Northern Ireland
Religion, Religiosity and Politics in a Changing Society

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Introduction

Northern Ireland is an avowedly Christian society. This is true in at least three senses. There are only very small numbers within the non-Christian faith communities. Belfast has an Islamic centre (not strictly a mosque), a synagogue, a gurdwara, and two Hindu temples. There is another Sikh temple in Derry. But overall numbers are very small, with ‘other religions’ representing only 0.82 percent of the total population in the 2011 census. A second stamp to its Christian ethos is Northern Ireland’s high levels of Christian identification, with eight out of every ten people in 2008 describing themselves as affiliated to the Christian religion (Hayes and Dowds 2010: 1), down, admittedly, from 96 percent in 1968 but still remarkably high. Yet within this Christian tradition, there is, thirdly, a vast tapestry of religious belief and practice, with over seventy-five Christian groupings in the 1991 census having at least ten or more adherents (Richardson 1998: ix). Most of this diversity, of course, is the result of schism within Protestantism, amongst which many very small independent denominations can be found.

Using data from the last three national censuses in Northern Ireland, this chapter will chart the relative strength of Christian religious identification against the trend to secularisation elsewhere in Britain and the West generally. I refer to this as Northern Ireland’s ‘exceptionalism’. There are two features to it—continued very high levels of Christian religious practice, and sectarian conflict between groups marked by religious boundaries (referred to widely as ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’). High numbers in the pews and something approaching a ‘holy war’ are related processes and the links between religion and politics form an important part of the argument in this chapter.

With respect to Northern Ireland’s high levels of religiosity, a contrast will be drawn between secularisation and liberalisation, for Northern Ireland is experiencing a decline in Christian observance as well as liberalisation in what Christians believe, rather than a large decline in identification. The chapter will identify the variety of these trends across the Christian denominations, particularly the decline in observance in mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches and the relative growth of evangelical, independent and charismatic churches.
With respect to Northern Ireland’s sectarian conflict, the impact of the civil unrest known colloquially as ‘the Troubles’ on maintaining observance and identification will be stressed, and the corresponding effects of the peace process on liberalisation will be addressed. The relatively weak contribution of the institutional churches to the peace process has had a significant effect in the post-conflict period by reducing the capacity of the institutional Church to be active in post-conflict reconstruction and healing, which further impacts on patterns of religiosity. The contemporary Church is experiencing a crisis of legitimacy caused by its irrelevance to the process of conflict transformation, which is combining with several other social changes and trends to weaken people’s allegiance to it, most notably amongst the young. The chapter will end with some speculations about possible future patterns of Christian religiosity and identification. It is necessary to begin, however, by addressing Northern Ireland’s two most obvious distinguishing features.

Northern Ireland’s Exceptionalism

Northern Ireland is noteworthy for two processes—retaining very high levels of religious identification and a very violent form of civil unrest. The two are closely connected. ‘The Troubles’ helped to maintain religious observance and identification as a way of articulating ethno-religious identity in what appeared to most people, including many locals, to be an intra-Christian conflict. However, the close association between religion and politics proved problematic for a specifically Christian contribution to conflict resolution and has hindered the Christian churches in the post-violence phase to the point where patterns of religiosity and identification are under threat. Northern Ireland’s exceptionalism is thus inherently contradictory, establishing tension between the two processes that mark it as unique, making exceptionalism simultaneously both an advantage and disadvantage for the churches.

Given that these two processes feed off one another, it is necessary at the outset to establish that the Northern Irish conflict was not a religious or holy war. The conflict was not about theology or different interpretations of scripture. It was about the legitimacy of the state and about equal access to the scarce resources distributed by the state (this is argued most strongly by McGarry and O’Leary 1995). The substance of the conflict was entirely political. However, the way the conflict was experienced took on religious forms (for a wider discussion of the religious contribution to ‘the Troubles’ see Barnes 2005; Mitchell 2006a, 2006b; Elliott 2009). This distinction between substance and form is often misunderstood, so it is necessary to labour the point.