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Walking the walk of religion and nonreligion: notes on Turpin's *Unholy Catholic Ireland: Religious hypocrisy, secular morality, and Irish irreligion*

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In his book *Unholy Catholic Ireland* Turpin examines the rejection of religion in Ireland and how it has become intertwined with perceptions of moral hypocrisy. First of all, I must say that I immensely appreciate the thoroughness and versatility of Turpin's work. The book is based on his extensive original research that is rich in methodology and insight. The general trends are depicted with a historical overview and analysis of survey data, and these are complemented with qualitative work on media sources, interviews, and fieldwork (both in-site and virtual). The qualitative research gives voice to ordinary Irish people; their views can be heard throughout the book, intertwined with the bigger trends. Different positions and outlooks are represented, from the "morally authentic" ex-Catholics to the priests who struggled with their moral stigma.

In the book, Turpin discusses his findings in light of several theories from fields such as psychology and sociology. These include the existential security hypothesis, theories about social learning (mainly through CREDs), the moral foundations theory, Goffman's notion of stigma, Berger's sacred canopy, and Taylor's theory on the phases of secularization.

Of these theories, three are given particular emphasis: the diminution of religion in Ireland is mainly explained with existential security (people turning to religion less in safe environments) and the subsequent depletion of credibility enhancing displays (CREDs), following Lanman (2012). The reactions to the scandals and moral hypocrisy are often discussed in relation to the moral foundations theory.

In this commentary, I will discuss some notions of the book concerning these theoretical frameworks. My comments mainly relate to the potential similarities and differences of religious and more secular outlooks described in the book, especially regarding CREDs. I will also briefly discuss some of Turpin's suggestions in reference to the moral foundations theory. Finally, I will extend upon Turpin's reflection concerning the future of nonreligion (in Ireland and elsewhere) by speculating upon the possible impact of existential insecurity in more secular societies.

CREDs for religious and/or secular beliefs?

Based on his survey findings, Turpin posits that religious CREDs are a major predictor of Catholic faith and identity. By CREDs, Turpin refers to "behaviors that give some indication that people believe what they say they do, because they are costly to perform or hard to fake" (p. 51). According to Turpin, CREDs are important for learning religion in particular – religious systems are described as "vulnerable to suspicion" since their claims cannot be "verified by everyday experience" (p. 52; see also Lanman & Buhrmester, 2017). However, one might ask whether secular beliefs necessarily

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differ from religious ones in this respect. Many secular views are also not supported by everyday experience: take, for instance, scientific theories about the origins of species. The theory of evolution does not align with our everyday reality – or if it does, this is likely due to socially instructed learning. The same goes for the Earth as a sphere – in everyday observations, the Earth surely appears flat. Although it might be tempting to think that scientific knowledge and supernatural beliefs are acquired differently (due to difference in content and the former being empirically verifiable), the credibility of both seems to be largely affected by social factors, such as the perceived consensus about their truth value (Shtulman, 2013). In other words, CREDs might also be relevant for learning secular beliefs (Langston et al., 2020). This has been suggested by Mauritsen and van Mulukom (2023) based on secular rituals that can constitute CREDs for non-religious worldviews. However, Turpin’s suggestion about the importance of CREDs for learning beliefs that cannot be “verified by everyday experience” in particular might still hold true – CREDs could play a bigger role in learning both the religious *and* the secular beliefs that go against our everyday realities compared to the ones that better align with folk theories.

Ex-Catholics walking the walk: moralized authenticity and rationality

In Turpin’s book, moral integrity relates to the emergence and character of Irish nonreligion in several ways. As mentioned, CREDs (practicing what you preach or “walking the walk”) were of primary importance in predicting religiosity and theism among the Irish. Furthermore, Turpin suggests that ex-Catholics’ notions of moral hypocrisy in the Church have contributed to non-religious identities that emphasize “moralized authenticity”. Despite the stereotypes of atheists as morally dubious, the disaffiliated can present themselves as moral compared to the Catholic Church *and* the cultural Catholics who seem to turn a blind eye to the atrocities in Catholic institutions. From the reader’s perspective, it thus seems like the ex-Catholic narratives place special importance on something that resembles CREDs: acting in accordance with one’s beliefs and values (“walking the walk”), which, in their case, means rejecting the morally stained Church not only in words but also by disaffiliating. Turpin associates this emphasis on following one’s beliefs in ex-Catholic identities with adhering to individualistic values over relational ethics.

