

A chronicle of love, abuse and change

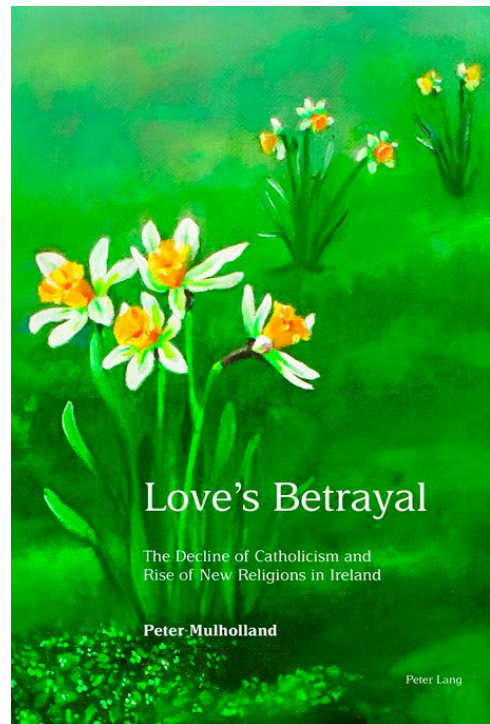
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Peter Mulholland, **Love's Betrayal: The Decline of Catholicism and Rise of New Religions in Ireland** (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2019), 362 pp.

The *Sunday Independent* is an Irish weekly newspaper which forms the foundational basis, with some other leading Irish newspapers, of Peter Mulholland's book *Love's Betrayal: The Decline of Irish Catholicism and Rise of New Religions in Ireland*. The media coverage of religious and social affairs between the years 1959 and 1989 is the focus of this book, upon which its synthesizing theoretical reflections are made. This media coverage literally constitutes a chronicle of change, Mulholland's description of which takes up the 68 page-long appendix at the end of the book, almost as if it were the bedrock for all the preceding pages, and which takes us on a journey into the history of Ireland and its psyche in the context of abuse, religious belief and social change.

The aim of Mulholland is to propose a synthesis of sociological, theological, anthropological, and psychological theories in explaining the two main themes of the book concerning Catholicism and the new religions mentioned in the title. Mulholland refers to researchers such as Max Weber,



Lawrence Taylor, Steven Sutcliffe, Rodney Stark, William S. Bainbridge, Eileen Barker, Paul Heelas, Conrad Baars and Tom Inglis, just to name a few, in his attempted synthesis. However, keeping the main focus on the public discourse and media sources, and putting more emphasis on psycho-social explanations, the book leaves a burden of responsibility on the reader to follow up with a more in-depth acquaintance

of the brief theoretical interpretations Mulholland depicts from this cavalcade of researchers. The main argument around the rise of new religious movements is that people's needs and aspirations are no longer being met by the Catholic church. Moreover, Mulholland seems to be inclined to assert that the majority of people turning to new religions or more magical-devotional, syncretistic forms of Catholicism are suffering from some forms of mental disorder, other personal problems, or life crises. This rise of new religions was furthered by the decline of traditional Irish Catholicism, which Mulholland attributes to the history of a class-related socialization of the Irish people under an authoritarian religious, and often abusive, regime.

Peter Mulholland is an independent scholar, holding a PhD in social and cultural anthropology from Maynooth University in Ireland. This book, *Love's Betrayal*, is based on part of his doctoral research project in Maynooth. Mulholland has been credited for initiating the first multidisciplinary academic conference on new religious movements in Ireland in 2009 and co-editing the conference proceedings, *Ireland's New Religious Movements*, published in 2011. It is safe to say that he can be seen as one of the driving forces of research into new religious movements in Ireland. And with his previous research interests also touching Irish Catholicism, this book seems almost to be a culmination point. An interesting aspect of Mulholland's biography is how it presents a picture of a relatively young tradition of research into new religious movements in Ireland. In the book Mulholland himself discloses how in fact the academic department dedicated to the study of religion wasn't established until 2008.

