

Love's Betrayal: The Decline of Catholicism and Rise of New Religions in Ireland, by Peter Mulholland, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2019, 362 pp., ISBN 9781787071278, £60 (hardback).

The issue of secularization has dominated the sociology of religion in the west for decades. Mulholland's interest in it is located in Ireland where there has been a dramatic shift of religious affiliation. Whereas in the 1936 Census 93.4% of the population declared themselves as Roman Catholic, by 2012 another poll rated the Republic of Ireland as the least religious of the fifty-seven countries surveyed (1-2).

In parallel with this demise of mainstream religion in Ireland, Mulholland notes the rise of New Religious Movements (NRMs). Because of Mulholland's focus on the active place of NRMs, he provides a history and distinction between this and similarly related terms. Mulholland traces the etymological history of the term NRMs to the counter-culture movements of the 1960s which were described then as 'New Age'. The NRM label also has the benefit of avoiding the negative associations given to 'cult' or 'sect'. Mulholland explains that the term embraces a wide range of religious groups, including that of established religions whose origin lies, in this case, outside of Ireland (6) - which means that Buddhism and Hinduism fall within this classification.

Following Paul Heelas, NRMs are viewed by Mulholland as essentially individualistic, rather than collective organisations. They promote self-responsibility and self-actualization. These values are acknowledged by those who could be seen as in direct competition with the NRMs, the Roman Catholic Church, which admits its own failure to address such issues (10).

Furthermore, Mulholland indicates that NRMs have - according to functionalist perspectives - provided alternative radical values in the face of modernity, offering, for example, rigid prescriptions on personal behaviour (11). Added to these, is the 'cultural' impact, especially the input of one individual, the popular David Spangler from the United States (8).

Alongside this introductory overview, Mulholland develops his own interpretation of what he sees as the secularization of Ireland. Broadly, he presents this as issuing from three factors. First, the breakdown of a process whereby religious affiliation has been automatically passed down from parents to offspring. Second, the failure of the anachronistic teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Third, the huge problem of covered-up child abuse which has scandalized the Roman Church. Then, finally, the rise of NRMs who, Mulholland argues, fill the void left by the ailing R.C. church and its failure to address the psychological needs of a vulnerable part of Irish Society.

First, the breakdown of a process whereby religious affiliation has been automatically passed down through the family from parents to offspring. A number of factors are presented as being responsible for this change. From the 1960s to 1980's, problems within the Irish economy led to

migration of young people (190). Many of those who stayed were dependent upon EEC food surplus hand-outs. Women disproportionately emigrated, a large proportion of men between 45 and 54 years of age were unmarried, mental health suffered and suicide rates rose (192-5). Difficulties within the family were no less severe. A 1986 report signaled that one in four children suffered abuse, amongst the causes being the inability of many men to develop healthy relationships, exacerbated by over-crowding within households, with the discouragement by the church of the use of contraceptives being in part to blame (196).

The Northern Irish troubles, added to fears of nuclear war and created a national sense of anxiety (198-204). On the plus side, later improvements in the Irish education and financial sectors bolstered a more enquiring and critical attitude towards institutions such as the church (207). Mulholland contends that such experiences of rapid changes became an opportunity for NRMs (212). This psychological contribution has, he explains, been overshadowed by a preference for sociological explanations for changes in religious affiliation (212). Alternatively, Mulholland's interest is in the application of attachment theories to any understanding of the success of NRMs (216). Those who have sought solace in the secure attachments within the memberships of NRMs have done so because of the context of societal change, the dysfunction of the traditional Irish family and the betrayal of care by the R.C. institution (227).

The second strand to Mulholland's overview is the failure of the anachronistic teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church to connect with contemporary Irish people. Independence from British rule led, negatively it is argued, to the Roman Catholic church seeking greater power and influence in the Republic. Priests and Nuns became more powerful together with what Mulholland conceives as a 'civilising' mission whereby the church sought penitence from the new country with citizens acting as 'good Catholics'. The outcome of such expectations led to the exertion and manipulation of social capital in the job market, politics and education (80). Combined with the Church's influence through schools, it was able to create a culture of repression with discipline through corporal punishment and authoritarian and repressive measures not only in schools and seminaries, but widespread in the family too (81-3). So traumatic were these elements within Irish culture that it led, Mulholland depicts (referring to a number of reports), to widespread relational and psychological problems (84) and a rising generation who looked for alternatives to such authoritarianism (114-118) – a hunger to which the NRMs were able to assuage.

