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Queering the pulpit: catholic clergy and media celebrity in the Republic of Ireland

Páraic Kerrigan^a and Maria Pramaggiore^b

^aUniversity College Dublin; ^bMaynooth University

ABSTRACT

This article examines the unlikely ways that media celebrity enabled priests and nuns in Ireland to make gay and lesbian identities visible. Despite the fact that sex among men was criminalised in Ireland until 1993, Catholic priests and nuns during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s used their mass media celebrity to make same-sex desire and LGBTQIA+ identities visible in popular media, especially through the public service broadcaster RTÉ. The article examines three case studies in which priests and nuns ‘queered the pulpit,’ harnessing their public personas to affirm LGBTQIA+ identities across various Irish media platforms in ways that were surprisingly tolerant, given Catholic orthodoxy. The article speaks to the paucity of research regarding religious personalities as celebrities. The omission of religious figures from the celebrity studies literature is noteworthy, particularly in the Irish context, where broadcast media has been a potent site for cultivating clergy celebrity. The article’s focus on religious celebrities who gave voice to LGBTQIA+ lives and concerns in the Irish context also reframes the traditional narrative of the relationship between media and Catholic clergy, which has often been characterised solely in terms of scandal.

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Introduction

This article opens with an anecdote that might read like a dirty joke. In November 1994, Father Liam Cosgrave, a parish priest from the North Dublin neighbourhood of Baldoyle, died, naked, of a heart attack at Incognito, a gay sauna in Dublin city centre. Another, unnamed, priest who was on site that night performed the sacrament of extreme unction, known as last rites.

Incognito’s manager, Liam Ledwidge, stated in the press that Cosgrave had been drinking coffee with two other priests before he died (O’Kane 1994) and that at least 20 priests were regulars at the sauna (MacDonald 2016). ‘We would not normally give out this information,’ Ledwidge acknowledged, ‘but as a gay community we rebel against the Catholic church, which refuses to recognize us’ (O’Kane 1994). Incognito’s priest patrons, anonymous in life, yet infamous in death, represented both the orthodoxy of the Catholic church and its undoing. Fr. Cosgrave was granted a posthumous notoriety, mainly in the gay community and the incident would be written into the Murphy Report (2009) on child

sex abuse by priests in the Archdiocese of Dublin, despite the fact that there were no children involved.

This article examines the unlikely way that media celebrity enabled priests and nuns in Ireland to make gay and lesbian identities visible. The case of Fr. Cosgrave is admittedly, an extreme example. In the three historical instances that we document, clergy members who were representatives of Irish Catholicism, a powerful social, cultural and religious institution whose dogma sanctions only reproductive sex – and that only within heterosexual marriage – enabled discussions of gay and lesbian sexual identities that challenge Catholic orthodoxy. Despite the fact that sex among men was criminalised in Ireland until 1993, these Catholic priests and nuns used their mass media celebrity during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to make same-sex desire and LGBTQIA+ identities visible.

We argue through three case studies that priests and nuns ‘queered the pulpit’, re-envisioning their congregations as a mass media audience, for whom they opened up a space for the discussion of LGBTQIA+ spiritual and social lives. At the time of these media appearances, the clergy celebrities would have been understood by Irish audiences primarily as promoting tolerance for gay and lesbian people, which links their project to a larger history of gay liberation in Ireland that Kieran Rose (1994) has termed ‘a tradition of tolerance, fairness and justice arising from the struggle against colonialism, and for civil, religious and economic rights’ (p. 3–4). These celebrity priests and nuns were not challenging heteronormativity from a queer perspective, a stance whose overtly deconstructive politics resists the ‘circumscribing power of sexual labelling in general’ (Valente 2010, p. 25). Nor were these clergy figures arguing for the existence of a ‘self-queering Ireland paradigm’ (Valente 2010, p. 25) whereby ‘Irish and homosexual subject positions slide into figurative identification as a mutual deviation from the hegemonic norms’ (Valente 2010, 31). Yet, their challenge to Catholic orthodoxy as out gay and lesbian clergy members made important inroads in the broader conceptualisation of the diversity of sexual identity.

The article seeks to address the paucity of research in celebrity studies regarding religious figures as socially constructed celebrities (Alpion 2020; Natale 2013). As Steve Nolan (2009) notes, celebrity in the church functions in similar ways to fame within popular culture forms, such as film:

Both film and liturgy invite their constituent subjects to identify with one another, as audiences tend to build a relationship of identification with the main character of a film, Christian believers might identify with the priest. (61)

Research on religious figures in celebrity studies has focused on evangelical Christian celebrities (Natale 2013), priests who have cultivated a radio presence (Warren 1996), saints as celebrities (Howells 2011) and individual figures such as Mother Teresa (Alpion 2020) and Mary Magdalene (Bolton 2020). The omission of religious figures in the context of celebrity studies is noteworthy, particularly in the Irish context, where the media landscape has been a potent site for constructing and cultivating clergy celebrity. This article explores the way that particular clergy members harnessed their celebrity in Ireland to render LGBTQIA+ identities visible in ways that were surprisingly tolerant, given Catholic orthodoxy and the historical context of the AIDS crisis.

The focus on celebrity and religious figures in the Irish context also offers a new narrative through which we can examine the relationship between media and the clergy, which is often

associated with scandal. The press around Cosgrave's death, with its outing of unnamed sauna-frequenting gay priests, adheres to the conventions of scandal reportage while at the same time overtly announcing the seismic changes taking place at the intersection of religion and sexual identity in the Irish Republic during the 1990s. In 1993, the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) decriminalised consensual sex between men in response to a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights that Irish law, still based on the 1861 *Offences Against the Person Act*, was in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights. At the same time that this political milestone was reached, representing the culmination of David Norris and his allies' *Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform*, the decade of the 1990s became synonymous with revelations of priest sexual misconduct in Ireland and elsewhere, which unfolded as international media events. In Ireland, just as male homosexual sex was decriminalised – because sex between women was not named in the existing law, there was no mention of it in the EU court ruling – the history of abuse by paedophile priests became common knowledge.

Two Irish priests – Eamonn Casey, the Bishop of Galway, and Belfast priest Brendan Smyth – became infamous objects of media scrutiny during the 1990s because of sexual scandal; in the former case, for subverting Catholic sexual norms and in the latter, for violating child sex abuse law. In April of 1993, Casey's former housekeeper Annie Murphy appeared on popular Irish chat show *The Late Late Show* to discuss her recent book, which disclosed her long-term relationship with the Bishop and the fact that they had a child together. The *Irish Examiner* named the Annie Murphy episode of the programme one of the 'top 10 moments of Irish television' (deBurca 2013).¹

At the time, the *LLS*, which began broadcasting during the Summer of 1962, was RTÉ's flagship programme. The show had become a cultural phenomenon with a massive audience reach, becoming one of the most successful programmes on RTÉ throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, with audiences often above one million viewers (Kerrigan 2019). It would thus play an important role in two of the case studies in this essay. The show's popularity in part originated from the discussion of controversial topics, in particular, issues pertaining to sex and sexuality. Possibly even more integral to the show's success was its presenter Gay Byrne. Byrne's success on the show was attributed to his 'willingness to assume the role of devil's advocate for social reform in a tiny conservative island' (Doyle O'Neill 2017, p. 26). The public service broadcaster RTÉ's willingness to court taboo subjects, coupled with Byrne's eagerness to use television to question Irish society's conservatism, solidified the *LLS* as an Irish cultural institution (Brennan 2019, Kerrigan 2021). In fact, it was on the *LLS* that many of the clergy cultivated their celebrity.

In the case of the notorious paedophile Brendan Smyth, the priest fled Northern Ireland in 1991 and took refuge in the Republic for three years to avoid prosecution.² The Smyth case was implicated in the resignation of the Irish Prime Minister Albert Reynolds in 1994, when it was revealed that an extradition request had languished in his Attorney General's office for seven months. Smyth's image was widely disseminated in the media, indelibly linking his role as a priest to the sexual abuse, rendering him what Colum Kenny calls an 'anti-religious icon':

The short sequence of images of Smyth that were [...] often repeated [...] on Irish television, became a sort of sickening, electronic anti-religious icon. Still images of his face appeared frequently in the print media in general stories about sex abuse. Smyth himself came to be regarded by many Irish people as the personification of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church (Kenny 2009, p. 65).

These two Catholic priests engaged in unauthorised or criminal sexual behaviour and became figures of mass media interest, or more precisely scandalous infamy, as a result. By the end of that decade, a broader view of the widespread abuse in church run schools and institutions came to light, due in part to the airing by RTÉ of the documentary *Dear Daughter* (1996) and the series *States of Fear* (1999), which furthered the discussion of the Church's culpability in protecting criminally abusive clergy.

While acknowledging that scandal and clergy abuses remain a central element in the relationship between Catholic clergy and sexual identity in Ireland, and between clergy and the media, we intend to explore a different history here, one that reveals a nascent counterpublic that began to coalesce around Irish television outlets and particularly, the public service broadcaster RTÉ. Fraser (1992) defines counterpublics as discursive spaces 'where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (p. 123). We argue that, in Ireland, such counterpublics developed in plain sight within mainstream Irish media culture through the work of RTÉ producers and members of the Catholic clergy who were willing to leverage their celebrity to publicise LGBTQIA+ issues, with the dual goal of promoting tolerance and achieving ratings success.

We trace the history of several clergy members who enabled the supportive articulation of alternative sexual identities, and specifically those that challenged the Catholic norm of heterosexual marital monogamy, through media appearances. We view these figures as engaging in a process of queering of the pulpit because they utilised mass media, not a local congregation, as their audience and because they promoted acceptance and affirmation of LGBTQIA+ lives. At the time, these figures articulated the diversity of sexual identity in what might now be seen as the narrow terms of gay and lesbian desire. This article aims to illuminate the cultural work of this small group of priests and nuns who, in conjunction with Irish media producers and activists, subverted Church-sanctioned heteronormativity on radio and television programmes that reached a wide swath of the Irish population.

Through mass media celebrity, priests and, to a lesser extent, nuns (due to fewer opportunities for media visibility) were unlikely ambassadors, disseminating knowledge about and discussion of LGBTQIA+ identities. Over the five decades since the emergence of the national mass media in Ireland in the 1960s, these religious celebrities have, at key moments, brought public attention to alternative sexual identities, contributing to the fuller articulation of LGBTQIA+ and queer Irish identities, history and culture.

Celebrity priests and nuns

The intersection between celebrity and religion has been theorised from several vantage points, drawing particularly on the work of Emile Durkheim (1995). Pete Ward (2014) and Chris Rojek (2007) train their focus on the connection between fandom and religious worship; Rojek argues that 'all cultures possess rites, myths, divine forms, sacred and venerated objects, symbols, consecrated men and sacred places' (172). Whereas Daniel Boorstin (1961) points to the communication revolution of the early 20th century as the source of the phenomenon of celebrity, Simone Natale (2013) argues that 19th century spiritualist mediums were the first to commodify religious identities.³ As organised religion in the West has experienced a decline, Rojek observes, 'celebrity culture has

emerged as one of the replacement strategies that promote new orders of meaning and solidarity' (180).

But celebrity culture and religious leadership are not mutually exclusive possibilities. Since the late 19th century in Europe and North America, religious leadership has been enabled by and, increasingly, has become synonymous with, an engagement with mass media. Religious celebrity developed in the US among revivalists such as Charles Grandison Finney, Dwight L. Moody; and Billy Sunday. Early to mid-20th century 'crusaders' include Aimee Semple McPherson, Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Joel Osteen, who consolidated global empires through radio and television. More recently, as more religious communities have moved online, they have acquired global followings and produced their own set of influencers (Campbell 2020, Whitehead 2018; Hoover 2006).

The Catholic church produced its share of celebrity priests, several of whom can be understood as members of the Irish American diaspora. During the 1930s, Father Charles Coughlin, born in Canada of Irish parents, became known as the 'radio priest' because he so effectively used the burgeoning national network of radio stations to preach hatred of Jews and blacks to an audience of millions. Father Patrick Peyton, born in County Mayo, spent most of his life in the US, beginning a career on radio in the mid-1940s with the slogan 'the family that prays together stays together.' He built a media enterprise through his Rosary Crusade mission, hosting Rosary Rallies around the world. The best known celebrity priest may be Irish-born Father Edward Flanagan, who established Boys Town, the home for orphaned youth, in Nebraska in 1921; his reputation for good works became the subject of a 1938 film starring Spencer Tracy. Flanagan travelled to Japan, Korea, Ireland, Austria and Germany to advocate for the cause of child welfare.⁴

Opportunities for media fame and celebrity for nuns were much less available than they were for priests. This comes from broader disadvantages faced by nuns within the Roman Catholic Church, which has had a long history of marginalising women within the Church hierarchy (Tighe-Mooney 2018). Even after Vatican II, which attached greater significance to role of women in the Church, religious service within the Catholic tradition remained highly gendered, with priests continuing to be associated with clerical authority and nuns subjugated to lesser positions of service within the Church's structures (Stornig 2012). Sharon Tighe-Mooney (2018) contends that these gendered structural inequalities have established a culture within the broader Church that prohibits women from the ministry and decision making. These systemic inequalities have contributed to the prominence of priests as media figures and the relative invisibility of nuns.

Even with the context of the church's gendered hierarchy, however, there are examples of nun celebrity. The Belgian 'singing nun,' Jeannine Deckers became internationally famous for the Grammy winning hit single, 'Dominique' (1963). Mother Angelica founded the Eternal Word Cable Television Network, initially broadcasting radio programmes from a converted garage in 1981, but eventually moving her WEWN network online. Mother Teresa (born Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu) became a global celebrity, one who was second in status only to John Paul II, according to Gëzim Alpion (2007 p. 4–5). Alpion's study, which argues Mother Teresa was involved in the construction of her public persona and that her fame ruptured the patriarchal dominance of the Church is an important contribution to the literature on religious celebrity. Alpion's observations are relevant to the cases of priest and nun celebrity in Ireland that we examine, and particularly to the ways in which nuns sometimes challenged the pervasive dominance of priests in the Irish media.

In 20th century Ireland, Catholic priests and nuns enjoyed a unique public status linked not merely to their traditional religious authority but also to the national identity and the workings of a not fully secular state. When the Irish Free State was established in 1922, Catholic institutions were 'dominant across civil society' (Lynch 2012: 68) partly due to the 19th century 'devotional revolution' that expanded the role of the clergy, whose numbers were growing rapidly in a population decimated by famine. Moreover, priests such as Patrick Sheehan, who wrote novels, lectured to the Gaelic League, and wrote for the lay press were instrumental to Irish nationalism (Garvin 1986, p. 69).

As has been thoroughly documented (Inglis 1998), the Catholic Church became a powerful bureaucratic authority in a newly independent Ireland, and priests occupied the moral high ground on most public and private matters, including sexual practices and sexual identity. 'Catholic moral teaching on sexual relations shaped not only personal morality but public policy as well' writes Lynch (2012, p. 68). The public policy that developed reflected a 'Jansenist puritanism' in vogue at the national seminary in Maynooth, where the majority of priests were educated (Martin 1997, p. 96). Martin argues that church practice led to the production of 'heterosexualized bodies' in Ireland: bodies that were the ultimate object of applications of power, subjected to the disciplinary control, and self-control, mechanisms associated with the Catholic Church, and thus aligned with Foucault's 'docile bodies', which are 'subjected, used, transformed and improved' (1975, p. 97).

At the particular conjunction of church and state power in Ireland, priests were granted nearly unlimited authority and were expected contribute to public discussions of sexual identity and practice, beginning with the inception of the Irish state up to and including the Marriage Equality Referendum (2015) and divorce (1995, 2019) and abortion referenda (2018). To be sure, most priests were not celebrities, but rather were recognised locally as public figures. However, Ireland's peculiar media ecosystem, in which the church became embedded in public service television broadcasting at its inception, gave rise to the possibility of clergy celebrities. The incorporation of priests into RTÉ, which is examined below, gave the clergy opportunities to present church perspectives on personal, family and cultural issues on a regular basis and to develop their own star personas.

Ensnared in national bureaucratic and mass media institutions,⁵ Irish priests have thus always enjoyed a form of public authority that is religious *and* political, spiritual *and* secular. Nuns, by contrast, subordinated within the Catholic hierarchy, were associated with helping professions, earning their authority and power as teachers and nurses in orders such as the Sisters of Mercy and as administrators of now-infamous institutions such as the Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes.