Contextual boundaries are emphasized in Mulholland's take on new religions. He

views new religions from a very wide angle, from an Irish and normatively Catholic context, based on his data, which in large part is constituted of public discourse from media sources. Hence, the focus is on an emic perspective and the concept of new religions can be seen to include everything from neopagans to vegetarian nutritionists, New Ageism to Jehovah's Witnesses, depending on the contributor's perspectives or Mulholland's interpretations. The said views around new religiosity are mostly news about or reactions towards religious or spiritual activities other than Catholic ones. In chapter one, Mulholland traces the history of new religious movements, or NRMs, in Ireland by chronicling temporally framed public discourse in his primary sources. He discusses the numbers and some activities of different faith groups that can be included under the umbrella term of NRMs in the Irish setting. Furthermore, he looks at the Catholic reactions to these groups and their activities, creating a dual perspective of the rise of new religious movements and the decline of Irish Catholicism as simultaneous events, sharing the same macro-historical and micro-social processes.

Chapter two dives into theology, explaining the roots, history and background of Irish Catholicism and its uniquely rigorous form. Mulholland leans heavily on Tom Inglis when explaining some of the socio-political developments behind the flux of traditional Irish Catholicism, through the system of a church-controlled education system from which the top-down civilizing mission was introduced to the Irish family and psyche. However, he calls for a more interdisciplinary approach drawing from the disciplines mentioned earlier.

Mulholland positions abuse at the centre of the dynamics behind the fall of Catholicism and the rise of new religions

in Ireland, addressing not only physical abuse in the form of corporal punishment and sexual violence, but also the psychosocial consequences of Ireland's rigorous Catholicism. Through chapters three to five, Mulholland chronicles the public debate and turmoil around corporal punishment and child abuse. He refers to this broadly sensed abuse as an endemic occurrence in the church-controlled national and industrial schools, eroding the moral authority of the church long before the child sex abuse scandals, which Mulholland sees as the final nail in the church's coffin.

The title 'Love's Betrayal' comes from the reaction of the former Irish President Mary McAleese to a report by the Ryan Commission, which was formed to inquire into the child abuse scandals, in which she declared them to be a systemic betrayal of the Christian doctrine of love. Mulholland shows how this idea of Christian love lay at the centre of the debates for and against some of the abusive aspects of Irish Catholicism, deeply rooted in another theological and ideological concept; original sin.

After a short examination of personal and collective stresses in the form of nuclear anxiety and the Cold War, which Mulholland sees as a fertile ground for magical-devotional forms of Catholicism and NRMs, he ties everything up with the help of attachment theory. As noted earlier, the aim of this book was to offer an interdisciplinary synthesis explaining the two main themes. Mulholland argues that attachment theory and its core constructs provide a framework for integrating the different theoretical fields. He subscribes to views of attachment theorists, such as John Bowlby, Lee Kirkpatrick and Philip Shaver, on how variations in the ways parents interact with their children form either secure, insecure or disorganized attachment types.

Again, these attachment types lead to different ways of remembering and interpreting religious representations in the minds of their offspring. Moreover, Mulholland considers the notion of religion capitalizing on the operation of the attachment system, meaning the receptiveness to new religious ideas among those whose attachment was disorganized or insecure.

It is the individual's social experiences and psychological development in a certain period of Irish history that lie at the heart of Mulholland's main arguments. Discussion of the loosely conceptualized NRMs is limited and feels more like a sideline. However, this book can be praised for its intriguing portrayal of the history and nature of Irish Catholicism and its psychological and social implications, with theological bearings, for the Irish experience, people and society. The essence of the book is an interdisciplinary examination of the public discourse around Irish Catholicism and new religious movements, painting a picture of a number of abused and psychologically damaged children, growing up to doubt the Catholic Church and find love elsewhere amid societal change.

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