

GROW-ing Neo-Secularisation

Áine Lórié

Kaplan University, USA

Vesna Malešević

National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland

Neo-secularisation theory helps understand the changing position, influence and role of religious authority structures and personal religion/spirituality. This paper discusses the mutual-aid group GROW as an alternative authority system in the context of mental health support in Ireland. Research findings suggest that spiritual and ritualistic dimensions of GROW reinforces a pre-existing religious ethos.

Keywords: neo-secularisation, religion, mental health, small-group organisations, GROW

Introduction

Irish society has been described as one of the most religious places in Europe. Nonetheless secularising tendencies have been recorded in relation to a decline in personal belief and Catholic Church authority (Keogh in Woodcock Tentler, 2007; Inglis, 1998; Corish, 1996). Various studies have shown that religiosity is changing in its content and shape (Dowling in Fulton et al., 2000; Inglis, 2007; Greeley & Ward, 2003). Yet secularisation theory concentrates on a top down approach where religious institutions remain fixed to wider social and political processes. Neo-secularisation theory extends this debate by examining the concept of religious authority, which focuses on interactional relationship between society and religious structures as well as inter/intra-institutional dimensions.

From this perspective, the relationship between mental health and religion is placed within a wider discussion of declining religious authority. We question if mental health sufferers substitute and/or supplement established guidelines with alternative ones. If so, to what extent does the utilisation of alternative practices reflect particular claims of neo-secularisation theory regarding institutional reliance on supernatural legitimisation?

In order to support the above arguments, the paper explores secularisation and neo-secularisation in Ireland, presents a methodological review of our research process and examines empirical findings from a project called “Sacred Belief and Secular Health: A Study on Religion and Mental Illness in Modern Irish Society”. Lastly, we discuss religious messaging within GROW and relate the findings to neo-secularisation claims.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Secularisation debates fall into two main camps: “the inherited model” (Wilson, 1982) and the religious economies model. The former relies on the analysis of modernisation processes to account for changes in

Áine Lórié, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Kaplan University.

Vesna Malešević, Ph.D., Lecturer, School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland Galway.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Vesna Malešević, School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland Galway, Galway, Ireland.

religion and religious organisations and alterations in religiosity levels as well as the social-political-economic position of religious organisations. The second model focuses on religiosity and religious organisations in terms of economic exchange models of interaction. Modernisation theorists comparatively perceive religion as based on rational decisions of individual and group actions. Numerous texts support the idea of the Golden Age of a religious society juxtaposed against a contemporary, rational and seemingly irreligious society. Therein lays an assumption that religious individuals exercise religious persuasion in private while matters of public life would be freed from supernatural evocation. However, the invocation of reason and science as the measures of human conduct negates the lived experiences of both private and public life in numerous societies. Furthermore, secularisation theory could be construed as a “myth” (Luckmann, 1983) that paints a linear picture of historical development. Hadden (1987) also criticises the evolutionary model of secularisation as an obstacle for cross-cultural comparisons. Berger (1992) similarly concludes that only particular strata of those in Europe with western centred education support secularisation and modernisation claims.

Religious economies model relies on rational choice analyses by correlating rational pursuit of goals with economic behaviour. The resultant “believer” is described as a highly rational pursuer of exchange relations with “gods” who considers a ratio of benefits versus costs (Stark & Bainbridge, 1996). However, this exchange is based on an idea that religious commitment rests on psychological egoism, since it construes religious commitment exclusively as a self-interested action (Jerolmack & Porpora, 2004). In doing so, this perspective denies the wealth of data and depth of religious commitment as experienced by believers who chose to be religious due to social, political or economic pressures.

The aforementioned models overlook how changes in religious authority impact the position and role of religion and religious organisations. Here neo-secularisation theory offers a better explanation. As Yamane (1997) claims, the issue under consideration is “the orientation people have to religious authority structures” (p. 116). Religious authority structure is defined “as a social structure that attempts to enforce its order and reach its ends by controlling the access of individuals to some desired goods where the legitimating of that control includes some supernatural component, however weak” (Chaves, 1994, pp. 755-756). This implies that religious authority structures rely on the invocation of the supernatural to command over desirably perceived goods. This is a highly relevant point considering that religious authority structures are in competition with other authority structures. Furthermore, only studying religious authority structures overlooks the secular manifestations of religious discourses (Grant, O’Neill, & Stephens, 2003). To investigate changes in these structures one is bound to examine situations where religious authority is relocated from religious to non-religious settings.

Placing this debate in the Irish context, the hegemonic prevalence of Catholicism leads to a discussion of the implications of such dominant creed on social agents. Through its influence in such areas as education, health and welfare coupled with the teachings on sexuality, marriage and procreation, the Catholic Church managed to imprint its ethos in all areas of public and private life.

Inglis’ (2001, pp. 49-50) study on the Church firmly illustrates the permeation of Catholicism in Irish civil society. He (2001, pp. 54-56) explains how the Church supported other interest groups that defended Catholic affiliated positions or teachings. One adopts this Catholic ethos via their socialisation, especially within social sectors such as the home, education, health and social welfare.

Powell and Guerin (1997, p. 74) confirm a fairly sturdy connection between the Church and voluntary

organisations. For instance, they (1997, p. 76) cite that 57% of Irish voluntary organisations were heavily influenced by the Church in terms of having a religious founder, providing finances and premises, and management. This relationship could be viewed as a form of neo-secularisation in the sense that the Catholic ethos has repositioned itself outside of its institutional confines. The very pervasiveness of the Catholic ethos demands our understanding of GROW's affiliation with Catholicism not only as an example of the relocation of religious authority, but also as a site of contested religiosity. In efforts to understand GROW in relation to the process of neo-secularisation, it is important to examine relevant research on small group organisations.

Small Group Organisations

There have been several studies on small group organisations and support groups (Michalec, 2005; McCreight, 2007; Borkman, 2008). Borkman (2008) points out that the appeal and success of support groups in the United States (U.S.) is largely due to its non-hierarchical structure and reflective experiential narratives. Knott and Frank (2007) focus on traditional mainstream services and find a strong influence of spiritual and religious systems in the British medical sphere.

Sociological research that specifically investigates religious/spiritual qualities of small group organisations has been profoundly helpful. Zadrow's (1998) study on Al-Anon's¹ shows that the group meetings took place within religious structures such as church halls. Roberts' (2008, p. 93) examination of HIV/AIDS self-help groups illustrates that participants seemed to connect the disease to a Christian, morally based stigma. The most relevant research focuses on Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). This is largely due to the spiritual basis of AA's 12-step programme. Schwartz's study (1992, pp. 334-335) highlights the importance of AA in the U.S. as a means to open dialogue about suffering. Geil and Rudy (1983) illustrate how AA membership is similar to religious conversion.

Psychological research on AA and spirituality has shown to be robust (Roland & Kaskutas, 2002; Hortsmann & Tonigan, 2000; Kaskutas et al, 2003). The majority concentrate on the religiosity of AA members while not measuring the religious/spiritual influence of the programme. Roland and Kaskutas (2002, p. 74) found that African-Americans stood out in terms of having high religiosity and consequently participants "embraced the spiritual tenets of AA at a level that was reflective of their religiousness". Makela et al (1996) reinforce the sociological implications of these results by showing how AA groups were intertwined with the prominent Catholic Church in the context of Poland. Kaskutas et al (2003, p. 3) explore the connection between sobriety and religion and highlight that "many treatment intervention and aftercare programs carry a spiritual component". The authors also show that AA's appeal is heterogeneously widespread because not limited to prior belief. They further stress that involvement in AA can lead to a spiritual awakening.

Weegman's (2004, pp. 245-247) study on Narcotics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous shows that the programme appears to decentralise the individual through key terminology in the 12-steps and the "Big Book". The author explains that a type of dependence is established with a Higher Power that is interpreted via the group thereby helping to counteract the idea of addiction being a "disease of isolation".

Hirschman (1992) provides a phenomenological account of recovery by examining five main themes that emerged from study of Narcotics Anonymous: opening and closing rituals, self-identification as an addict, the credo of identifying not comparing, maintenance of the boundary "clean" versus "dirty" and the development

¹ A support group similar to Alcoholics Anonymous.

of a surrogate family/community bond. Hirschman identifies a Christian component in connection with the 12-step programme. The author (1992, p. 545) points to the non-denominational character of the group but admits a theistic reliance “upon Christian church metaphors and practices to help maintain a sense of sanctity for its mission”.

The above studies are helpful to consider for our own research and analysis on GROW.

