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Ireland as a Post-Catholic Religious Market?

The Role of Extra-Institutional Religion

Gladys Ganiel, Senator George J Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, Queen's University, Belfast

This paper will explore three claims that I make in my recently published book, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity*, on which it is based.¹ The three claims are that:

- we can characterize the island of Ireland as 'post-Catholic';
- we can describe the religious landscape on the island of Ireland as a 'market';
- the concept of 'extra-institutional religion' – which I develop in the book – can help us understand how religion is changing and evolving.

I did not intend to write a book about 'post-Catholic Ireland.' The research on which my book is based was part of an interdisciplinary Irish School of Ecumenics' research project, 'Visioning 21st Century Ecumenism: Diversity, Dialogue and Reconciliation'. Along with colleagues, I had identified a need for research about religious diversity on the island of Ireland, which had been made more obvious by increased immigration during the Celtic Tiger years in the Republic. I had also identified a need for research about what seemed to me, more than a decade after the Good Friday Agreement, to be an obvious lack of reconciliation between Christian churches, in Northern Ireland and the Republic. I wanted to study how people of faith at the grassroots were encountering both ethnic and religious diversity, what they thought about it, and what they were doing to create more harmonious relationships with those who are 'different'.

As a sociologist of religion, my task during the project was to carry out empirical work: surveys, interviews and observations. There were two 'Surveys of of 21st Century Faith' in 2009, the first of which canvassed 4,005 faith leaders. I strove for a universal sample of faith leaders on the island, and 4,005 was as many as my research assistant Thérèse Cullen could track down. 710 responded. The second was an open, online survey for laypeople, to which 910 responded. The in-depth interviews and observations were carried out as part of eight case studies of 'expressions of faith' between 2009–11, including the Parish Pastoral Council of the Parish of Good Counsel in Ballyboden, Dublin; *Slí Eile/Magis* Ireland, a Jesuit young adult ministry; Abundant Life, a

Pentecostal congregation in Limerick; St Patrick's United Church, a combined Methodist and Presbyterian congregation in Waterford; Jesus Centre Dublin, a congregation of the Redeemed Christian Church of God; