Religion as a Response to the Crisis of Modernity: Perspectives of Immigrants in Ireland

Vladimir Kmec

Modernity, as associated with capitalism, industrialization, secularization, rationalization and globalization, has brought many benefits to humankind. Modernity has been accompanied by the rise of consumerism, individualism and materialism. At the same time, modernity was expected to lead to an inexorable decline of religion and a marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere (Berger 1973, 1990, Beyer 1994, Bruce 1996, 2002, Casanova 1994, 2001, Taylor 2007). In Western societies, the tensions between the positive and negative forces of modernity created a vacuum—a crisis of modernity. For some, religion became a force that could fill this vacuum: a response to the crisis of modernity. Accordingly, some scholars have challenged or revised the secularization thesis. Martin (1969, 1978, 2005) and Greeley (1973) argued that there has not been a decrease in religious belief but a change in the way people perceive and relate to God. For Cox (2009), secularization brought an increase in the need for spirituality and an emergence of non-conventional forms of religion. Davie (1990, 2001) claimed that people continue to believe without belonging to institutional religions. Modood and Kastoryano (2007) highlighted that religions in secular societies continue to shape political, social, cultural and economic world-views and value systems; public space is not religiously and culturally neutral. For Habermas (2006), secular citizens must learn to live in a post-secular society together with religious people, while religiously practicing people have to learn to live in a post-Christian society with secular people.

Globalization and increased migration means increased religious, ethnic and cultural pluralism, further complicating the role of religions in the modern public sphere. Indeed, migration is one of the decisive forces in the revival of religion in Western societies. While migrating to new countries, migrants take with them their own religious packages, i.e., practices, behaviors and perceptions (Casanova 2001, Foley 2007, Held et al. 1999, Jenkins 2007, Ugba 2007, Warner 1998). Upon entering a new country, immigrants usually prefer to establish their own religious communities rather than to join existing ones. This occurs even when immigrant groups belong to established religions and faiths (Alba, Raboteau and DeWind 2009, Sagarena 2009, Lopez 2009). As agents of transnational connections to their homelands, immigrant congregations can

While the literature on transnationalism emphasized that immigrant congregations helped people maintain connections to their homelands and thus sustain conventional religious behaviors, other scholars suggested that these are not the only options. Practicing religion within immigrants’ places of worship can help immigrants in their adaptation to their new society (Handlin 1971: 3). It can encourage integration and intercultural interaction in the host society (Nagel 2010, Pries 2010). Within their places of worship, immigrants can synchronize their previous religious identity with the mainstream culture of the host society, or change their religiosity. Immigrants can practice their religion in hybridized and secularized forms while interlinking the tradition of their homeland with that of their host society (Avalos 2004, Ling 2008). The pressure to modernize that migration brings with it can have different impacts on religious identity: “regression or innovation, traditionalism or modernization, neutralization or professionalism” (Pankoke 2005: 387). In transnational settings, religion becomes central in the emergence of new hybrid identities or the re-affirmation of old identities (Vásquez 2008).

This chapter focuses on the links between religion and crisis from the perspective of immigrants in the Republic of Ireland. Ireland can be said to be in a transitional period, experiencing multiple crises associated with modernity. Ireland has changed from a poor country of emigration with a relatively religiously and culturally homogenous population, to a more multicultural society experiencing a rapid economic boom (accompanied by secularization and modernization), to a country in economic crisis. These crises have been compounded by the severe crisis in the Catholic Church in Ireland, as exemplified in clerical sexual abuse scandals.

This chapter begins by describing the Irish context as one of multiple crises. It then draws on my ethnographic fieldwork to explore how temporary young immigrants from the European Union (EU) and of Christian religious background are responding to these multiple crises. I share the stories of immigrants affiliated with a German Lutheran congregation, a Polish Catholic chaplaincy and a Slovak Catholic community in Dublin to illustrate how they respond to these multiple crises with religion.1 While becoming part of immigrant congre-