Methodology

Smith (1981, p. 112) claims that qualitative methodology offers an “inter-subjective” understanding of social behaviour and is highly adaptable in various research settings. Because of the problems linked with qualitative research (i.e. rapport building, measuring verbal and non-verbal communication, quality of observations, sampling), Lofland (1995) and Smith (1981) support methodological diversification. Concerning diversification Hodder (2003, p. 156) points out “text can [also] be used alongside other forms of evidence so that the particular bias of each can be understood and compared”.

Relevant findings used for this paper originate from a Ph.D. project called “Sacred Belief and Secular Health: A Study on Religion and Mental Illness in Modern Irish Society”. From October 2007, until March 2008, 10 interviews were completed, 12 GROW meetings were observed in urban and rural settings and the main text *The Programme of Growth to Maturity* (2005)² was examined. In relation to meetings, non-participatory observation method was employed. Semi-structured in-depth interviewing technique was utilised for investigating participants’ religiosity. The interviews lasted between one-to-two hours, were audio recorded, and took place in public places. Interviews were guided by four main topics: general background, mental health background, GROW and coping.

GROW—General Background

GROW originated in Sydney, Australia in 1957 with support from Catholic priest Fr. Con Keogh and spread to New Zealand, the Republic of Ireland, England, the U.S., Canada and Mauritius. In 1969, GROW was founded in Ireland by Fr. Sean O’Hanlon and currently has over 130 groups with nine regional offices and one national office in Cork. The Irish Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Department of Health and Children financially support the organisation.

GROW is considered to be non-denominational and/or secular. GROW publicity³ does not display any latent or manifest illustrations of a spiritual/religious dimension. However, upon examining GROW material, spirituality is shown to be a key aspect of the programme.

GROW—Meetings

Weekly meetings occur in the evening, lasting two hours, and are peer-run. Of the five groups observed, only one was for young-adults (18-30 years), with the highest number of attendees (12). Other groups range from four to eight attendees and are mostly comprised of adult males (40-60 years). After the meeting members gather for informal socialising.

Meeting leadership works on a rotation basis among long-term members. Other leadership roles include the group organiser, the recorder and the visiting field worker. Most of the respondents had led a meeting at

² Here on referred to as *Growth*.

³ See GROW’s website: www.grow.ie.

least once.

Structure of Meetings

The “Opening Routine” begins with a half-a-minute silence while members collect their thoughts. After, the leader reads “The Memento”, which has a strong prayer-like quality, specifically on account of everyone’s slight bowing of heads. The leader reads from *The Group Method*: “while we place ourselves in the presence of God, the Supreme Healer, for the work of this meeting, let us not think only of our own needs and troubles, but let us invoke His guidance and help...”.

Next is the reading of the “Twelve Steps of Recovery and Personal Growth” with a member reading all steps including “3. We surrendered to the healing power of a wise and loving God” (*Growth*, 2005, p. 5). The “Twelve Steps” assist in structuring GROW by setting targets for members.

The final part of the “Opening Routine” called “The Grow Commitment” is vocalised by all attending members and is a pledge to uphold to the meeting’s integrity and confidentiality. This is followed by a brief phrase that is read while linking hands: “In GROW, we believe in one another, we love one another, and we trust one another” (*Growth*, 2005, p. 77).

The second phase is called “Group Interaction”. A member gives what is known as a “Personal Testimony” that is followed by a group discussion of members’ problems. Many participants revealed that personal testimonies of others greatly inspired them to stay with GROW in the hope of recovery. During “Reports on Progress” and the “Recommendation of Practical Tasks”, everyone is encouraged to discuss their progress from the previous week, since an individual problem is paired with one phrase from *Growth* (2005). The “Middle Routine” begins with the “Affirmation of Good” and “The Act of Surrender”. Both are read aloud by all and have a prayer-like tone. The “Act of Surrender” specifically relates to god:

True, Strong, and Loving God, Supreme Healer, Knowingly and deliberately I now (make the decision) confirm my decision to abandon myself entirely to Your wise and powerful love. (*Growth*, 2005, pp. 78-79)

Before reciting the “Act” the programme cautions that it is not intended for “unbelievers”, “nor even automatically by all believers- but only those who, after considerable reflection, are convinced they are ready to make this profoundly personal act” (*Growth*, 2005, p. 78). At every meeting all members recited this “Act”.

