

## BOOK REVIEW

## Unholy Catholic Ireland: Religious Hypocrisy, Secular Morality, and Irish Irreligion

by Hugh Turpin

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022, 344 pages

On February 3, 2026, Northern Ireland's Education Minister Paul Givan announced a national review of religious education (RE) curriculum in schools across the country. This announcement followed a landmark Supreme Court ruling in November 2025 in which it was determined that the "Christian-by-default" approach of their current RE curriculum and collective worship in Northern Ireland schools violated the rights of parents and children to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. While this ruling may seem unremarkable in other Western countries, those familiar with Ireland's historically homogenous Catholic identity will recognize this as a much more significant step. In the wake of this decision and the conversations it is likely to provoke for scholars of religion, it seems prudent to revisit (and recommend) a recent text detailing in incredible detail how over a few short decades, Ireland went from a Catholic country to a national case study in secularization.

Hugh Turpin's *Unholy Catholic Ireland* is both a landmark work on Irish irreligion and a masterclass on the value of mixed methods research. To set up the results of his research, Turpin guides the reader through a history of Ireland's establishment not only as a Catholic nation but as "the" Catholic nation, a bastion of faith in which Irishness and Catholicism became unified in an "ethnoreligious melding" (p. 19). This Irish-Catholic identity included a unification of public services (such as healthcare and education) with the Church bolstered by public deference to the Church by the state in virtually all matters. Even in the face of increasing secularization of other European/Western nations this identity was staunchly upheld, as evidenced by Ireland's continued maintenance of anti-contraception and anti-divorce laws long after other nations had made legislative changes in those areas.

However, since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ireland has undergone a significant identity shift, and Turpin's quantitative work sheds light on those changes. One metric Turpin points to as a sign of these changes early in the text is weekly Mass attendance, which went from 85% in 1990 to just 34% in 2017. Turpin dedicates the entire second chapter to an exploration of the data, and delves into the complexities of measuring the number of practicing Catholics in a country in which natal nominalism – the personal identification with the religion of one's birth even when

one no longer holds to the beliefs of said religion – can influence demographic survey responses. In engaging with the ethno-Catholic identity, Turpin pairs survey data and previously conducted quantitative research with illustrating vignettes to provide insights into the context and culture of Ireland’s religious change.

Nowhere is the new Ireland’s difference from the old more apparent than in Turpin’s description of the papal visits to Ireland; Pope John Paul II’s visit in 1979 drew an estimated 2.5 million devotees to Dublin’s Phoenix Park, whereas Pope Francis’ visit in 2018 to the same location saw less than 300,000 attend, a startling contrast. Turpin attended the visit of Pope Francis in person, and his observations of this event (including the positive reactions of attending devout Catholics, the ire of the protestors, and the disgust of street vendors who failed to make their sales quotas) are both compelling and seasoned with a wry wit – Turpin describes the sight of Pope Francis in the pope-mobile as a “pontifical Pac-Man” (p. 93), surely a literary first.

The reason for this drastic change is, as one might expect, deeply connected to the various Church scandals that emerged over the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Covering the church scandals in unflinching detail – the Magdalene laundries, the priest child abuse, the mother and baby homes, and others – Turpin lays out a clear and comprehensive account not only of the various antecedents of Ireland’s outward secularization. Canadian readers in particular may be struck by the similarities to the Residential School Crisis and other impacts of colonization on the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis cultures; a stark reminder that the Irish, too, are a colonized people.

The scandals alone do not account for the unprecedented shift in Ireland’s religiosity, and Turpin takes considerable time and care in describing how these incidents interacted with a growing population of affiliated but skeptical adherents. In Chapter Four, Turpin describes “quiet subcultures of Catholic disenchantment” (p. 133) that provided fertile soil for the seeds of disaffiliation these atrocities sowed. To understand how these subcultures developed in a country that was Catholic from politics to pedagogy, the author turns to (among other theories) Credibility-Enhancing Displays (CREds) for an explanation. Turpin incorporates anecdotes from his interview data with observations about changing cultural norms to paint a picture of reduced presence and importance of religious CREds in a formerly CRED-rich environment. This, combined with church scandals and visible hypocrisy acting as reverse-CREds – what Turpin calls “Credibility-Undermining Displays (CRUDs)” – act as contributing factors for Ireland’s rapid changes.

