Declining Catholicism and the ambiguity of Irish Religiosity: What Hugh Turpin's Unholy Catholic Ireland tells us about religion and morality in contemporary Ireland

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Few countries have seen such a rapid decline in religious authority as has Ireland. A little over four decades ago, the Catholic church's importance within Irish society was almost absolute, with archbishops intervening on all matters of life from reproductive rights, politics, to the arts and film. Move forward to 2023, and the country has voted for gay marriage equality and swept away some of the world's strictest abortion laws. In 2022, the Irish census even listed "no religion" as the first option over all other choices for the first time. To explain the swiftness of these changes, experts have – with good reason – pointed to the horrific scandals, and their systematic cover-ups, that have embroiled the church over the past three decades (see for example O'Toole, 2018). This has certainly played a part in the desacralization of the church. But by themselves scandals can tell us little of what religious, irreligious, and ambiguous identities are replacing Catholicism.

This is where Dr Hugh Turpin's monograph Unholy Catholic Ireland offers new insight, opening the reader to the space between Ireland's Catholic past and the emergence of irreligiosity. Based on four years of fieldwork, Turpin charts the rise and disposition of religious rejection among Ireland's "ethno-Catholic" majority, explaining how nonreligious identities have emerged at our current juncture in Irish history. As Turpin argues, this is not simply a matter of growing "indifference" but entangled in questions of moral authority and even contestation of the very nature of Irish identity. Waning Catholic socialization and intergenerational change play a role, but contemporary ex-Catholicism has also manifested out of a continued preoccupation with the historical institutional role the church plays within Irish society.

The strength of Unholy Catholic Ireland lies in the rich empirical data. Readers are provided with a mix of survey and ethnographic insight, which allows us to grasp the extent to which irreligious identities have grown, and to understand the nuanced positions through which religious and irreligious identities are defined more generally. There are perhaps few surprises in Turpin's data; for instance, his survey data shows us that younger people tend to be less religious than older generations, and liminal or ex-Catholics are less likely to trust bishops. But in explaining his findings, Turpin builds upon Henrich's (2009) concept that Credibility-enhancing displays (CREDs) to offer an intimate picture of declining religiosity. In short, grand narratives of Church scandal may make one less likely to take confession (as Turpin also notes), but a lack of exposure to rituals by one's parents or family are equally important drivers of a fragmenting Catholic consensus. These findings offer a picture of secularization in motion. In this regard Unholy Catholic Ireland adds to a corpus of scholastic work such as that of Tom Ingle and Gladys Ganiel – both of whom Turpin draws upon – to offer a vivid explanation as to how Irish religious sensibilities have been changing since the 1990s.

But Turpin's ethnography also provides rich insight into the myriad – and often messy ways – individuals continue to associate with Catholicism, even when they attempt to completely reject it. Unholy Catholic Ireland unpacks the social settings, contradictions and "moral dissonance" that can define different variants of Catholic and non-Catholic identity. Turpin takes us to the main protagonists in the ongoing battle between competing moral pictures of what it means to be a socially conscientious Irish citizen. We meet atheists at pro-choice rallies and priests struggling with the disgrace caused by clerical paedophilia. We are introduced to individuals who frame the church's hold over society as part of a long history of Irish oppression, and we meet "traditionalist" advocates who feel stigmatized for their continued belief.

From Turpin's description it is clear that reverence of church figures, such as former archbishops like John McQuaid, or even the unproblematic use of Irish Catholic nationalist tropes of endurance under tyranny, no longer hold fast. But in its place, we are left not with a fully secular Ireland but one rife with

opacity, and it is here that Turpin's rich explanation of an "ambiguous middle" offers us a nuanced picture of the social apprehensions surrounding the declining role of the church. We meet working class men who neither believe or take the church seriously but nonetheless identify as cultural Catholics, and we meet non-believers who still baptize their children. We meet individuals repelled by the scandals of the church, but who are uncomfortable with the moral challenge to their faith by atheists. Turpin shows us that both contemporary Irish Catholicism and the irreligious identities replacing it are deeply personal and reflective, but also that such identities are multifarious, sometimes overlap- ping, and evolving through the moral battles we are seeing played out through recent referendums. We are left with a sense that while open displays of ritual or piety may be declining, there remains a reluctance to fully let go of Ireland's catholic heritage or disassociate from Catholic tradition; either for reasons of ethnic identity, respect for one's family, or an uneasiness with atheist alternatives.

Unholy Catholic Ireland thus offers an insightful contribution to the wider study of irreligion, and a useful contrast to observations from other parts of Western Europe. Whereas nonreligious identities have generally been seen as emerging out of apathy toward religious institutions, in Ireland irreligion remains entangled within debates on how best to fit or remove Catholicism from Irish identity and ideas of morality. For the main protagonists of ex-Catholicism, the church remains an obsession.

While I thoroughly enjoyed Unholy Catholic Ireland and believe the work to be an important read for those interested in Irish Catholicism or the broader anthropological study of irreligion, untangling the nature of Catholic authority also requires broader political analysis of independent Ireland. Throughout the twentieth century, the church was in lockstep with Ireland's big post-civil war political parties, most predominantly Fianna Fáil. It is perhaps of no insignificance that declining support for Ireland's traditional political parties has come at a time of diminishing Catholic authority (and vice versa). For much of the previous decades, they were widely seen as mutually supporting pillars of Irish nationalism, and so if there is to be any criticism of Unholy Catholic Ireland it would be that this political dynamic perhaps deserves greater reflection – especially given the recent revival of a reformed Sinn Féin.

Yet this shouldn't detract from what is an empirically rich, methodologically rigorous, and conceptually engaging work that should interest scholars well beyond those concerned with Ireland, irreligion or Catholicism. Unholy Catholic Ireland provides a window into the rich, and sometimes contradictory, social battles through which secular morality comes to contest religious authority, and a unique study of the emergence of irreligion. It deserves to be widely read.

Disclosure statement

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