Mulholland paints a picture of the Roman Catholic leadership in Ireland in disarray as they react to the rise of these NRMs. Whilst some wish to engage with these groups and learn how to re-connect with the life-settings of lost parishioners, others simply act in dismissal and

condemnation of such alternative spiritualities, looking for ways in which they can be 'cracked' (17-19).

The third element in Mulholland's thesis is the role played by the scandal of widespread and unchecked child abuse within the Catholic Church. The 1970 Ryan report showed that 170,000 children were committed to (the now disgraced) Industrial Schools. Children were sent there for nothing other than their parent's non-conformity to social norms (132). It led to what Mary McAleese declared as a systematic betrayal of the Christian imperative to love (hence the title of this book). For Mulholland, the abuse of children was sadly at a level higher than any other European country and that it was religion which lay behind the rationale for such abuse (134). Similarly, the reason why it took so long to question such deplorable behavior is again, due to Biblical teaching, church traditions, and the psychologically damaged persons affiliated to extrinsic religious types who use their faith in a self-serving way. All of these combined leading to members with a problematic sense of inadequacy and an unhealthy desire to be disciplined. The abuse of priests in training at seminaries being another expression of the church's manipulative disposition towards the individual (142). In turn, Mulholland argues, this led to the production of clergy with 'a taste for cruelty' (143) and children and families who, without sufficient feelings of self-worth, tended to accept the abuse which was dealt to them (150).

Finally, Mulholland argues that it was the NRMs who filled the void left by the ailing R.C. church, addressing as they did the psychological needs of a vulnerable and damaged part of Irish Society. In part, it is claimed, the opportunities for critiquing the Catholic Church arose in the wake of the public outrage against state and church over corporal punishment (155). This was not only a void in doctrine and liturgical practice, but of being able to provide close relationships, that the new churches and groups offered 'surrogate family structures' (108).

In reaction, the Catholic church used its privileged access to the media to denigrate the new expressions of religion. An example of this was the negative reaction of clergy towards Transcendental Meditation and Yoga, (38). The attempted domination of religious thought and practice in Ireland by the Roman Catholic church meant that, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses Yearbook of 1988, the country was the most difficult of all in which to evangelize (95). However, sitting uncomfortably with this thesis is Mulholland's undeveloped consideration that it was the media themselves who initiated and developed an interest in such 'alternative' spiritualities (52-53).

Hand in hand with rejection of NRMs was a degree of assimilation of their spiritual and mystical interests into the mainstream and popular practices of some R.C. memberships. This is seen as evident in the practice of divine healing (57) and the Moving Statues phenomenon (51); a trope, Mulholland contends, which has a long history in the church (57), one

which the author sees as 'the ongoing process of religious relativization' (58).

However successful these may have been within the R.C. church, it has not prevented a wide range of NRMs taking hold in Ireland, such as the Unification Church (Moonies), Hookers for Christ, Charismatic Renewal Movement, the Irish Unidentified Flying Saucer Movement, Wicca, Evangelical movements such as the Dublin Christian Mission and Billy Graham, along with religions whose origin lies outside Ireland as with Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism and the Baha'i.

NRMs were not the only movement away from the traditional church - there was also a greater shift away from religion completely in a secularization (174) in part promoted by the media (183). Changes in Irish laws and practices over contraception, divorce and abortion demonstrated this shift of power. But above all, contends Mulholland, it was the groundswell of 'disedifying' personal experiences of autocratic, avaricious, paternalistic and scandalous behaviour from the R.C. Church which led to its own demise (185-6).

Whilst lacking support for many of the claims made here and a critique that often appears to be an ungenerous and over-generalised depiction of the Catholic Church, it is well worth reading for its interest in how secularisation should be a nuanced argument relating to specific contexts, including that of national events. In conclusion, I recommend this interesting and useful work.

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