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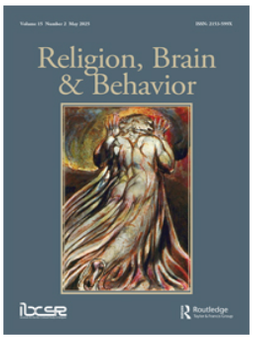

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Gradualist change or sudden collapse? Religious decline and residual religiosity in Ireland

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Turpin's book on religiosity in contemporary Ireland explores the persistence of Irish cultural Catholicism and the poor long-term prospects for active religiosity. The book examines the cultural content of religiosity, irreligion, and unbelief in Ireland, adding to the body of evidence on Irish secularization by probing the moral justifications of former and continuing adherents. Researching incongruent religious behavior is challenging (Chaves, 2010), with multiple methods necessary to account for variation. Turpin shows great methodological range in his account of non-religion and continuing religiosity, and perceptions of continuing adherence among the non-religious, via an online panel survey, participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and digital ethnography.

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The description of "Kincaid" is immersive, providing prima facie evidence of the hedonic rewards of secularity: the pub discussions are vivid. The survey includes intriguing features such as the "free list" method, deserving of much wider use. The institutional church's loss of credibility from the 1990s and 2000s is identified as a key turning point. The book's attention to the cultural content of religiosity, irreligion, and unbelief in contemporary Ireland will encourage many to the social scientific study of religion in Ireland.

An important project for a collective research program is the identification of the origins and causal mechanisms of Irish secularization. This text adds to the body of evidence required, foregrounding the scandals revealed in the 1990s and 2000s. The Casey affair of 1992 was a key turning-point: a bishop resigned and immediately left the country after press revelation he used church funds to maintain a teenage child. A participant in Hilliard's longitudinal study of women in Cork described instant demoralization and loss of her own credibility with her daughter: "it damaged my whole life … he should have come out himself and made a statement" (Hilliard, 2003, pp. 42–43).

The puzzle is why so many remain attached, given evident moral disgust with the various and extensive revelations. Turpin suggests a range of possible factors: habituation, the emotional draw of a secularized Catholic form of Irishness, communitarian values, and self-interest, each highly-plausible. That the question remains open suggests further attention be paid to cohort-driven change as a key mechanism of religious change in Ireland, ideally tested against longitudinal data. Indeed, the reflections on generational change within families provide some of the most compelling material in the book. Such reflection aids understanding because "individuals are remarkably bad at giving consistent reasons for their behavior" (Vaisey, 2009, p. 1672). Choices in the moment tend to be made in nondeclarative mode (Lizardo, 2017), structured by "deep, largely unconscious networks of neural associations that facilitate perception, interpretation, and action" (Vaisey, 2009, p. 1686). While qualitative methods give rich insight into the justification of choices, it may be difficult for subjects to articulate fundamental motivations, and why a particular choice simply "feels right" (Vaisey, 2009, p. 1689). Dual-process models of culture accordingly propose that "discursive consciousness" is less involved in everyday moral decision-making than often thought (Vaisey, 2009, p. 1690).

While the institutional church lost credibility almost instantly on 7 May 1992, the decline may nevertheless more largely reflect the slow workings of individualization, liberalization, and economic security. Attention to cohort effects might also provide additional traction over the question of why cultural Catholicism persists. Cohort-driven approaches have explained religious change in a number of contexts, including Britain (Crockett & Voas, 2006; Field, 2019), Germany (Wolf, 2008), the US (Voas & Chaves, 2016), and in cross-national studies (Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Voas, 2008).

1. The deep roots of religious detachment

While Irish Catholicism was hegemonic in the first decades after independence, its dominance was not entirely complete: there remained sources of potential, if not effective, challenge. A recent analysis of naming practices using the 1911 Census highlights the stronger importance of rural conservatism over Catholic orthodoxy for fertility (Connor, 2021), raising the question of whether economic drivers primarily determined religiosity rather than the converse. "Mixed marriages" between Catholics and others usually led to their children being raised as Catholic; but such marriages were not vanishingly rare, and resulting children were aware choice was conceivable. 24 percent of Dublin residents (city and county) were other than Catholic in 1901. High-profile radicals Frank and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington married as Catholics in 1903 (Frank having been christened in the Irish Church), but afterwards identified as rationalists and humanists; their son Owen founded the Irish Humanist Association in 1967 (Irish Times, 1970; Levenson & Natterstad, 1986). Besides intermarriage, modernity drove religious mixing in boarding houses and in employment, including live-in domestics. Twenty-nine percent of those living in residences with up to nine

others—more likely to be private houses—shared an address with somebody of another religion (author's analysis).