The emergence of the national mass media in Ireland created a new public venue for priests, expanding their reach and making possible new forms of celebrity that ranged across many aspects of Irish culture, from the ecumenical to entertainment, from superstition to singing. With the establishment of RTE television as a public service broadcaster (PSB) in 1961, television became the dominant mass medium in Ireland throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (Kerrigan and O'Brien, 2018; O'Brien and Kerrigan, 2020). The role of RTÉ has always been informed by its 'Public Service Broadcasting Charter' which specifies that it must 'reflect the democratic, social and cultural values of Irish society and the need to preserve media pluralism', and 'reflect fairly and equally the regional, cultural and political diversity of Ireland and its peoples' (RTÉ, 2004).

The Catholic Church in Ireland viewed the arrival of a television service with concern, as they felt it might 'undermine their influence' (Savage 2015, p. 163). Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid set up his own diocesan Television Committee 'to explore how the new medium could enhance the work of the Church and defend its interests' (ibid). This project culminated with the appointment of several clergy members to the RTÉ board with one serving as an executive assistant for religious broadcasting.

These early media collaborations marked the convergence of the Catholic clergy and Irish mass media, forging an industry relationship and a worldview that would dominate Irish television for several decades. Due to the centrality of the Catholic Church during this period, clergy were frequently incorporated into PSB programming to offer 'expert' testimony, often times on LGBTQIA+ issues (Kerrigan, 2019). This practice furthered the prominence of the clergy and normalised their role as arbiters of moral and cultural values within the public sphere.

The founding of RTÉ enhanced access to the public airwaves for the Catholic church. Clergy were present on the RTÉ board and appeared as experts on social issues on air, and McQuaid further ensured the influence of Catholic priests as content producers. He funded the creation of *Radharc* (Irish for panorama), a film production unit staffed exclusively by Catholic priests that produced more than 400 television documentaries programmes in 75 countries between 1962 and 1996. Because of the paucity of Irish media outlets during the years of *Radharc's* existence, and because of its political clout, the unit was granted a prime-time slot every week. *Radharc* represents a unique engine of priest media celebrity in Ireland (McAteer 2011). RTÉ not only brought priests into the television production process, it also featured them in front of the camera in sometimes surprising ways that speak more to entertainment than spiritual uplift. Fr Richard Horan, known as the magician priest, appeared on *Newsbeat* in March 1971, performing a sword balancing trick with his niece on Achill Island. The priest assured the *Newsbeat* reporter Cathal O'Shannon that the performance was based on skill, not devilry: 'It's not black magic ... it's a trick' (RTÉ Archives 1971).

Because of their power over documentary television production in Ireland and their broader incorporation into the structures of RTÉ, a celebrity culture developed around priests that would eventually yield bona fide stars such as 'the Singing Priest' Michael Cleary and Father Brian Darcy. This brief history documents an official celebrity culture of priests in Ireland that, we argue, would be undermined both subtly and overtly through the mass media appearances of the clergy we document in our case studies who subverted the heteronormative ethos of the Irish Catholic church.

Case studies in clergy celebrity: the singing priest

Fr. Michael Cleary was undoubtedly the most famous priest in Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s (McAteer 2011). Although not gay, Cleary's status as an ally of LGBTQIA+ activists and his outspokenness on gay issues opened up discursive possibilities for Irish people beyond the disciplinary framework of heterosexualized Catholic bodies theorised by Martin (1997). That, coupled with the fact that Cleary's own history of sexual exploitation became a source of contention with the Catholic Church, places him at the centre of this discussion of the role of priest celebrities whose media presence enabled an enriched understanding of alternative sexual identities.

Cleary's case cannot be presented in the context of a 'positive images' approach; it possesses the hallmarks of scandal and hypocrisy. His notoriety exposed the ambiguous relationship between the church and sexuality. The church's official suppression of sexuality beyond reproductive marital sex and its use of the confessional as the mechanism for both articulating and absolving sinful behaviour deviating from that norm, which Foucault addresses in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), inform the status of the Irish priest as both a disciplined and disciplinary subject. The priest enjoys the power to enforce official dogma of marital reproductive heteronormativity and clergy celibacy and yet also possesses the knowledge of the many practices that challenge those norms, both among the clergy and the lay population. At the time of Cleary's emergence as a media figure, a panoply of publicly unspoken sexual alternatives existed in Irish culture, with sexually active priests likely being the most taboo among them. His public statements referencing the sexuality of priests thus directly challenged the state-sanctioned church, which refused to acknowledge priest sex at all because of the doctrine of celibacy. At the same time, it enabled and protected abuses of all kinds by priests and nuns.

Cleary rose to prominence through the *Radharc* series, which documented his work in the disadvantaged area of Ballyfermot in Dublin. Because of this program, Cleary was commended for 'being in touch with the youth' (McAteer 2011). McAteer argues that Cleary's popularity derived from the post-Vatican II democratising ideology that held the 'church was the people and not the clergy' (McAteer, 2011). Regardless of its origins, Cleary's alternative Catholicism broke from the traditional, conservative rigid mould. In the documentary film *The Rocky Road to Dublin* (Lennon 1967), the priest went on record touting the need to liberalise the church's approach to sex, particularly with respect to contraception and extramarital sex.

Cleary's star persona on *Radharc* and his leadership of his congregation catapulted him into the national spotlight. After releasing two albums, he was nicknamed 'The Singing Priest,' and appeared as a warm up act for Pope John-Paul II's 1979 visit to Ireland. He was offered his own late-night radio phone-in show, which ran throughout the 1980s, and a TV chat show in the late 1980s. Cleary's celebrity was brought to bear on the moral issues being debated in Ireland at the time. He was a staunch supporter of the Eighth Amendment, which declared abortion unconstitutional in the Republic; it was and passed in 1983 and was abolished by referendum in 2018.

