

**HUGH TURPIN.** *UNHOLY CATHOLIC IRELAND: HYPOCRISY, SECULAR MORALITY, AND IRISH IRRELIGION.* STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS 2022, 325 P. ISBN: 9781503633131

JACOB EVANS<sup>1</sup>

With the dust still settling from the tremendous fall from grace that the Catholic Church is experiencing from scandals ranging from abuse of power by ordained clergy to the discovery of mass graves on Church property, Hugh Turpin brings us on an incredible ethnographic journey through the ‘last Catholic country’ (Pope Paul VI, p. 22) as it struggles to reconcile with an increasing disparity between the Church’s structures of morality and those of the public. In conducting this ethnography, Turpin examines the moral and conceptual dilemmas of identity that the people who make up ‘Holy Catholic Ireland’ (5) are facing as the decline of Catholicism threatens to unravel the social and cultural identities that the country has professed since 1921.

Turpin weaves an amazing narrative of what ordinary people are feeling as he questions how they continue to justify their stance toward Catholicism in a society that no longer considers it as the ‘Alter Christus’ (1). I credit Turpin’s compelling narrative to his wonderful use of ethnography which is made possible by his diligence and familiarity with the culture and language of Ireland. From casual conversations at parades and protests to structured interviews, Turpin captures the raw emotions and feelings of his interlocutors and brings you into these conversations with quotes from participants like ‘the Church are a bunch of pricks but the current lad seems alright’ (93).

The rawness of his ethnographic work makes the interlocutor case studies in Chapter 3 and his participant observation outlined in Chapter 5 all that more impactful as the words jump out of the page and bring you into the traumatic and confusing process of religious decoupling. Specifically, the case study of his interlocutor Peter, as he struggles with the rejection of Catholicism in his own life but the decision to include it in his child’s, paints a vivid picture of the internal moral and ethical turmoil that Ireland is facing as ‘what was once unimpeachable [...] has now become impure, desacralized, and openly questionable’ (94), but that remains socially essential.

While Turpin’s ethnographic work alone is compelling, it is further complemented by his integration of quantitative methods. The resulting mixed-methods approach avoids the usual pitfalls of this compromise and instead bolsters both types of data. The charts and figures in Chapter 2 quantitatively describing the decline of Catholicism in Ireland give context to the ‘complex scene of secularization and fragmenting consensus’ (12) outlined in Chapter 1. As the book transitions to ethnographic data, the conclusions drawn in the first two chapters become thick in their description, as the numbers represented in Chapter 2 materialize as the

---

<sup>1</sup> MPhil Candidate in Social Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford. Email: [jacob.evans@anthro.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jacob.evans@anthro.ox.ac.uk)

individuals, families, and communities that find themselves in the chaotic and confusing fray caused by Ireland's divorce from the Catholic Church.

Concluding the book, Turpin expertly points out that Catholicism is more than just a religion in Ireland. Pointing out the complex relationship that religion and religious institutions have in our conception of self, social and cultural structures, and the imagination of the nation-state. As Ireland and other highly religious countries continue on a path of secularization, Turpin's book will remain an excellent examination of the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of the people caught in the middle. Turpin's book highlights that the separation of church and state is not as linear as some would have us believe and that in this messy separation, a vacuum is created that people will fill by shifting and molding their existing cultural and social structures to fit the new space. Overall, this book is a fantastic read and an interesting look at the contemporary questions and queries that religion still presents to anthropologists as we continue transitioning to an ever more secular world.

---

This work is copyright of the author.

It has been published by JASO under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NonDerivatives ShareAlike License (CC BY NC ND 4.0) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal as long as it is non-commercial and that those using the work must agree to distribute it under the same license as the original. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)

