

# Smashed tabernacle

## Catholic emptiness and nationalism in post-industrial Scotland

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There is growing anthropological interest in emptiness. Increasingly, scholars are engaging with this concept as a spatial-temporal coordinate in the global landscape of capitalism and state power (Dzenovska & Knight 2020). The Emptiness project, established at the start of 2021 at Oxford University, seeks to develop experience, definitions and analytical tools to promote insight into the pervasive and expanding incidence of emptiness as a phenomenon of late modernity, with a specific focus upon the former Soviet space. As a project team member, I have been reflecting upon my encounter with emptiness, growing up in central Scotland within a particular ethnic and religious milieu. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, in this article, I excavate critical emic observations linking space, history and ideology. I aim for 'portable analytics' (Boyer & Howe 2016) to aid comparative consideration of emptiness across multiple sites.

Emptiness is more than the failure and retreat of the economy, the withdrawal of individuals or communities from space or the etiolation and abandonment of infrastructure. Although linked to and often made manifest through these external conditions, emptiness can signify the failure, defeat or collapse of ideas or ethics that have supported and motivated or even established particular forms of what Victor Turner calls *communitas*. Following Turner (1969), I have found it fruitful to consider liminal states and the ritual they presage as illuminating the essence and origin of emptiness and being among its most important consequences. Through contemplation on the ruin of an emblematic structure that unites modernism and a particular collective identity, I seek to understand certain aspects of the relationship between the failure of faith, absent futures and political populism.

### Academy and temple: Rise and fall

I began to think seriously about emptiness, not simply as a physical or social absence, but as an ideological and ethical presence in Scotland at the former Catholic seminary, St Peter's, Cardross. Rising ethereally from an abandoned, wild woodland, like Angkor Wat relocated to rain-drenched Argyll, St Peter's is celebrated throughout Britain and, more widely, as one of the most striking architectural ruins of European modernism. Beyond its architectural renown, I know it as an emblematic representation of the hollowing out of Catholic identity in Scotland, from its high watermark in the early 1960s to the present.

It was built between 1961 and 1968 to house and train priests, the clerical elite that would nurture, shepherd and supervise the growing Catholic flock in industrial Scotland who were primarily, but not exclusively, of Irish origin, predominantly working class and engaged in the then thriving traditional heavy industries such as shipbuilding, steel making, engineering, mining and railways. Always a minority, historically subject to prejudice and exclusion in Protestant Scotland, at the dawn of the 1960s, the Catholic community was active and optimistic (Devine 2019). The Catholic hierarchy's choice of radical architects, Isi Metzstein and Andy MacMillan, unapologetic devotees of Le Corbusier, reflected this forward-looking agenda. Their design and the finished building arguably delivered the most striking modernist architectural statement of the 20th century in Scotland up until Enric Miralles' Scottish Parliament at Holyrood.

Both my uncles studied to become priests in the 1960s, although neither studied at Cardross, and neither were

ordained. They were members of a cohort of zealous young men attracted by the lure of service and leadership embodied in the priesthood. The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) had just rescinded the centuries-old focus upon spirituality, monastic communality and isolation established at the Council of Trent to structure the training of neophyte priests. A freer, more community-oriented priesthood would serve, not lead, a confident, empowered laity in Catholicism's engagement with modernity. However, the architectural austerity of St Peter's, megalithic and cenobitic in its rigour and remoteness, spoke to that older order, having been commissioned just before Vatican II. In any case, the culture and the country that came about in Scotland as the 1960s progressed, unravelled both visions of the priesthood, their congregation and the social cohesion of working-class Catholic Scotland. As the post-war economy faltered and the heavy industrial infrastructure rusted and collapsed, the spiritual and ideological certainties that preceded the building of St Peter dissolved almost overnight.