Irish republicanism and socialism also provided sources of ideological challenge. Republicanism and Gaelic cultural nationalism included leaders of Protestant heritage. The War of Independence featured incidents of priests being intimidated and their homes raided (Heffernan, 2015). By the 1950s, latent anticlericalism, criticism of the Catholic voluntarist social model, excessive focus on the "Sixth Commandment", and evident low religiosity among Irish emigrants on arrival in Britain were identified as possible warning signals by a Jesuit theologian in *The Furrow*, a new Catholic periodical termed "an escape vent for heretics" by Archbishop McQuaid (Fuller, 2004, p. 87; Smyth, 1958).

Voluntarism was disastrous in the cases of Magdalene laundries, industrial schools, and mother and baby homes. The Regina Coeli hostel is instructive, opened in 1930 by the kindly civil servant Frank Duff, founder of the Legion of Mary voluntary service organization (Kennedy, 2011). It had a humane ethos, the sole example in Ireland of a religious organization housing single mothers so they could keep their children. But it preferred a volunteer-only model, finances were unstable and it was not properly equipped. The organization evaded official registration and demands to recruit medical professionals. The hostel struggled to control infectious outbreaks in the 1940s, and of 5,434 children ever accommodated at the hostel, 734 died (Mother and Baby Homes Report 2021, Chapter 21, 52).

The Irish social policy model was clearly deficient long before religious-run institutions attracted formal inquiry. Future Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald wrote in 1964 that "the Catholic Church in Ireland has lagged far behind Catholic thought elsewhere … . [which is] particularly notable in relation to such matters as social welfare" (Fitzgerald, 1964, p. 345). In 1992, Swedish social policy expert Walter Korpi gave the annual Geary Lecture at the Economic and Social Research Institute:

> something is missing in the Irish system. What one might have expected to find in a country with such a strong Catholic church are the classical corporatist arrangements … [with] tripartite participation by employers, employes, and the state … However, in Ireland, attempts to introduce "vocationalism" into social insurance institutions appears to have disappeared since the 1950s. (Korpi, 1993, pp. 18–19)

The failures of health and welfare provision provided a front for secular criticism, infamously so in the case of the Mother and Child scheme in 1951. Combined clerical and medical resistance meant the proposals failed, and the Minister for Health forced to resign. His resignation statement and leaking of correspondence with the Catholic hierarchy signaled both moral and political resistance (Oireachtas, 1951). The writer Seán Ó Faoláin critiqued church-state relations shortly afterwards: "The Dáil proposes; Maynooth disposes" (Ó Faoláin, 1951: 7).

Rising education levels also increased reliance on personal judgement. Change was initially limited because secondary education was not free until 1967, limiting opportunities for poor students, except those encouraged to priesthood. Fees were more manageable for the middle classes because schools were staffed by religious orders, comprising 60 percent of secondary school teachers in 1965 (O'Donoghue & Harford, 2011, p. 328). Former pupils recall stressful moral surveillance. Nevertheless, education provided opportunities beyond unskilled work or indeed teaching and religious life. The First Programme for Economic Expansion (1958–1963) led to most secondary schools eventually entering the free system, from which the children of small farmers, raised in disciplinarian families, particularly benefited (Hannan & Commons, 1992; McWilliams, 2019, p. 12). Those born in the 1980s were among the most highly educated in Europe (Ó Gráda & O'Rourke, 2022). The number of people working in agricultural occupations fell from 512,510 in 1951 to 265,400 in 2016, shrinking a more religious and endogamous group (O'Leary, 2001). National income and per capita consumption rose to converge with leading economies by 2001, radically reducing the insecurity of the first post-independence decades (Ó Gráda & O'Rourke, 2022).

Cultural change also gradually encouraged different thinking. Postwar emigration reduced demographic pressure and also communicated other ways of life. Many Irish nurses worked in the UK's "socialized medicine" system—the model deemed threatening to Irish religious values. *The Country Girls*, by former convent student Edna O'Brien, was published in the UK in 1960. While promptly banned in Ireland, censorship was becoming an embarrassment, and from 1967 the government limited bans to 12 years—which immediately resulted in the unbanning of several hundred books published before 1955 (Martin, 2006). By the late 1950s, the BBC was broadcasting to much of Ireland, and in 1961 state broadcaster RTÉ was established, with national debates a regular source of content. In 1966, the "Bishop and the Nightie" affair and student Brian Trevaskis' appearance on *The Late Late Show* provoked clerical displeasure. Trevaskis criticized censorship, corporal punishment in Catholic schools, called the Bishop of Galway extortionist and a "moron", and asked why cathedral building took precedence over care for unmarried mothers (Doyle-O'Neill, 2015, pp. 34–40). The Trinity student newspaper noted "for a while Ireland was roughly divided into pro-Trevaskis and anti-Trevaskis camps" (Trinity News, 1966: online).

Regarding fertility, the ban on contraception—though interpreted by some clergy and women to include even "natural" methods (Hilliard, 2003)—was being questioned years before the establishment of the Irish Family Planning Association (1969) and the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (1970). High birth rates meant poverty and overcrowding and destroyed women's health. The contraceptive pill was available from 1962 as a "cycle regulator" and by 1966 taken by 15,000 women who could find and pay a sympathetic doctor (Foley, 2019, p. 143); some, seeking absolution, found liberal priests (Kelly 2022, 152). Others traveled to Britain or sourced contraception by mail order (Cloatre & Enright, 2017). Average family size began to fall in 1963. *Humanae Vitae* disrupted provision, as well as dissemination of information, but two-thirds of doctors disagreed with the edict against contraception (Foley, 2019, p. 154), and professional social workers also joined campaigns for change (Foley, 2019, pp. 158–159). About 25 percent of married women aged 20–34 were on the pill by 1974 (Foley, 2019, p. 160). Cases of concealed pregnancies in the 1980s—resulting in stillbirths, maternal death, and infanticide—generated sharp reactions, both misogynistic and liberal, and revealed excruciating social pressure (McCafferty, 2010 [1985]).

These changes jointly supported a silent drift away from the peak of Irish Catholic religiosity. Not that implications were immediately clear. Hornsby-Smith's 1990 review of religion in Ireland did note evidence of secularization, but also highlighted continuing high rates of practice, religious renewal, and the flexibility and resilience of the Church (Hornsby-Smith, 1992).

However, a gradual expansion of a coalition of doubters and dissenters arguably made it possible for the Casey story to get traction in the first place. The *Irish Times* spent three months building the story, validated via the cheques made to the child's mother. One journalist later remembered

> [i]n those days, there were good reasons for a newspaper to be apprehensive about accusing a bishop of fathering a secret love child. Getting it wrong could bring the wrath of the still-powerful Catholic establishment down on its head, discredit the paper and involve crippling damages. (O'Clery, 2017, p. 2)

Indeed, Turpin's excellent footnotes give examples of revelations *not* triggering widespread public reaction or soul-searching: government and media reports from the 1930s, a 1960s play, and personal memoirs by survivors published in the 1980s (Turpin, 2022, p. 276, 278). Moreover, the abusive industrial schools were "a largely unexamined open secret" (Turpin, 2022, p. 40).

2. Period or Cohort Effects?

To explore the relative impact of period versus cohort effects, the European Values Study (EVS) is a useful source (EVS, 2020). It includes a number of measures of religiosity with consistent question wording and high-quality sampling from 1981, 1990, 1999, and 2008; unfortunately, Ireland did not participate in 2017. The pooled dataset captures generations raised in "holy Catholic Ireland" as well as those growing up after 1992 (for descriptive statistics, see online appendix Table 1). The