The middle part of GROW meetings is called the “Testing of Knowledge” and it tests members’ understanding of GROW information. It is followed by the segment entitled “Resumed Interaction” when members who have not reported on their progress are invited to do so. Visiting people from the community are also prompted to speak at this point.

The “Closing Routine” starts with public announcements after which the leader reads the “Weekly Evaluation Sheet”. Next the “Field Worker” makes general announcements.

The GROW meeting ends with reading two passages from the main book. All members stand up and link hands while reciting the “Prayer for Maturity” and “The Grow Aspiration” which read:

True, Strong and Loving God, Teach me to see things as they really are, To accept myself and to trust fearlessly in Your care, To govern myself, and to find my peace in doing Your will, And, living or dying, to give myself back to You and to my fellowmen. (*Growth*, 2005, p. 79)

May the spirit of friendship make us free and whole persons, and gentle builders of a free and whole community. (*Growth*, 2005, p. 79)

GROW—Text

Book Structure & Common Maxims

The opening pages of *Growth* (2005) are divided into three parts: “Beginning Growers”, “Progressing Growers” and “Seasoned Growers”. Many of the common phrases refer to participants from the “Beginning Growers” section. The first 17 pages firmly grounds the basic principles of religious/spiritual messaging. The second part of the book for “Progressing Growers” expands on topics from the opening section. Lastly, the section on “Seasoned Growers” is intended for the members who are nearly recovered. The final few pages incorporate specific passages, phrases or prayers heavily used in meetings with the following one directly addressing the supernatural:

1. Personal Value: No matter how bad my physical, mental, social or spiritual condition, I am always a human person loved by God and a connecting link between persons. I am still valuable; my life has a purpose; and I have my unique place and my unique part in my Creator’s own saving, healing and transforming. (*Growth*, 2005, p. 7)

For the purposes of this article, we will focus on spiritual/religious messaging displayed in the text.

Spiritual Language

Growth (2005, pp. 22-23) has a section dedicated to “Believers and Unbelievers” which explains that human suffering is central to its programme. The topic begins with a sentence that is indicative of its stance on belief:

It is obvious from GROW group experience that those who have a very personal belief in a loving God and an after-life have resources for their own mental health and for helping others in their most crucial needs which unbelievers do not have. (p. 22)

The book states next, “Most of us seem to fluctuate inconsistently between these opposites, but to be developing on the whole more towards one than the other” (p. 22). It is then attempted to sort out its conceivable spiritual bias:

That is why, though GROW is profoundly spiritual and God centred, it can draw no clear line between believers and unbelievers; and some unbelievers make far better Growers... than some believers. (p. 22)

In expressing this type of spiritual neutrality the section expands on how prayers used in meetings and spiritual references are voluntary and can be omitted. The book contains a secular “Appendix” that offers replacement terminology for spiritual phrases (pp. 80-81). Administration and leaders within GROW are required to uphold this neutrality. Such a position seems difficult to maintain when god is included as a central factor in one’s recovery. In a section entitled “How Do You Know You’ve Recovered?” the third explanation reads:

Your main habitual for facing life are built-in habit of personal maturity (understanding, acceptance, confidence, control, and love), accompanied by an increasing awareness of the presence and power of a loving God. Not the doctor, nor the pills, nor even the group. (p. 41)

The section on belief advises those “who cannot bear to hear any expression of religious faith” that the secular “Appendix” can be used (pp. 22-23, 81).

The text has a section expanding on spirituality, belief in god and maturity via god. The book acknowledges two types of spirituality “the ‘horizontal’ based on belief in persons, and the ‘vertical’ based on

belief in God” (p. 70). The book associates horizontal belief with the beginning “Principle of Personal Value” where members believe in one another and for oneself regardless of a belief in god. It is also stressed that belonging to GROW does not require religious belief or belief in god as a condition of membership. However, the contents emphasise spiritual messaging by means of a “natural link”:

Nevertheless, there is a *natural link* and consistency (testified to by most Growers) between this primary belief in persons and belief in a supremely personal healing Power, Wisdom, and Love greater than ourselves. (pp. 69-70)

The programme consists of two thresholds: humankind and god. This topic concludes with the realisation that belief in god (the second threshold) is not enough since true development comes holistically via the mind, body, heart, and spirit.

The subsequent section in GROW’s “Systems of Belief” questions if “In Reality greater than man which energises in the universe, is there knowledge, love and provision for us persons?” (p. 71), and the answer is “Belief in God”. There are also atheistic and agnostic answers:

The atheist says No: there is power but no personal intelligence and no loving providence above man. The agnostic says: it can never be known whether there is or not; so in practice we must carry on as if we are on our own. (p. 71)

The book labels the former two answers as fixed positions or “systems of positive Unbelief” which is in opposition to “a God-centred orientation of thought, feeling, and action” (p. 71). A possible fourth option is the idea of being a “mere Doubter or Half-believer”. The final option expands on the concept of “Believer”:

Finally, the Believer is firmly convinced that above man, in the overall movement of life as a whole, there is One Supreme Personal Being who knows and cares and powerfully provides for us⁴. This Being he calls GOD. (pp. 71-72)

The book then asks its readers:

...where do you see yourself? Are you a Believer or an Unbeliever? Or, if you are in the unstable middle region, are you drifting further in Doubt or growing more towards definite Belief? (p. 72)

The final section, “God ‘Improves’ as We Mature”, begins by stating how the idea of God seems to change over the years “as we grow from emotional inadequacy to maturity” (p. 73) and clarifies that one’s view of god helps to determine this process of improvement, “especially in relation to the suffering we have to endure” (p. 73). Four possible views of god are presented (pp. 73-74):

- “1. The Overall Power is Impersonal or Evil”.
- “2. God is a Severe Taskmaster and Judge”.
- “3. God is a Kind Saviour, Healer and Teacher”.
- “4. God is a Supreme Friend and Lover”.

GROW—Individual Religiosity

From all interviews a variety of spiritual/religious activities were revealed: prayer, going to prayer meetings, meditation, talking to a priest, attending mass, religious conferences and pilgrimages, reciting “a deck of the rosary”, participating in faith healing, attending special devotions and novenas, attending confession, reading *The Bible* and interpreting sacred signs. Our findings seem to indicate that older participants employed more “churched” activities while younger participants utilised more “non-churched”

⁴ We are quoting this in bold text because this is exactly how it appears in the *Growth* (2005).

activities. Participants employing more “churched” activities were Vanessa, Max, Rick, Frank, and Lisa. Most seem middle-aged or older and all five attend national school, went to secondary school and Lisa had a third-level education. They were heavily influenced by a Catholic ethos in both public and private spheres.

Participants spoke mostly of prayer, attending mass and reading *The Bible*. Prayer is held as the most significant activity as Vanessa describes “I get great consolation from mass and from prayers”. Attending mass ranked second in the list of “churched” activities, Max states: “I do, I pray morning, noon, and night and I go to mass most days. I’m at home in a church, just at home in a church.” Overall, many confirmed enjoyment of the socialising aspect of attending mass. Reading *The Bible* seemed to be the activity seldom employed except for Lisa, Rick and Max. For instance, Rick remarks “[*The Bible*] drove into me how never to give up hope”. Max also recalls how stories from *The Bible*, particularly “the Sams”, have worked within his spiritual interpretation of sacred “signs”.

Jessica’s discussion of her pluralistic version of spirituality best highlights the “non-churched” participants.

I grew up Catholic and was very religious as a child... I lost that in my teens and throughout a good chunk of my 20’s. It’s only in the last couple of years that my faith has kind of come back. I think a lot about the mystical side of life... That’s why I’m not put off by the God thing or the prayers [in GROW]. To me they’re like a chant or a mantra or something.

She employs many spiritual activities including meditation, chanting exercises, muscle testing, yoga, kinesiology, chakra balancing, attends self-healing workshops, and reads Buddhist texts. Certainly, Jessica’s experiences are illustrative of the diverse effects of secularisation. What is more, in regards to other participants, the common activity that they all share, attending GROW, could be viewed as a “non-churched” activity. This activity also speaks to the changes brought about in religious authority structures. Jessica also points out that the structure of mass is out-dated, that she would not talk to a priest. Lisa also alludes to this perceived unfriendliness of Catholic priests and elaborates how her current priest “doesn’t really have the time [to talk to her] and I think he’s a bit dismissive”. The majority of participants did not engage with priests about their mental health problems.