From the moment of its completion, the trajectory of St Peter's was relentlessly downwards. For all its architectural glory, the building did not work: it leaked rainwater at every juncture; the wind whistled through its concrete magnificence. The anticipated student numbers never materialized: it was half empty from the beginning. More sinister, the staff faculty was riven with division and factionalism: conservatives against liberals; *Aggiornamentistas* (those in favour of Vatican II reforms) against Tridentine traditionalists; Irish Jansenists against native Scots pragmatists.

Within a couple of years of its opening, internecine hostility and dissension were so widespread and profound that the then archbishop of Glasgow, James Scanlan, was forced to carry out a wholesale purge of the faculty. He recalled later, 'things were so tense, I just had to sack half of them. Whether it was the right half or not, I am unsure' (Watters 2016). The uneasy ambiguity of this last statement insinuates perhaps a deeper, more carnal dysfunction. Half a century later, American Catholic sociologist Robert Orsi (2019) would indict the central role played by the seminary, as an institution, in the genesis, nurture and camouflage of a culture of sexual predation within the Catholic Church. His analysis makes for chilling reading.

The tidal wave of sexual scandal that engulfed the Catholic Church worldwide broke on the shores of Scotland in 2015 when Cardinal Keith O'Brien, Archbishop of St Andrew's and Edinburgh and Primate of Scotland, resigned in disgrace following allegations of sexual abuse involving younger priests and specifically seminarians (Johnson 2013). The pattern of abuse of neophytes, novices and vulnerable pupils by elder clerics in remote monastic settings has since been revealed as systemic, involving institutions run by the De La Salle Brothers, the Marist Brothers and most prominent and recent, at the boarding school at Fort Augustus Abbey overlooking Loch Ness, the superior house of the Benedictine order in Scotland.

In the fourth volume of his history of sexuality, *The confessions of the flesh*, Michel Foucault (2021) reflects upon pastoral power in an appendix to a long exegesis of John Cassian's admonitions on chastity and Augustine's consideration of concupiscence, both focused upon the ethics of the cenobitic monastic life. Foucault observes that 'the shepherd's sin is at the centre of the relationship he main-

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1. By 2009, when the remaining community of seminarians was decanted to the Scots College in Rome, there was a total of nine priests in training.

2. Watters (2016: 126-127, 140). Watters also notes the controversial demolition of St Benedict's, Drumchapel, Glasgow, another Metzstein and MacMillan masterpiece, just prior to its planned listing in 1991, an act described by architectural historian Gavin Stamp as 'wicked [and] precipitate' (Watters 2016: 135).

3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-58024296>.

4. 'According to the code of Canon Law, deconsecration of a church does not include the altar which remains associated with sacredness. An altar, whether fixed or movable, must be reserved for divine worship alone, to the absolute exclusion of any secular use. An immovable altar loses consecration if the top or table, even for a moment of time, is separated from the base' (Watters 2016: 214).

5. Sectarian politics in Scotland divide, as in Northern Ireland, between the 'Orange' and the 'Green'. The 'Orange' reflects the figure of William III, the former prince of Orange, defender of Protestantism in the late 17th century, and victor over the Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne, 1690.

6. <https://www.heraldsotland.com/politics/20441814.snp-embroiled-new-sexual-misconduct-scandal/?ref=twtrcc>.



**Fig. 1.** Architects Isi Metzstein and Andy MacMillan c. 1965.

tains with the flock: his faults lead to the missteps of the sheep (and become all the more serious), and the sins of the flock increase his culpability' (Foucault 2021: 312).

In the early 1960s, vocations to the priesthood in Scotland numbered in the hundreds; by the end of the century, St Peter's had closed, was abandoned and had fallen into ruin and the flood had dwindled to single figures (Johnson 2013).<sup>1</sup> The growing confidence and public assertion of minority Catholic identity (Devine 2019) in Scotland that had been manifest since the war, ran out of optimism and imagination. This decline reflected a shift in the zeitgeist amongst Catholics in Scotland and across the West's spiritual and ethical landscape. Charles Taylor (2007) has characterized this shift as 'The Age of Authenticity'. Taylor identifies a tide of liberal secularism and self-absorption that coincided with the first wave of post-war industrial decline. In Scotland, as the shipyards, blast furnaces and foundries were first mothballed and then demolished, a generation arose that was increasingly inclined to expressive individualism and unmoved by the call to embrace what Taylor has called 'older forms ... centred on collective ritual' (ibid.: 541). Formal religious congregations declined, Catholic and Protestant alike, although the latter's decline was steeper and earlier (Brown 2001: 188).