In the context of the 1980s, however, Cleary voiced a liberal approach towards sexual practice and identity, and particularly towards the relaxation of the Catholic denunciation of homosexual acts. In *Tuesday Report*, a 1977 RTÉ documentary on homosexuality in Ireland, Cleary provided expert commentary on what was positioned as a moral issue and offered his support to the gay and lesbian community, arguing for more compassion from the clergy, using himself as an example: 'Take me, I'm working in Ballyfermot and people should judge me as a priest and my performance as a priest and whether I'm heterosexual or homosexual shouldn't matter to them' (Tuesday Report 1977). Cleary here not only raised the taboo subject of the sexual identities of Catholic priests, he also proposed that whether a priest was gay or straight should be of no import to his congregation. He furthered his message of tolerance by challenging stereotypes about gay priests, centring his discussion on anxieties about child abuse: 'if they're afraid of me making passes at little altar boys if I'm homosexual, why shouldn't they equally fear me making a pass at young girls in the school?' (Tuesday Report 1977). Here, Cleary foregrounds the issue of priest

sexual identity, expanding the spectrum of sexual identity in a somewhat counterproductive analogy that equates the spectre of gay priests abusing young boys with the threat of heterosexual priests exploiting young girls.

In the wake of the Bishop Casey scandal, it was revealed that Fr. Michael Cleary had fathered two children with his housekeeper, a woman who had sought his help years earlier as a vulnerable, homeless girl. The 17-year-old incest survivor had spent many years in orphanages and a psychiatric hospital and had turned to Cleary for help. In return, she lived a life of physical and emotional abuse and was forced by Cleary to give their first child up for adoption. It was this disturbing case of exploitation and abuse – just one of many church scandals that came to light during the 1980s and 1990s – that contributed to Irish congregations ‘questioning for the first time the gap between preaching and practice’ (Savage and Smith 2003).

Cleary’s case serves as an example of famous priest using his media pulpit, and especially the television documentary format, to preach tolerance primarily towards priests but also towards and gay individuals:

Any priest worth their salt at all would see it as one of the most understandable problems and I say problem, not sin, because not always is there sin. The real homosexual, the occasional slip up he makes, has come after tremendous effort, which must be accounted for (Tuesday Report 1977).

This patronising pastoral approach to forgiving the closeted priest and homosexual individual for the ‘occasional slip up’ – without reckoning the effect on those the priest or individual may be exploiting – represents a call for understanding rather than condemnation. This is significant coming from Cleary, given his vast popularity in Ireland during this period. Cleary used an admittedly problematic discourse of equivalency between potential abuse by straight and gay priests. In the process, he reiterated stereotypes of priestly paedophilia and yet also expanded the discussion on Catholicism and sexual identity by merely raising the question of priests’ sexuality and characterising paedophilia as a problem that is not limited to gay priests. In the Cleary case, the very production unit and documentary series created by the official marriage between Catholicism and mass media, *Radharc*, became the vehicle for undermining church dogma on sexual practice and identity by cultivating a priest celebrity may not have embraced, but certainly encourage tolerance towards, homosexual people.

Case studies in clergy celebrity: the curious case of the lesbian nuns

The appearance of two lesbian ex-nuns on popular Saturday prime-time chat show *The Late Late Show* (1962–) in 1985 caused one of the major public furores in Ireland during the 1980s. The nuns’ appearance explicitly linked the possibilities of pursuing a Catholic vocation with a lesbian sexual identity. As with Fr. Cleary, the lesbian nuns offered the Irish publican example of an alternative model of sexual identity among the Catholic clergy. In fact, the question of how to be both homosexual and Catholic occupied the epicentre of the media frenzy that erupted after the sisters’ appearance on the *LLS*.

The sisters in question were Rollins College Professor Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan; they rose to international fame with their 1985 collection entitled *Breaking Silence: Lesbian Nuns on Convent Sexuality*. The volume was a direct affront to Catholic views on sexuality and contained the testimonials of women who had entered the convent only to discover that they were lesbians. Despite Manahan’s insistence that they were writing for a small community of

feminist scholars, the book attracted international attention when it was banned by the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. Writing for Ireland's *OUT* magazine, Nell McCafferty accurately predicted the reaction to the book's imminent Irish release, writing: 'The title is enough to create a furore and a minor furore there will no doubt be' (*OUT* No. 5, 1985). The book was released in Ireland in September of 1985 and Irish customs immediately seized 1,500 copies.

The case of the lesbian nuns reveals how national broadcaster RTÉ utilised clergy celebrity to generate a debate within the public sphere on alternative Catholic sexualities, all the while ensuring that the show would receive press coverage. The *LLS* production team, aware of the international uproar, invited the co-authors to appear on the show to discuss lesbians in the convent, thus situating lesbian Catholic nuns in the most public of mass media venues in Ireland.

The *LLS* had an established practice of never advertising its guests in advance; breaking with this tradition, a producer leaked to the *RTÉ Guide* that the lesbian nuns would appear on an upcoming episode. Once this was announced, *LLS* host Gay Byrne recalled later, a deluge of 'the most obscene letters, telegrams and telephone calls' arrived to RTÉ daily (Byrne and Purcell 1989). One Irish citizen attempted to take a case to the High Court, as he felt that the nuns' appearance would 'undermine Christian moral values' (Corless 2017). The case was quickly thrown out. Manahan and Curb were ejected from Buswells Hotel in Dublin city centre by owner, Noel Duff, who said he 'respected nuns' and that although he had not read their book, he did not want anything to do with them (*Los Angeles Times*, 1985). This public reaction across sectors of Irish society reflects a paradoxical refusal to acknowledge the possibility of lesbian nuns while at the same time making it widely known that they existed.