In regards to additional concerns with “churched” related activities, Freddy spoke of an inhibiting factor in socialising in mass: “I had a lot of phobias about mass”. In addition, participants expressed about distrust towards the Catholic Church. Will relays his impression of attending a Christian Brothers school: “it was just the end of it, corporeal punishment in Ireland. Very strict, we used to get wacked. I’d go to mass, but I didn’t go to mass with a Christian...”. Luke concurs by saying, “I don’t have much time, I have distrust for formal religion and organised religion”.

According to participants certain principles within the Church can also be a deterrent including dogmatic thinking. Henry talks about:

I suppose a part of that is I grew up in a very religious family, where the solution to every problem was always spiritual, never practical.

However it is important to note how Henry negotiated his non-religious approach with spirituality within the context of GROW. On the other hand, Lisa, who greatly adopted Catholic teachings, recalls how her constant need to attend mass, confession, and prayer offered her no comfort.

Perhaps the noted difficulties in relation to personal belief, specifically “churched” belief and practices, contributed to our participants’ utilisation of alternative coping sources. Attending GROW potentially

constitutes the predominant coping activity.

Discussion: GROW and Neo-secularisation

From the findings, it is noticeable that this group and its members espouse strong religious connotations. Due to the prevalent Catholic ethos in Irish society and its 95% Catholic population, a Catholic framework is strongly present in many facets of life. As Inglis (2007) pointed out, regardless of the changing levels of belief, attendance of rituals or adherence to religious doctrines, Catholicism in Ireland is something that the majority of the population adopts through socialisation. Simultaneously the way in which Catholicism is being re-valued and re-shaped in terms of individual religiosity and its influence in small group organisations is something that requires examination.

GROW tends to act as an alternative authority system not only in its role in coping but also in its spiritual/religious messaging. While officially claiming to be non-denominational and/or secular, material used in meetings and its reliance on spiritually, ritualistic behaviour creates difficulties for the non-religious.

At the organisational level, GROW's official non-denominational stance is there to attract a wider audience while also qualify for government assistance. The second point is relevant, since GROW is financially supported by government agencies. If part of religious sector it would be further constrained by institutional demands in both its material content as well as religious messaging. However, by adopting a non-denominational position while incorporating religious messaging in its contents, GROW succeeds in not only attracting wider membership but also influencing those less religiously inclined.

Analysis of the main text reveals that GROW's conceptualisation of the sacred is the dominant theme. In the section on "Believers and Unbelievers", the opening links personal belief in god and after-life with individual recovery. Although also having a secular appendix, there is a clear favouritism of religious messaging. Furthermore, this non-denominational group uses religious messaging with reference to the supernatural to posit itself as an alternative (religious) authority system, whilst simultaneously filling in the emerging spiritual gap created by institutional distrust. In this context, GROW serves a function of the authority system offering what the Catholic Church cannot fulfil: a venue that provides a programme for recovery and support for those with mental health problems and a spiritual dimension stripped of doctrinal teachings.

Another point related to the main text points to the centrality of godly references. Although every leader and local branch administration needs to uphold spiritual neutrality and the non-denominational character, this is highly difficult to maintain for two reasons. One, frequent referencing to god is implicated in a concept of recovery. And, two, non-religious value systems (agnostic or atheistic) are phrased as systems of unbelief and therefore made questionable on the continuum of belief-doubt-unbelief where "belief in god" is the answer to the question about reality, knowledge and love that transcends everyday life.

There is a further point regarding religious referencing in terms of socialisation. In a Catholic permeated society, GROW becomes an alternative channel through which members uphold broader, cultural values. Therein GROW becomes an extension of Catholic socialisation with the benefit of mental health care with a spiritual dimension. Different concepts of god, interpretations of belief/unbelief, and an emphasis on personal spiritual development all support Grant, O'Neill and Stephens's (2003) argument on the spiritualisation of secular organisations. This point supports neo-secularisation claims where the laicisation taking place in religious organisations is another aspect of secularising structures. Simultaneously the relocation and further spiritualisation of secular organisations points towards the transference of loyalties to alternative authority

structures. By GROW using material with religious connotations and its strategic repositioning in the voluntary sector, it helps attract and maintain members who, as our study shows, might be dissatisfied with traditional authority structures. The question though is why there is a need for spiritual guidance within a non-religious organisation. The answer is that the idea of a non-denominational organisation which does not exclude a spiritual dimension extends GROW's mission and links recovery with aspects of religiosity/spirituality.