A concomitant of the collapse of heavy industry and the retreat of religion in the public sphere in Scotland in the last decades of the 20th century was the rise of a particularly pernicious drug culture in those very communities and parishes where the Catholic Church had thrived and led in the earlier decades: in Dundee; in industrial Lanarkshire; in the wind-swept working-class housing estates, the so-called 'schemes' in Glasgow and Edinburgh; in Paisley, Greenock and Port Glasgow – directly across the Firth of Clyde from, and within view of, Cardross.

Ironically, the last practical function of St Peter's was as a drug rehabilitation centre. As a bewildered and hostile Catholic hierarchy wrestled with the poisoned chalice of responsibility for, and custody of, a modernist masterpiece that they did not understand, could not afford to maintain but dared not demolish because of its listed status,<sup>2</sup> they found a *communitas* sufficiently stigmatized to inhabit the degraded and overgrown site.

In its last days as an occupied locus in the late 1980s, recovering addicts lived in squalid conditions without basic services within the already derelict concrete hulk of the former seminary. This reluctant engagement did little to slow down Scotland's relentless progress towards the highest drug death rate in Europe.<sup>3</sup> As a definitive statement of abandonment, in 2015, the monumental granite altar at the heart of the ruined seminary was jackhammered into huge chunks upon the orders of the archbishop of Glasgow to ensure that no profane acts could take place on this last remaining consecrated element on the site (the rest of the building having been deconsecrated after its closure).<sup>4</sup>

### Modernist dreamworld, nationalist salvation

Today, as one approaches the ruin of St Peter's through the tangled undergrowth, one becomes aware of an apotropaic, sacral aura about the site and the edifice. The concrete massif is shot through with shards of light. Beyond the ziggurat façade of precast concrete, deep within the innards of the building, serried ranks of pillars retreat into the darkness. The effect is redolent of other ruined or marooned sacred spaces: the Hypostyle Hall of the ancient Egyptian temple complex at Karnak on the Nile or the great Moorish Mezquita immured within the Catholic cathedral at Cordoba in Spain.

Yet despite its sheer megalithic presence, St Peter's today is neither gloomy nor intimidating. As it has become

more derelict, it has softened and solidified into the landscape. I have walked its perimeter and interior in high summer and dark November, often reminiscing upon my late uncles. Both of them bore the scars of their seminary experience in the 1960s. Neither broke the code of silence that shrouds that conflicted brotherhood, upholding what Orsi (2019) has called 'solidarity among brother priests, secured by the enduring bonds of seminary friendships'. This solidarity is one of the key characteristics shared by ritual subjects engaged in rites of passage (Turner 1969: 96).