Catholic activists protested the nuns' *LLS* appearance, gathering at the RTÉ studios on the night of the broadcast. RTÉ news documented the scene as protesters stood outside the Dublin studios, erected a statue of the Virgin Mary, and were led through the rosary by a priest in an ice cream van. Byrne recalled that holy water was sprinkled onto the production team and guests as they entered the studios (Byrne and Purcell 1989). This vehement protest against the broadcast represented a response to a perceived threat to Ireland's traditional 'ethos and habitus' (Inglis 1998).

Not surprisingly, the media attention instigated and invited a larger conversation regarding homosexuality and Catholicism in Ireland. Byrne directly confronted the controversy on the night of the broadcast, stating, 'the next item has caused us considerable trouble this week [...] We have seldom in our 23 years of the *LLS* experienced a barrage of complaint and criticism as we have experienced this week'. (*LSS*, 1985) What was originally intended as an appearance by the ex-nuns on their own became instead a panel discussion on homosexuality and Catholicism, as Manahan and Curb were joined by religious leaders including Sr. Maura of the Daughters of Sion and Fr. Raphael Gallagher from Trinity College. Gallagher later released a booklet entitled *Understanding the Homosexual* (1985), a sympathetic reassessment of the Church's position on homosexuality.⁶ His appearance with the nuns on the *LLS* highlighted the potentially oppositional opinions materialising within the Irish Catholic Church related to alternative sexual identities.

The televisual treatment of the lesbian nuns confronted the key contradictions of Catholic gender and sexual orthodoxies, while also demonstrating the ways in which Irish television harnessed the celebrity of these religious figures to generate controversy. When questioned by Byrne as to why she joined a convent in the first place knowing that she was a lesbian,

Manahan responded 'if there had been more choices for women, we would have made another choice, but at that time, it seemed that our alternatives were to be married, to be good Catholic mothers' (*LLS*, 1985). Manahan here references the desire to avoid the Catholic ideal of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1996) and reproductive futurism (Edelman 2004), which for women encompass the cultural expectations of fulfilment through motherhood. Her response further speaks to the way that the convent could invite the interest of those whose sexual and/or gender identities defied these norms.

In fact, Curb provided Irish viewers with a politically-inflected definition of lesbianism: 'when we say lesbian [...] we're not speaking necessarily of sexual activity, we're speaking of a sexual orientation, but we're also speaking about a spiritual and a political commitment, to loving women' (*LLS*, 1985). Despite Byrne's dismissive remark that this was 'a rather vague definition,' (*LLS*, 1985), Curb's articulation of lesbian subjectivity broadens the discourse of sexual identity and practice. Not only does it divorce lesbian sexual identity from specific sexual practices, but it also forwards a woman-focused, arguably feminist, vision endorsing the social significance of love, respect and desire among women from within an institution dominated by a male hierarchy.

The celebrification of the lesbian nuns as a result of the *LLS* and the reactionary response forced Irish Catholic institutions to discuss the possibilities that LGBTQIA+ identities might exist within their ranks. The inclusion of Sr. Maura and Fr. Raphael may have represented standard practice within the Irish media of including religious figures in media pertaining to moral and social issues, yet, it paradoxically resulted in them affirming the existence of LGBTQIA+ Catholics. Sr. Maura confronted the staunch reaction of Catholic conservatives by pointing out that nuns 'do not leave their sexuality behind' when they enter the convent, and she stated that the protest against Manahan and Curb was 'not complementary to our sisters' (*LLS*, 1985). Sr. Maura represented an authoritative and prominent member of a religious order declaring on television that there might be lesbian members within the order, that they should be treated with respect, and that their sexuality was an intrinsic part of their identities.

Fr. Raphael wrapped up the discussion on the *LLS* by acknowledging that many practicing Catholics with religious vocations identified as gay. With this, he prefigured the views of Fr. Bernárd Lynch in the 1990s by stating that a gay sexual identity should not be at odds with religious vocations because 'the kingdom of God welcomes all' (*LLS*, 1985). Sr. Maura and Fr. Raphael's contributions to the *LLS* hinted at a liberal bent within the Church that may have surpassed the Irish public as a whole in terms of their progressive attitude.

The media events that were both constructed and organically arose around the Manahan and Curb visit to Ireland provided a platform that engendered a broader discussion of sexuality. When their book was eventually released by Irish customs and distributed to book-sellers nationwide, it rose to number four in the paperback charts. Ruth Wallsgrove wrote that 'when staying in a working-class neighbourhood in Dublin that week, I was amazed to see 30 or 40 copies of it at a local news stand, crowding out single copies of popular novels' (Wallsgrove 1985). The lesbian nuns' appearance on the *LLS* became the most watched single television program of the 1980s.

The ubiquity of the discussion involving the lesbian nuns across Irish media forms from television and radio to print media indicates the ways in which religion underwent the twin process of 'celebrification and celebrization' (Driessens 2012). On the one hand, the mass media played a part in constructing religious celebrities, while on the other, it harnessed that

celebrity for the production imperatives of boosting ratings. The case of Manahan and Curb, and the co-optation of their international celebrity by the Irish media further amplified the interest in the existence and views of LGBTQIA+ clergy and what they could offer to a nation of practicing Catholics.

Case studies in clergy celebrity: Father Bernárd Lynch, AIDS activist

'Gay is good. Gay is a gift of God. Gay is the image of God'

Bernárd Lynch, 1989

Fr. Bernárd Lynch serves as an exemplar of the ways in which Catholic celebrity enabled a national discussion of gay male sexual identity in Ireland, channelled through the very national broadcasting system that historically had been dominated by the Church. During the 1980s, Lynch's AIDS ministry became a *cause celebre* through which Catholicism and gayness collided. Lynch's AIDS work – which, critically, took him to locations outside Ireland – can be understood within the tradition of the Catholic Mission. Missionary work has often been undertaken outside the narrowly defined parishes and dioceses in Ireland, enabling priests to broaden their horizons with international experience. But Lynch's work demanded a radical rethinking of this tradition.