The interview findings support the above claims in that GROW is not only a support group for people struggling with mental health issues, but it is also an environment highly conducive to the respondents' religious/spiritual leanings. Even GROW's spiritual messaging could be viewed as generally Christian and not specifically Catholic. However, for some participants, the conceptualisation of this messaging is processed under a Catholic perspective due to their socialisation. This processing may indicate that religious authority in Ireland has profoundly altered to the extent that GROW, a self-help organisation, is able to utilise religious messaging. In addition, GROW offers "non-churched" spiritual activities to its members by providing extended choices.

In regards to "churched" activities, participants mainly listed prayer, reading *The Bible* and attending mass. Prayer is considered particularly important due to its ability to offer "consolation". It seems mass helps balance the very inter-personal activity of prayer. Many of the five "churched" participants greatly varied in terms of the frequency of attending mass. Inglis (1998) may view this experience as a part of the Irish Catholic habitus in which people acquire social capital while also solidifying social ties. Outside mass, the development of social ties is something that seems to occur in the context of GROW meetings. The third activity of reading *The Bible* appeared to assist in disseminating a positive attitude by offering a message of hope. Some participants described how this message is one that helps explain suffering.

Aside from the "churched" activities, Jessica's broad account is illustrative of expansive "non-churched" practices. Yet Jessica had not totally abandoned "churched" activities (namely mass), because she believes it exudes "good energy". All participants engage in GROW's "non-churched" activities for the shared purpose of coping. Furthermore, GROW meetings along with the text function in a ritualistic manner. In addition, all participants engage with a variety of coping activities outside of GROW, according to "churched" or "non-churched" spiritual affiliations. In regards to neo-secularisation theory, it is clear to see from the interviewees that a negotiation between Catholic religious authority and GROW's authority structure is taking place. In this process, various levels of employing religious practices as positive coping emerge. However, there are limitations when it comes to using such coping mechanisms, depending on one's respective relationship to religious/spiritual authority.

As already addressed, when it comes to "churched" religious practices and belief, certain difficulties or limitations can arise. Considering how all participants referenced (directly or indirectly) as brought up Catholic, these difficulties relate to attitudes towards the Church. In regards to attending mass, it was reported how this environment is not always conducive to improving one's mental health. Furthermore, from Will's and Luke's respective accounts, we see how the issue of institutional distrust is a very current one. The sexual abuse scandals have impacted public approach to and utilisation of institutional religion. The relocation of authority structures seems to be taking place as a consequence of the various processes such as intra-institutional mismanagement, an accommodating perception of alternative organisations (like GROW), and the broader individualisation of choices.

Conclusions

Conceivably GROW, an alternative authority that stresses a non-denominational perspective, reinforces a diverse approach towards religious/spiritual coping. What is more, GROW's legitimisation and extension of a Catholic ethos supports neo-secularisation claims in which loyalty is being shifted from declining religious authority structures to alternative structures. It seems that the very existence of GROW as a healing-orientated small group organisation that focuses on infirmities of mental health problems could be indicative of the very pervasiveness of the Catholic ethos. This might explain why our participants chose to attend GROW despite their ostensible differences in regards to spiritual orientation and practices. Additionally, messaging reflected in GROW seems to match members' pre-existing Catholic principles or attitudes. Overall, this paper supports the idea that not only are alternative authority structures emerging (both religious and secular), but also that such structures are replicating a Catholic ethos despite an individual's cognizant endorsement.