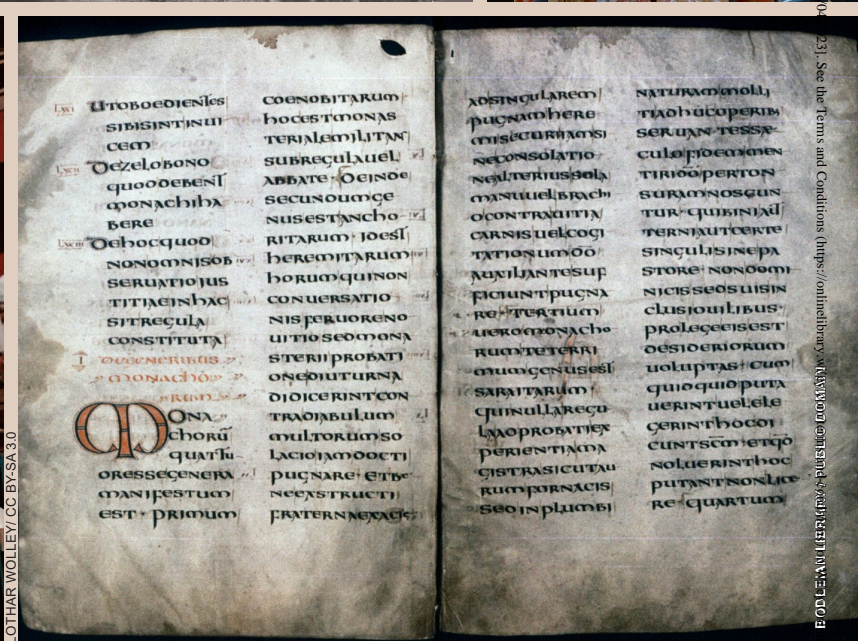
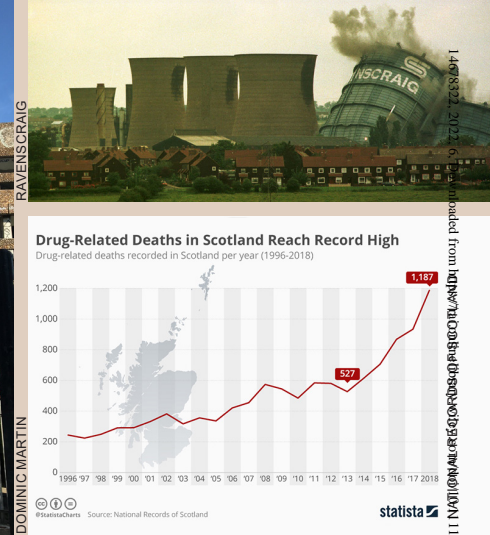
Reflecting in 1993 upon its creation and dereliction, architect Isi Metzstein commented that the stubborn resilience of St Peter's would continue and that its true force and essence might be as a ruin. There is an echo in this observation of the function performed by the *malangan*, the Melanesian mortuary effigy and its attendant ritual (Kuchler 1987). Once completed, the discarded relict serves as a mnemonic and repository of all preceding rituals. The regime of priesthood preparation that this monument was created for was a distillation of the monastic rule passed down through Catholicism since the days of St Benedict in late antiquity. The monastic rule is a structure that formalizes every daily activity and consideration into a unified curriculum of ritual. The prelates who commissioned the radical modernist architects to construct an academy and a temple at Cardross understood this imperative, as did Metzstein and MacMillan.

St Peter's was erected on a historical, social and theological fault line that modernity (and modernism in architecture) aspired to bridge. That fault line encompasses both the 'interregnum' that Gramsci identifies 'when the old is dying and the new cannot be born' (Gramsci 1971: 276), but, more pointedly, also frames the consciousness of Benjamin's historian who 'establishes a conception of the present as now-time shot through with the splinters of messianic time' (Benjamin 2003: 397). The suturing of the past and the future into the myth and reality of the present is most visibly and dramatically carried out through ritual. It is ritual that bridges the boundaries of the liminal. Just as the seminary is a locus of liminality bestriding the novice and the ordained priest, the secular and the sacerdotal, so the drug rehab is similarly a place of transition between addiction and the recall to life.

At the heart of some forms of emptiness sit the spectres of futures anticipated and then aborted or abandoned. The mighty husk that is St Peter's today stands as the discarded relict and emblem of the journey made by a faith community across a threshold that perhaps it did not anticipate and certainly did not understand. The collective adherence to a rule faltered as the spirit of expressive individualism took hold. This remarkable, indestructible monument captures the spirit of the age at the very moment that a minority population in Scotland pivoted away from the 'mobilized' self-disciplined identity of its past (Taylor 2007: 471) to embrace what Taylor has called a 'soft' relativism (ibid.: 481) and a 'horizontal' (ibid.: 484) solidarity that has subsumed its identity under a more obviously secular signifier. Daniele Hervieu-Léger (2000) has theorized religion as a 'chain of memory': 'as our fathers believe, and because they believed, we believe too' (Hervieu-Léger 2000: 80).