In 1977, Lynch began ministering to the Catholic gay community in New York, whose members were forbidden to worship on Catholic Church property; at that time, and continuing to the present day, the Catholic Catechism defines homosexual sex as 'intrinsically disordered' because it does not lead to procreation or affirm male-female complementarity. The AIDS crisis in the 1980s prompted Lynch to found a Catholic AIDS ministry, but this shift in his focus incurred severe censure from Rome. Through his ministry, Lynch sought to publicly establish that homosexual relationships were loving and that homosexuality was acceptable. In fact, he extended the slogan of American gay activist and co-founder of the Mattachine Society Franklin Kameny which said that 'gay is good' (Long 2014), turning it into a theological statement that proclaimed, 'Gay is a gift of God.'

Lynch's embrace of homosexual Catholics clashed with both American and Irish churches and provoked the wrath of New York's Cardinal O'Connor, who ordered Lynch to end his ministry. A campaign was waged to remove Lynch from his post at Mount Saint Michael Academy, a Catholic boy's school in the Bronx; he was indicted on false charges of sexual abuse, which were dismissed out of hand by the presiding judge. This aspect of Lynch's case reveals the ways in which priest celebrity can activate cultural scripts that equate gay priests with paedophilia.

Lynch cultivated a public persona through various fora, but his entry into the Irish media landscape as an international clergy celebrity was instigated by alternative media outlets in Dublin. Independent gay publication *OUT* magazine, founded in 1984, negotiated with RTÉ to have Lynch appear on the *LLS* (*OUT* No. 12, 1987). Irish gay civil rights activists considered media visibility central to their political project and they utilised connections within RTÉ to offer airtime to a range of LGBTQIA+ figures who were not clergy celebrities.

Members of *OUT*'s editorial board, including Edmund Lynch (no relation to the priest), were also key production staff members at RTÉ and they encouraged the *LLS* research team to address Lynch's New York AIDS ministry. The existence of gay media workers like Lynch within

RTÉ were critical to the development of a counterdiscourse on sexuality under the auspices of the Irish national broadcaster, an institution that continued to be dominated by conservatism and the church. Lynch was one of only a few out figures within RTÉ, and his sexual identity enabled him to understand the significance of LGBTQIA+ issues within clergy. This encouraged him to lobby for airtime for LGBTQIA+ causes, which he did on several occasions. For example, he had been instrumental in obtaining air time for Franklin Kameny of the Mattachine Society, who appeared on the magazine programme *Last House* in 1975, and for LGBTQIA+ activist Rose Robertson, who appeared on the *LLS* in 1977. Lynch similarly used his internal networks to secure a place for Lynch on the *LLS* in 1987.

Following Lynch's appearance on the *LLS*, the Irish press dubbed him 'the AIDS priest' and celebrity status accelerated (*Irish Mirror*, 2017; *Irish Sun*, 1986). He subsequently became the subject of three documentaries for Britain's Channel 4, *AIDS: A Priest's Testament* (1987), *Soul Survivor* (1989), *A Priest on Trial* (1992). He wrote a best-selling book in 1993, also entitled *A Priest on Trial*. While his public profile spanned the US and the UK, Lynch's celebrity was well established in Ireland, and he dedicated his efforts there to educating audiences about the reality of being both Catholic and gay. He argued that, despite the official position of the Church, the two did not have to be at odds with each other. He marshalled his celebrity and his mission as a priest to resolve the supposedly inherent contradiction between Catholicism and gayness.

Lynch's work with closeted gay priests and people living with AIDS made their identities and struggles visible yet also enabled a new form of being both gay and Catholic. In an interview published in *OUT*, Lynch intentionally used his star power to offer radical provocations. He stated: 'Having an official voice in the Church is necessary in order to be able to say to and for both the Church and the gay community: "Gay is good. Gay is a gift of God. Gay is the image of God"' (*OUT* No. 12, 1987).

Lynch's work with the LGBTQIA+ community and his emerging celebrity status led to an increased scrutiny around his own sexual identity (*OUT* No. 12, 1987), which is predicted in the work of Larry Gross (2001) who notes that the logic of outing holds all gay public figures responsible to the minority of which they are a part, and ethically and morally obliges them to come out for the good of all gays and lesbians. The ambiguity around Lynch's sexual identity and the imperative to elicit a coming-out narrative on live television becomes clear in an exchange between Lynch and Gay Byrne on *LSS*. A discussion of the death from AIDS-related illness of a close friend of Lynch's prompted Byrne, presumably functioning as a proxy for the Irish public, to speculate about Lynch's sexuality (*Soul Survivor*, 1989). After Lynch recounted the death of Stuart Garcia, Byrne asked him: 'Are you gay, Father?' Lynch denied that he was gay (*LLS*, 1987).

Lynch declared on the Channel 4 documentary *Soul Survivor*, released two years later, that his denial was the biggest sin he had ever committed because 'it denied my creativeness in God'. Lynch's retroactive disclosure that he was gay reveals several critical elements related to sexual identity of priest celebrities. For centuries in the Catholic church, including in Ireland, gay or queer identities went unnamed, remaining ambiguous and speculative, even when they were visible in plain sight. For priests identifying as both gay and Catholic, a curation of the self was required, which involved subordinating the disclosure of sexuality – the all-important political gesture of coming out – to one's vocational duties as a priest. This conflict informed Lynch's media presence, resulting in his denial of his gay sexual identity, but at the same time enabling the question about the

non-heterosexual, potentially non-celibate sexuality of a priest to be raised. When Lynch did come out in 1989, homosexuality remained a criminal offence in Ireland. Telling the truth cost him his job. He was never again able to earn his living as a Catholic priest.