Through this process, Turpin manages to maintain a clear and abiding respect for those who remain Catholic in the face of these scandals. This delicate balance comes to a head in Chapter Seven, in which Turpin details his interviews with Catholic clergy who had not been directly connected to any scandal, yet were experiencing “a sense of being publicly tainted” (p.

228) by their affiliation with the Church. One priest recalls the times before the scandals became broadly public knowledge when he would be greeted with a nod and a “Good morning, father” in the streets, contrasting such esteem with the current state in which he experiences covert avoidance at best or overt animosity at worst. Other priests acknowledge the harms that have occurred but downplay the backlash, suggesting that it will fade in time and Ireland will return to its Catholic identity. While these laments about loss of deference and respect may seem tone-deaf in the face of the documented and extensive abuses, Turpin remains committed to ethnographic rigor in describing these interviews and avoids even the appearance of polemics in his work.

While Catholicism wanes within Ireland a new movement waxes, and Turpin devotes considerable space in his book to this growing ex-Catholic population. While not all ex-Catholics identify as atheists (a word that may be fraught with meaning for some time in Ireland), there is a secular movement with Ireland that has begun to devote time and rhetorical effort to opposing the remnants of the Church’s power – a movement that included a push to have ex-Catholics cease identifying as Catholic on the national census may be able to claim at least some responsibility for the recent changes in the RE curriculum. This secular movement and its place in the new Ireland are explored in detail across Chapters Five through Seven, making the latter half of the book both a detailed description of Ireland’s current state and a possible forecast for countries that may be on a similar trajectory. Poland, for instance, has historically been a Catholic nation that is currently undergoing its own secularization (see Falewicz et al. 2025). Researchers in Poland planning to explore these changes may wish to look to *Unholy Catholic Ireland* as a guide for their own methodology.

One of the text’s primary strengths comes in the author’s skillful integration of descriptive statistics with ethnographic observations. Too often mixed methods studies present as either quantitative research *with* some qualitative work, or qualitative research *with* some quantitative work. In *Unholy Catholic Ireland*, Turpin expertly weaves together both quantitative breadth and qualitative depth to create an integrated whole. The quantitative foundation of Chapter two flows naturally into the raw and compelling case studies and interviews in later chapters, which Turpin recounts with appropriate sensitivity while drawing out further insights. In addition, Turpin brings a unique lens as a former cultural Catholic himself, and woven throughout the text are anecdotes and personal reflections that range from humorous to poignant, making this text (in addition to its other achievements) a compelling example of the power of autoethnography. It is here that Turpin demonstrates his skill as a careful and insightful writer, presenting his data, observations, and conclusions with an elegance and vulnerability not found frequently enough in academic work.

It is rare to find an academic text so enjoyable to read, and rarer still to find one written that even lay audiences (of both academic and religious variety) would find accessible. In that

regard, Turpin's seminal work sets the bar for future texts in the social scientific study of religion. If anything could have strengthened the book, it would have benefitted from additional chapters exploring the future of the new, secular Ireland in the changing global context. Perhaps we will be fortunate enough to see a second volume from Turpin on this subject in the future. For graduate students and early career researchers, this book makes an excellent case for the use of mixed methods, and Turpin's detailed methodological appendix provides insights into this process for those who wish to emulate his approach. For those qualitative researchers who can brave the (not too treacherous) quantitative waters of Chapter Two, the ethnographic depth that follows demonstrates the value of the mixed methods approach. For experienced scholars and newcomers alike, *Unholy Catholic Ireland* is a compelling read, and would be appropriate as a supplementary text in religion courses across the social sciences.

### Reference

Falewicz, Adam, Dorota Kuncewicz, Dariusz Kuncewicz, Malgorzata Szcześniak, and Daryl Van Tongeren. 2025. "Different Is the Faith of a Child, Different Is the Faith of an Adult, I Just Managed to Get This Faith, My Own' - Qualitative Study on the Concept of Religious Deidentification. Conclusions from the Analysis of a Polish Sample." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 36(1):6-31.

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