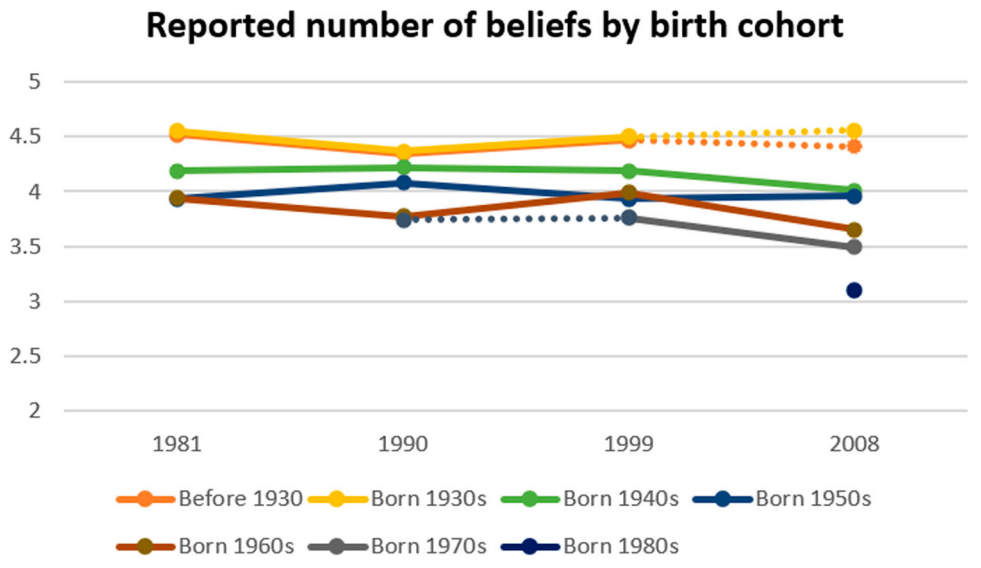

Figure 1. European Values Study, 1981-2008, author's analysis. Survey weights applied. Respondents were asked whether they believed in God, heaven, hell, and the existence of sin and an afterlife. Each belief counts for one point.

infrequency of the survey and technical impossibility of disentangling age, period, and cohort effects statistically inhibit definitive answers. However, a graphical analysis of frequent church attendance, belief in God, confidence in churches, and perceived importance of religious ceremonies for each birth cohort at each wave help indicate the nature of change.[1]

Figure 1 graphs the average number of a range of orthodox Christian beliefs (existence of God, heaven, hell, sin, afterlife) held by each decadal birth cohort.[2] The graphs suggest relative stability for each cohort across the four waves, with evidence of between-cohort decline. This is confirmed by an ordinal logistic regression model including terms for survey wave, birth cohort, and proxies for social age to avoid the exact collinearity from including all three of age, period, and cohort. These are the number of children each respondent has, whether the respondent has a partner, and whether they are in education, work, or retired (online appendix Table 3). While those born before 1930 are not significantly more or less believing than those born in the 1930s, members of each cohort after the 1930s are significantly less so. Those participating in the 1990 wave have significantly fewer beliefs on average than those in 1981 when controlling for third variables, while those in 1999 and 2008 do not. Completing education at a later age is associated with being more likely to hold more beliefs, though this association may have disappeared more recently.

Figure 2 presents graphs of weekly church attendance by cohort. In 1981 and 1990, each successive cohort tended to report frequent attendance less, with little difference between waves save for those in the 1960s. By 1999, the attendance norm had collapsed for those born in the 1970s. Reported attendance also looks lower for those born in the 1950s and 1960s compared with 1990. For the oldest two cohorts, trends appear flat over successive waves. Attendance trends provide most support to the sudden desacralization story described so vividly in Turpin's first chapter. Regression analysis indicates both cohort and period effects were in operation (see online appendix Table 3). A longer period in education has a positive association with attendance in the pooled model, while of the measures of social aging, being retired is associated with attending more often.

Respondents were also asked whether they agreed it was important to mark a child's birth with a religious ceremony, and their level of confidence in churches. Figure 3 indicates high rates of agreement for each of the three waves on which the rites of passage questions were fielded, with above 85 percent agreeing for each cohort. Moreover, the trend lines look flat. Regression analysis supports