She recognizes in the secularism that is the concomitant of modernity, an imperative that favours 'societies of change' as opposed to 'societies of memory' (ibid.: 123). The great Catholic anthem, '*Faith of our fathers*', sung at masses and devotions across the Catholic heartland throughout the first half of the century, defiantly proclaimed 'We will be true to Thee till death!'. This must have rung hollow through the dripping concrete chambers of St Peter's as the vision of a vibrant, socially engaged





(From left to right, above to below)  
**Fig. 2.** The Council of Trent.  
**Fig. 3.** St Peter's Cardross.  
**Fig. 4.** Ravenscraig Steelworks, Motherwell. Demolished July 1996.  
**Fig. 5.** Scottish drug death statistics 1996-2018.  
**Fig. 6.** SNP leaders: First Minister Alex Salmond and Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon at the launch of 'A National Conversation', 14 August 2007.  
**Fig. 7.** Carfin Grotto, Lanarkshire, Scotland 1922.  
**Fig. 8.** Malangan funerary figure, 19th century, New Ireland.  
**Fig. 9.** Second Vatican Council.  
**Fig. 10.** Oldest copy of the Rule of St. Benedict, 8th century, Oxford Bodleian Library.  
**Fig. 11.** Scottish Catholic hierarchy 1972. Archbishop James Scanlan (centre), Bishop (later Cardinal) Thomas Winning (second right).





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Scottish Catholicism melted before the eyes of bishops, clergy and laity. Expecting to face a challenge from prejudice and exclusion, heirs to a tradition of resistance to 'dungeon, fire and sword', they found themselves undone by affluence and indifference.

The corollary of the future past that was never reached is the future unforeseen. The unanticipated future sometimes produces surprising outcomes and strange bedfellows. The ascendancy of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the former Labour strongholds of the west of Scotland coincides with the rise and fall of St Peter's and the waning of the Catholic identity it metonymizes. Scottish nationalists in the early post-war period had been essentialists in inclination and genealogy and strongly associated with the Protestant majority population. My grandmother vividly recalled the venomously sectarian atmosphere of an election campaign in the early 1950s in Coatbridge, Lanarkshire. The candidate of the recently founded SNP led supporters in procession through predominantly Irish Catholic areas behind a banner with a kipper attached under the slogan 'Cured at Carfin!' – a derisory reference to the celebrated local Marian pilgrimage shrine, a centre of great devotion foacrossr Scottish Catholics, sometimes known as the 'Lanarkshire Lourdes'.

The SNP leader throughout the 1970s, William Wolfe, was known for his virulent anti-Catholic stance. Even as it moved into its broader populist and so-called 'civic nationalist' phase under the leadership of Alex Salmond, SNP ambiguity towards the Catholic minority remained. As recently as the 1994 Monklands East by-election, the Labour candidate Helen Liddell, a Catholic, accused the SNP of playing the 'Orange card'<sup>5</sup> after her party's majority fell from over 15,000 to 1,660 (Arlidge 1994). Today hardly 25 years on, the SNP holds every single Westminster and Holyrood seat across the Catholic heartlands of central Scotland, most with unassailable majorities. Joseph Webster details a mirror image of this volte-face in his recent intriguing ethnography of Lanarkshire Orangemen (Webster 2020). He observes hard-line Protestant partisans voting for (traditionally Catholic-identified) Labour candidates in the belief that they will champion Crown and Union against the SNP. His Orange interlocutors are convinced that 'the SNP's appeasement of the Catholic Church [was] matched by the Scottish Catholic Church's support for Scottish independence' (Webster 2020: 24).