References

- Berger, P. L. (1992). *A far glory*. New York: The Free Press.
- Borkman, T. (2008). Self-help groups challenge the health care systems in the US and UK. In S. Chambre & M. Goldner (Eds.), *In patients, consumers and civil society: Advances in medical sociology* (p. 10). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, Ltd.
- Bruce, S. (1993). Religion and rational choice: A critique of economic explanations of religious behaviour. *Sociology of Religion*, 54, 93-205.
- Chaves, M. (1994). Secularization as declining religious authority. *Social Forces*, 72(3), 749-774.
- Corish, M. (1996). Aspects of the secularisation of Irish Society 1958-1996. In E. G. Cassidy (Ed.), *Faith and culture in the Irish context* (pp. 138-172). Dublin: Veritas.
- Dowling, T. (2000). Young Catholic adults in Ireland. In J. Fulton et al (Eds.), *Young catholics at the new millennium. The religion and morality of young adults in western countries* (pp. 50-69). Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- Grant, D., O'Neill, K., & Stephens, L. S. (2002). Neosecularisation and craft versus professional religious authority in a nonreligious organization. *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42, 3.
- Greeley, A. M., & Ward, C. (2003). A "Secularized" Ireland. In A. M. Greeley (Ed.), *Religion in Europe at the end of the second millennium* (pp. 155-187). New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.
- Greil, A., & Rudy, D. (1983). Conversion to the world view of Alcoholics Anonymous. *Qualitative Sociology*, 6, 5-28.
- Hadden, J. K. (1987). Towards desacralising secularisation theory. *Social Forces*, 65, 587-611.
- Hirschman, E.C. (1992). Recovering from drug addiction: A phenomenological account. In J. F. Sherry Jr. & B. Sternthal (Eds.), *NA—Advances in consumer research* (Vol. 19, pp. 541-549). Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research.
- Hodder, I. (2003). The interpretation of documents and material culture. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 155-175). London: Sage Publications.
- Horstmann, M. J., & Tonigan, J. S. (2000). Faith development in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA): A study of two AA groups. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 18(4), 75-84.
- Inglis, T. (1998). *Moral monopoly: The rise and fall of the Catholic church in modern Ireland*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- Inglis, T. (2001). Irish civil society: From church to media domination. In T. Inglis, Z. Mach, & R. Mazanek (Eds.), *Religion and politics: East-west contrasts from contemporary Europe* (pp.49-67). Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- Inglis, T. (2007). Catholic identity in contemporary Ireland: Belief and belonging to Tradition. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 22(2), 205-220.
- Jerolmack, C., & Porpora, D. (2004). Religion, rationality, and experience: A response to the new rational choice theory of religion. *Sociological Theory*, 22(1), 140-160.
- Kaskutas, L. A., Turk, N., Bond, J., & Weisner, C. (2003). The role of religion, spirituality and Alcoholics Anonymous in sustained sobriety. *Alcohol. Treat. Quart.*, 21(1), 1-16.
- Keogh, D. (2007). The Catholic Church in Ireland since the 1950s'. In L. W. Tentler (Ed.), *The Church confronts modernity. Catholicism since 1950 in the United States, Ireland & Quebec* (pp. 93-149). Washington: The Catholic University of America Press.

- Knott, K., & Franks, M. (2007). Secular values and the location of religion: A spatial analysis of an English medical centre. *Health & Place, 13*(1), 224-237.
- Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1995). *Analysing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. California: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Luckmann, T. (1983). *Life world and social realities*. London: Heineman.
- Makela, K. et al. (1996). *Alcoholics anonymous as a mutual-help movement: A study in eight societies*. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press.
- McCreight, B. (2007). Exploring narratives of pregnancy loss: The role of self-help groups in supporting parents. *Medical Sociology Online, British Sociological Association, 14*.
- Michalec, B. (2005). Examining the multidimensional benefits of breast cancer support groups. *Journal of Psychosocial Oncology, 23*(2/3), 159-179.
- Powell, F., & Guerin, D. (1997). *Civil society and social policy: Voluntarism in Ireland*. Dublin: A & A Farmar.
- Roberts, S. (2008). Normative functions of HIV/AIDS support groups. *South African Review of Sociology, 39*(1), 83-97.
- Roland, E. J., & Kaskutas, L. A. (2002). Alcoholics Anonymous and church involvement as predictors of sobriety among three ethnic treatment populations. *Alcohol. Treat. Quart., 20*(1), 61-77.
- Schwartz, J. (1992). Everybody loves a drunk. *American Demographics, 14*, 13-14.
- Smith, H. W. (1981). *Strategies of social research: The methodological imagination*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Stark, R., & Bainbridge, W. S. (1996). *A theory of religion*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Weegmann, M. (2004). Alcoholics Anonymous—A group analytic view of fellowship Organisations. *Group Analysis, 37*(2), 243-258.
- Wilson, B. R. (1982). *Religion in sociological perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yamane, D. (1997). Secularisation on Trial: In defence of a Neosecularisation paradigm. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 36*(1), 109-122.
- Zajdow, G. (1998). Civil society, social capital and the twelve step group. *Community, Work & Family, 1*(1), 79-89.