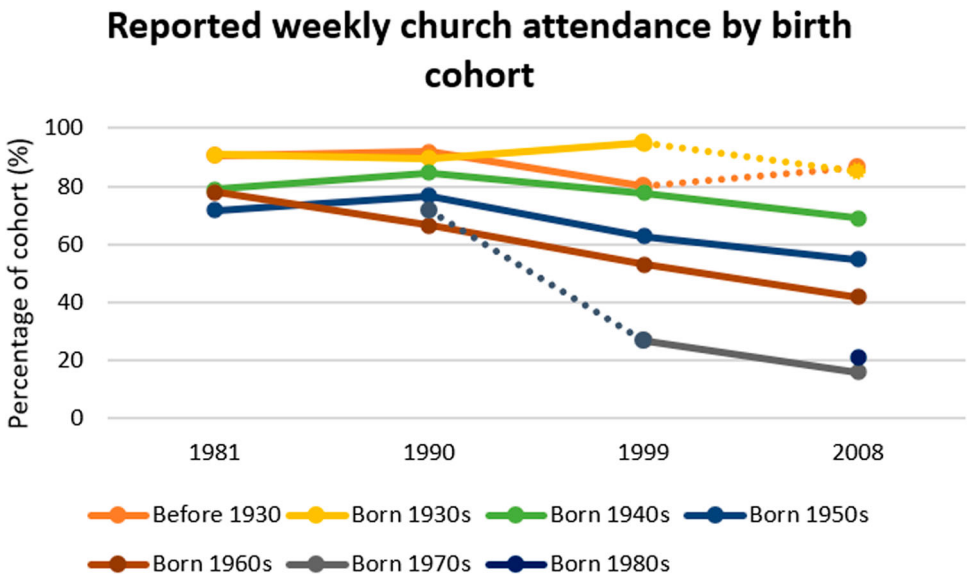

Figure 2. European Values Study, 1981-2008, author's analysis. Survey weights applied. Respondents were asked, "Apart from weddings, funerals and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?"

an interpretation of a generalized consensus in favor of babies being christened, with little systematic variation across respondents. Women and those with more children are more likely to agree, while those born in the 1940s are less likely to agree than those born in the 1930s (see online appendix Table 3). However, there are no other discernible period- or cohort-related differences, though they may have emerged since 2008. Nevertheless, this supports Turpin's account of cultural Catholicism still claiming rites of passage.

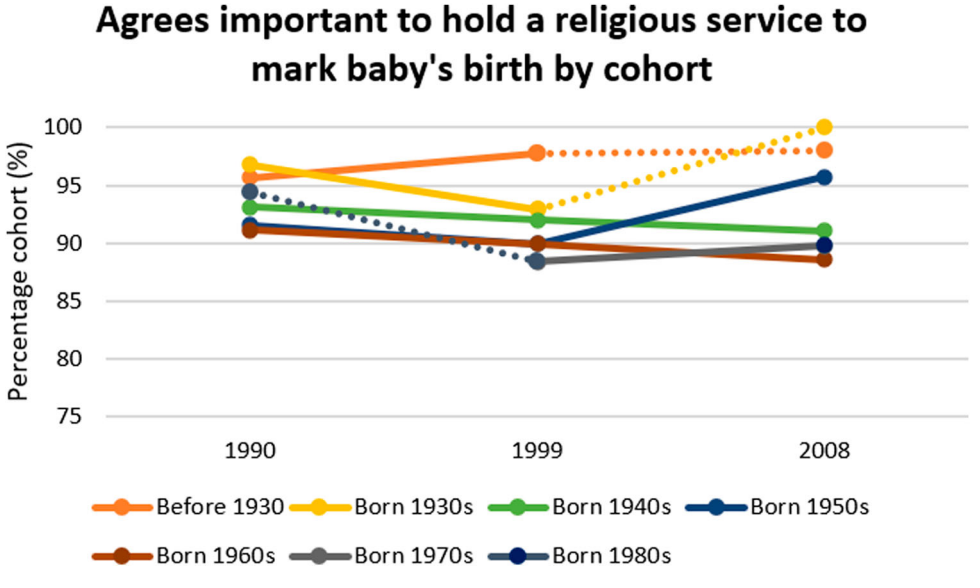

Figure 3. European Values Study, 1981-2008, author's analysis. Survey weights applied. Respondents were asked: "Do you personally think it is important to hold a religious service for any of the following events?—Birth" and could respond "yes" or "no".