In a thoughtful and deeply personal account of the long journey of the Catholic community in Scotland to mainstream acceptance, Scotland's leading historian, Thomas Devine (Devine 2019), lauded the demotic instincts of Cardinal Thomas Winning, Cardinal O'Brien's predecessor as primate, erstwhile archbishop of Glasgow, and last rector of St Peter's who oversaw its closure and subsequent dereliction. Devine's encomiums were delivered in 2017 in the annual Cardinal Winning lecture established at the University of Glasgow to celebrate the late cardinal's memory and specifically the contribution that Catholic education policy and pedagogy had made to integration, and more widely, to Scottish life. In a politically redolent gesture, the following year (2018), the Scottish Catholic hierarchy invited Nicola Sturgeon, first minister of the devolved Scottish government and leader of the SNP, to give the Cardinal Winning lecture. In her lecture, Sturgeon highlighted Winning's decisive role in Catholic mainstream acceptance and the Catholic community's politically important integration.

## Conclusion

The Catholic community's embrace of Scottish nationalism, perhaps not predictable, is not entirely surprising. Chantal Mouffe (2005: 30) has analyzed the blurring of

political frontiers when disaffection can precipitate the transfer of collective identities across nationalist, religious or ethnic forms of identification. The Age of Authenticity that Taylor identifies, brought forth a 'new pursuit of happiness that draws people so strongly that they begin to desert the older ritual life ... built around the community and its common efforts to survive in the physical and spiritual world' (Taylor 2007: 490).

However, while the cloak of secularism that modernity has cast may have removed religion from the immediate field of sight, religion has not and will not go away. Hans Blumenberg (1983) argues that the presumption of sterile secularism as a condition of modernity is a misunderstanding of the relationship between modernity and what preceded it. He asserts that instead of secularization, there is a preoccupation with the answers given to perennial questions. Callum Brown, chronicling the decline of Christianity in Britain through the late 1950s to the 1970s, notably remarks upon 'the feminization' of Christianity (Brown 2001): the promotion of 'family' values and the further impetus given to the decline of the power and credibility of male priesthood.

The particular form of populist politics practised by the SNP under Nicola Sturgeon's leadership has a clear inflexion towards women and women's issues – pioneering proto-feminist stances, such as enhanced child benefits, the promotion of free 'period products', strong support for abortion rights, commitment to change the rules of evidence to facilitate rape convictions and support for a radical revision of the laws governing transgender transition. All are worn as a badge to evidence liberalism and a commitment to a progressive social agenda and are manifestly popular with Catholic voters.

Yet the spectre of abusive and predatory male sexuality haunts the SNP's aspiration to be seen as a modernizing, secular, gender-oriented new broom in the Scottish public sphere. The very public estrangement between erstwhile leader Alex Salmond and his supporters and Nicola Sturgeon and the current nomenclature in the wake of a high-profile trial involving multiple sexual misconduct allegations has been the prelude to a series of scandals involving party figures preying on the junior and subordinate.<sup>6</sup>

Wendy Brown (2021: 72), in an excoriating distillation of the rise of neo-liberal populism more widely across the West, has recently revived Marcuse's concept of *repressive desublimation*. This complex manifestation of modernity and affluence creates a subject freed by disinhibition, particularly in sexual mores, yet dressed in the clothes of conscience. Superficially affecting to be radical, it reinforces self-interested conservatism. Brown memorably characterized it thus: 'It looks like freedom while shoring up the status quo and submitting to it' (Brown 2021: 72).

The *communitas* that Turner theorizes is defined by liminality, marginality and exclusion. It predicates an anti-structure as opposed to a structure. The Catholic *communitas* of west central Scotland thrived whilst it recognized itself as other – almost, as Turner would assert, as 'inferior' (Turner 1969: 128). As it made the journey towards the mainstream acceptance that Devine chronicles, little did it suspect that the progress envisioned by its pastors might turn out to be that 'storm' overseen by the 'Angel of History' (Benjamin 2003: 392): its faith dissolved, its priesthood traduced and contaminated, its proud industrial heartland derelict and drug-infested, its very *communitas* reduced to a mere Facebook community to facilitate the 'horizontal' truisms of 21st-century populist politics. All this saga of emptiness is there to be read in the shattered and discarded grandeur of St Peter's, Cardross. ●