Lynch's gay affirming approach even gestured towards a queer sensibility, which was fully in evidence in his assertion that 'it is only the spoiled children of God who get the gift of gayness.' Moving beyond the toleration of gay lives, particularly in the context of the massive loss of life due to AIDS, Lynch here engages in a campy and even naughty embrace of the 'spoiled children,' who sound less interested in acceptance than they are in being fabulous. Lynch became the first Catholic priest in the world to establish a gay civil partnership in 2006 and later married his partner in the wake of Ireland's same-sex marriage referendum in 2015 (The Journal.ie 2017). His religious celebrity, which enabled a discourse around LGBTQIA+ sexual identity in the Irish media that challenged church teaching even at the height of the AIDS pandemic, indicated the ways in which individual clergy members within the Catholic Church utilised their influence in the public sphere for gay emancipation.

Conclusion

In Ireland, celebrity priests and nuns contributed in surprising ways to the work of bringing visibility to gay and lesbian identities. In the 1970s and 1980s, as Irish television emerged, Michael Cleary was able to leverage the *Radharc* documentary series to captivate audiences as the 'singing priest' and to promote his message of tolerance, couched in the admittedly unusual terms of equivalent potential for abuse by straight and gay priests. His abuse scandal raised the possibility that priests could be sexually active and confirmed that the church's positions on the sexuality of clergy and lay people alike might be both untenable and hypocritical.

RTE used the international *cause celebre* status of lesbian nuns Nancy Manahan and Rosemary Curb to generate a surprisingly open panel discussion during which church representatives, a nun and a priest, preached tolerance. During the AIDS crisis, Bernárd Lynch took it upon himself not to condemn those suffering from HIV-related illness, but instead, to publicly tend to them. It's no accident that Lynch, Manahan and Curb all appeared on Gay Byrne's *The Late Late Show*, as RTE's producers sought to create a discourse of tolerance both for political reasons and to expand audience share (Byrne and Purcell 1989).

It's also no coincidence that the lesbian nuns and Fr. Lynch had achieved international celebrity prior to the Irish media appearances documented here. In the case of the nuns, the controversy surrounding their book in the US enhanced the likelihood that their appearance would deliver high ratings, as it appealed to an Irish public invested in joining the global media ecosystem.

The case of Fr. Lynch speaks to the way that LGBTQIA± Irish people, whether clergy members or not, have chosen forms of exile, using their mobility not only to live openly as queer people elsewhere, but also to establish their authority and credibility in Ireland. Lynch's work in the US was well known before his *LLS* appearance and the documentaries on his life produced after the *LLS* episode were produced in the UK, which meant that they were credible international media products widely available for consumption in Ireland.

Through these celebrities, the unique culture of Irish Catholicism, whose orthodoxy is heterosexualist to the point of pro-natalism, and the idiosyncratic Irish media ecosystem,

which was dominated by a church-run national broadcaster for several decades, gave rise to a series of media events in which clergy acknowledged the existence of LGBTQIA+ people and advocated for their acceptance. Because of the role of the church in Irish society, and particularly its convergence with the government-run mass media, we would argue that these case studies are distinctive in contemporary history, as other Catholic countries in the EU such as France, Italy and Spain, have larger commercial media sectors that enjoy independence from the church or public service broadcasters that are not regulated significantly by religiosity.

Our discussion highlights the way that Catholic clergy members Cleary, Lynch, Manahan and Curb embraced the media spotlight to discuss and disclose alternative sexual identities and to affirm LGBTQIA+ lives, often at great risk. The national broadcaster's activities in these cases – motivated in part by politics and in part by ratings – invited protest, controversy, and open discussion. We argue that these cases represent an overlooked strand within recent Irish history and address the dearth of research on religious celebrity. The media events around clergy celebrities discussed here created a space for articulating homosexual, Catholic identities and contributed in part to the significant changes that Irish society would witness in the early 21st century.

Notes

1. The persistence of Casey's notoriety is significant. In 2019, a niece of Casey's lobbed child abuse accusations against him, and Annie Murphy returned to the headlines, in print and online outlets such as @IrishCentral as well as the *Irish Mirror* and the *Irish Independent*.
2. Smyth ultimately served time in both Northern Ireland and the Republic, dying in 1997 in prison of a heart attack at age 70, one month into his twelve-year sentence.
3. Joseph Roach, writing on the public image of Shakespeare rather than of religious leaders, contends that the process of celebrity was underway during the 18th century.
4. During his 1946 visit to Ireland, Flanagan publicly criticised the Irish system of residential institutions and industrial schools, calling them a national disgrace. See Gordon Lynch (2012).
5. 'The popular influence of the Church was such that no politician would seriously entertain alienating the church; the 20th century provides numerous examples of the way in which the church influenced successive Irish governments' policies on issues of child welfare and personal morality' (Lynch 68–9).
6. The Archbishop of Dublin, Kevin McNamara, called for the removal of the booklet from the shelves of the religious book distributor Veritas, without providing an explanation.

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Notes on contributors

Páraic Kerrigan is a Teaching Fellow with the School of Information and Communication Studies at University College Dublin. His research pertains to the dynamics of diversity in media industries, specifically centred around Ireland's LGBTQ community. His first book, *LGBTQ Visibility, Media and Sexuality in Ireland* was published in 2021 by Routledge and his forthcoming book, *Media Graduates at Work* will be released by Palgrave later in 2021.

Maria Pramaggiore is Professor of Media Studies and Dean of Graduate Studies at Maynooth University. She has published widely on gender and sexuality in cinema and media. She is the author of three monographs, a co-authored film studies textbook, and co-edited collections on voices in documentary and bisexual theory.

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