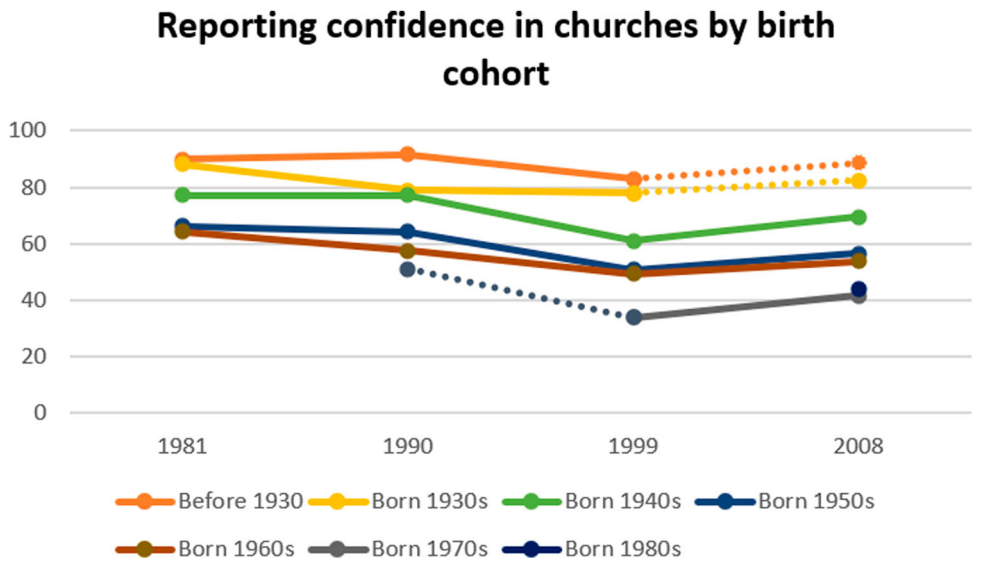

Figure 4. European Values Study, 1981-2008, author's analysis. Survey weights applied. The percentages reporting "a great deal" or "quite a bit" of confidence in "the church" are combined.

A further theme in *Holy Catholic Ireland* is rejection of the institutional Catholic Church. The closest relevant measure is reported confidence in "the church" on a four-point scale, representing "a great deal", "quite a lot", "not very much", and "none at all". The graph below combines "a great deal" and "quite a lot" to capture at least some confidence. While there was little decline on average within cohorts between 1981 and 1990, most cohorts experienced a substantial decline between 1990 and 1999, with a slight recovery by 2008. Ordinal logistic regression largely confirms this (see online appendix Table 3), with each of the three later waves showing lower confidence than the first. Postestimation testing shows that 1999 and 2008 responses were significantly less confident than those in 1990, although the difference between 1999 and 2008 was not significant. In other words, the most substantial period-related change occurred between 1990 and 1999 (Figure 4).

These patterns suggest two mechanisms at play, working more or less strongly on each indicator. The revelations of the 1990s and 2000s led to a dramatic decline in practice, on top of a longer, slower process of detachment already underway, evident in cohort decline in belief and confidence in the church. Infant baptism has a stronger pull, with little to no evidence of period- or cohort-related decline in the EVS. It is admittedly difficult to be precise in identifying period and cohort effects given the relative influence different cohorts have over national debate, which can be affected by relative size. Ireland had a baby boom in the late 1970s, with that cohort coming to adulthood in the 1990s and 2000s—a time when youth emigration fell. Younger generations accordingly had relatively more during that period.

3. Why hasn't religious decline progressed faster?

As Turpin demonstrates, a large proportion of Irish society remains actively religious. It may be that a proportion of the population has no strong sense of moral compromise and finds religion rewarding, or prefer the familiar due to nostalgia. Turpin suggests communitarian values may drive continuing attachment, with embeddedness favored and ostracism feared: "people may feel that disaffiliation is impossible or that it may simply be unthinkable" (Turpin, 2022, p. 130). Communitarianism may also encourage a sense that morals are not being compromised:

accepting culpability is a collective action problem, particularly where the institutional church's lines of accountability have been historically poor. Identification of the self with the group therefore affects expectations of payoffs from voice, exit, and loyalty (Hirschman, 2004 [1970]), and perhaps heightens anxiety that disaffiliation will be read as betrayal (Turpin, 2022, p. 148).