An interesting feature of ex-Catholic accounts is that they often expressed *disgust* over the Church scandals. This reaction is commonly associated with sanctity in the moral foundations theory (Haidt, 2012). Turpin relates the disgust to a “sense of violated societal purity” (p. 220) but also suggests that expressing disgust in particular might be an effort to avoid the stereotype of an angry atheist, as being “anti for the sake of being anti” has been weaponised against the ex-Catholics (p. 211). While such expectations may influence the way ex-Catholics communicate, the disgust was also expressed in a secular parents group (constituting in-group signaling). Thus it seems likely that clerical child abuse “authentically” elicited disgust regardless of one’s religiosity, even if prior research indicates that the sanctity foundation might be *more* prominent in individuals who are religiously and politically conservative (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Disgust could be a common reaction to sexual behaviors deviating from societal norms that also induce extreme harm (such as child molestation and rape, see Harper & Harris, 2017).

However, ex-Catholics *also* referred to the continued practice of cultural Catholics as disgusting, as “people won’t trouble themselves to think what any of that [Catholic rites of passage] actually means” (p. 201). These kinds of statements indicate that for some, rationality might be sacred (the importance of *thinking* things through), accompanied by an ethic of authenticity (whether actions align with one’s beliefs and values). Again, “walking the walk” thus also appears crucial for many ex-Catholics. This surely makes sense – if CREDs predict religiosity and theism, actions aligning with one’s beliefs *should* be important for people’s judgements of others. But might people differ in the extent to which they find this relevant for credibility? What about the cultural and liminal Catholics who seem to put less emphasis on whether one’s affiliation and actions align with their beliefs?

Liminal Catholics “walking”?

In his book, Turpin also describes more silent ways of scepticism than that of many ex-Catholics. For instance, in chapter 3 an informant describes how his father did not step inside the church but lingered outside smoking during Mass despite being a Catholic, an act that Turpin calls “a quiet atheist CRED” (p. 106). But if a CRED is quiet in the sense that it can only be seen in actions (and not in words), is it a CRED to begin with? In the end, the moral of the story seems to be that we primarily pay attention to our caregivers’ actions regardless of the family’s “official” beliefs – and that we take after our parents. One thus cannot help but wonder the extent to which witnessing actions (mere “walking”) might suffice for children following in the footsteps of one’s (reliable) caregivers, due to factors such as emotional attachment or a general sense of safety elicited by familiarity.¹

Instead of someone not attending rituals despite their Catholic identity, it was more common in Turpin’s examples for cultural Catholics who uphold Catholic traditions, such as weddings and baptisms, to be sceptical of Catholic beliefs. While wondering would their ritual attendance still qualify as CREDs, I thought about Ståhl’s (2021) suggestion that the non-religious often emphasize individualizing (and not binding) values as they might have been less exposed to religious CREDs that not only signal the importance of religion but that of community. In a similar vein, one might conceptualize religious communality that does not align with one’s rejection of Catholic faith as a CRED – a CRED for binding values and relational ethics that do not prioritize personal beliefs over shared heritage and social harmony. In other words, while it might seem that cultural Catholics merely “walk” – act but not according to their religious beliefs – they could still constitute high-integrity models due to acting in accordance with their *values*, at least in the eyes of those who adhere to relational ethics. In Turpin’s examples, not adhering to one’s own religious (or non-religious) beliefs actually also seemed to appear as a moral stance – not making a fuss over oneself but rather attending to the perceived common good (“stoic scepticism”, p. 137). It is intriguing that although many cultural Catholics associate the Irish Catholic Church with abuse and corruption (chapter 2), membership and attendance can still serve as a moral signal – albeit one that may be complemented with a disclaimer rejecting other parts of Catholicism.

Religion as peripheral? Future landscapes of belief in more secular societies

In his book, Turpin suggests that Catholicism in Ireland has become “peripheral” as a religion (p. 4, 254). This first appears puzzling from the Nordic perspective. After all, the Catholic Church still has a prominent role in societal tasks managed by the state in many other European countries (for instance, primary schooling). An overwhelming majority of the Irish also identify as Catholics, albeit likely due to being “born Catholic”, as demonstrated by the survey results in chapter 2.

However, Turpin does make a compelling case for the secular becoming normative in Ireland, not in the least exemplified by the secular rhetorics of the Irish pro-life movement. The secular shift can also be observed in people’s vacillation with their religious beliefs, or expressing inner conflict as some would “love to” believe in religious concepts like God but acknowledge this might not be “logical”, indicating the expected value of secular rationality (p. 32, 101; for similar lines of “believing” in the Nordic context, see af Burén, 2015; Haimila et al., 2023).

In other words, Catholicism does appear peripheral in terms of *credibility*. In this cultural climate, Turpin argues that for many, the Catholic Church mainly acts as the national service provider for funerals, weddings, and such – and as a marker of national identity. This resembles the cultural Christianity of Nordic countries such as Finland and Denmark (Taira et al., 2023), and it is easy to agree with Turpin’s suggestion that the Nordic model might lie in the future for Ireland as well.² However, Turpin underlines that the coming developments in Irish nonreligion are difficult to determine, as the future is uncertain. My final thoughts concern this notion. In chapter 1, Turpin

adheres to the importance of existential security as a factor underlying the decline in religiosity. While discussing future directions, he notes that if societal development leads to people feeling threatened, they “cleave to identities and in-groups” (p. 258). Once the secular has become more normative, would the Irish (or individuals in other societies) return to religion or rely on their secular identities in times of existential insecurity? If beliefs such as “secular humanism” can replace religious values (as suggested by Taylor’s theory mentioned in chapter 1), would these also provide for similar existential functions as religion?

Reflecting upon this question, it should be noted that Turpin does not suggest that the association between religion and existential insecurity would be due to people seeking comfort from religion. Instead, Turpin cites Lanman (2012) who has proposed that existential threats enhance religious actions (threat and action theory). According to Lanman (2012, p. 57), insecurity induces increased i) endorsement of in-group ideologies, ii) religious participation, and iii) “superstitious” behavior (which, according to this account, goes hand in hand with belief in non-physical agents that could be conceptualized as religious). Based on this suggestion, we might expect that future crises (if severe enough) would elicit an increase in religiosity even in more secular societies – halting the progression of religion as “increasingly peripheral”. However, this might also *not* be the case. As demonstrated by Turpin’s book and other research on non-religion, people also hold secular in-group ideologies and can congregate through hobbies and organizations that are not subordinate to religion (Coleman et al., 2019; Haimila, 2020; Lee, 2015). Moreover, as many non-religious believe in supernatural phenomena (Bullivant et al., 2019), it might be expected that their behavior can also take on “superstitious” forms without this encouraging traditional religiosity. Therefore, existential insecurity might not bolster religion in particular *if* the society affected is “sufficiently” secular *and* communal. Some might argue this to be unlikely, since secular belief systems tend to emphasize individualistic values (as demonstrated in the book, see also Inglehart, 2021), whereas religious belief systems are more collectivistic. However, *if* a decreased exposure to communal CREDs has contributed to non-religious individuals endorsing individualism over binding values, as proposed by Ståhl (2021), the differences in the values of cultural Christians and the non-affiliated might wane as non-religiosity becomes normalized. Once being non-religious does not signify being “the odd one out”, (culturally) religious and non-religious individuals might participate in communal activities to a more similar extent. As individualizing values also seem to be associated with a sense of security (Ståhl, 2021), it is plausible that in case of existential threat, *irreligious* individuals (such as the Irish ex-Catholics) might lean on more collectivistic secular beliefs. Thus, if crises would strike in an increasingly secular society, we might not only see some people return to religion but secular beliefs also taking on more collectivistic forms.

Notes

1. In their 2017 article, Lanman and Buhrmester argued for the importance of CREDs (“walking the walk”) in particular as their CRED scale predicted theism controlling for religious socialization in American adults recruited through MTurk. However, religious socialization was measured with Hunsberger and Altemeyer’s religious emphasis scale, which, instead of religious socialization more generally, seems to measure teaching a fundamentalist approach to Christianity. The scale includes items on the extent to which one’s parents stressed that “it was responsibility to fight Satan all your life”, that “the unrepentant sinners would burn in hell for all eternity”, and that “the persons who tried to change the meaning of scripture and religious laws were evil”. The CRED scale, on the other hand, comprises items such as “To what extent did your caregiver(s) attend religious services or meetings?” and “To what extent did your caregiver(s) engage in religious volunteer or charity work?” One cannot help but wonder whether the results on the CRED scale predicting theism beyond the religious emphasis scale thus reflect the importance of acting in accordance with one’s beliefs over religious socialization or the importance of “milder” religious socialization cues, including actions, over teaching fundamentalist beliefs.
2. Turpin discusses the cultural Christianity of the Nordic countries, such as Denmark, as an “inoffensive, unobtrusive institution that acts as a carrier for collective identity without dictating moral values or worldview”

(p. 256). Although I think this is largely the case, it should be noted that many Finns, for instance, still agree on the importance of the Lutheran Church for teaching moral values such as love for one's neighbor (Church Research Institute, 2015). As there have been no religious scandals of the Irish Catholic scale in the Nordic countries, the moral heritage and authority of the Church is still quite commonly respected – perhaps more so than in Ireland.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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