Religion may also still be perceived to have civic utility, as a vehicle for objectives such as climate justice and as a platform for cultural diplomacy. Moreover, dominant parties Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil can both be described as ideologically Christian Democrat; the current Taoiseach, not a religious believer, has spoken positively of Christian Democracy (for example, Tyaransen, 2010: online). There is also the case of elite Catholic private schools: while academic selection is not permitted, religious selection and legacy admissions are. Even after recent reforms via the recent Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2018 to outlaw religious discrimination over admissions, schools may refuse a place to an applicant of another denomination if they can demonstrate admission would affect the school's religious ethos. Legacy admissions (up to a quarter of places) also reinforce elite social reproduction. Courtois notes that the dominance of Blackrock alumni in *The Irish Who's Who* is similar to that of Eton in the British version. While private schools educate 8 percent of children, 16 percent of politicians, 39 percent of senior business figures, and 5 percent of higher professionals represented in *Irish Who's Who* were educated privately (Courtois, 2020, p. 172). They are partly supported by state funding of the private secondary sector totaling €121 million in 2021, to about 26,000 students (Oireachtas, 2022).

Persisting cultural Catholicism may accordingly reflect the fact that detachment is a slow process, taking more than one social generation to take full effect. However, continuing adherents have agency, tailoring commitment to available extrinsic benefits and rationalizing choices via the discursive strategies described so effectively by Turpin. And, as highlighted, engagement with rites of passage has continuing appeal. Cultural Catholics argue that they differentiate the good from bad. Columnist Jen Hogan wrote recently in defense of "bouncy castle Catholicism":

> bouncy castles are [actually] pretty hard to get at that time of the year … I pick and choose the bits I accept and actively teach my children the bits we utterly reject. It's the only way I can make my peace with it, and even at that, it's a very troubled peace. But I didn't want them to have nothing. (Hogan 2023: online)

The "something" is not necessarily very religious (Bruce & Voas, 2010). The charge of secularists is less that such engagement indicates high religiosity, but that it supports social inequalities and legitimizes the institutional church. But for a secularization account, it is sufficient to demonstrate that religion is in decline, and key mechanisms of decline, rather than whether it has declined *enough*.

Conclusion

Unholy Catholic Ireland opens a range of possible questions, together constituting an important and exciting research program. Future projects might examine the effect of immigration and religious diversity on Irish religiosity, and on perceptions of what it means to be a good citizen. Headline data from the 2022 Census will be published by the Central Statistics Office from May 2023, revealing the extent of change in religious identification since the 2016 Census: the percentages for Catholics (78 percent in 2016), no religion (10 percent in 2016) and other world religions will attract keen interest. A further question is differentiation by gender. The nature of the research design means the majority of culturally-Catholic voices in the text are male. Men tend to lead secularization, with women on average more religious on most measures; however, the gap usually narrows as secularization becomes more advanced (Voas et al., 2013). We might therefore expect current gender gaps in Irish religiosity to narrow as religiosity reaches its lower bound.

Such questions depend on access to high-quality microdata on religion in Ireland, and support for its analysis. Besides not taking part in the 2017 EVS, Ireland did not take part in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) Religion IV study in 2018, though it participated in

1991, 1998, and 2008. Participating in the EVS and ISSP would have allowed more robust testing of how far change in belief and practice reflect period or cohort effects. While Ireland's participation in the European Social Survey since 2002 offers excellent opportunities to compare contemporary Ireland with other countries, the survey's measures of religion are limited. Given the historical importance of religion for state building and social life in Ireland and the continuing pillarization of society in Northern Ireland—where politics remain unsettled—resumption of participation in cross-national survey programs is vital.

Notes

1. Adherents are overwhelmingly Catholic: 95 percent of respondents in 1981, 93 percent in 1990, 88 percent in 1999, and 80 percent in 2008. Protestants formed 1.7, 1.9, 1.6, and 3.3 percent respectively. Of former adherents, the rates identifying as formerly Catholic form zero, 3, 5, and 7 percent of respondents respectively while former Protestants form zero, 0.4, 0.2, and 1.3 percent of respondents. Since the rates identifying as other than Catholic are so small, the graphs and models are for the full population samples. However, we should bear in mind that some element of any apparent change or significant effects may not be specific to Irish Catholicism.
2. Where an estimate is based on fewer than 100 observations, the connecting line with the previous estimate (for the pre-1930 and 1930s cohorts in 2008) or succeeding estimate (for the 1970s cohort in 1999) is dotted. Other observations are based on at least 100 observations. See Table 2 (online appendix) for sample sizes for each cohort by wave.

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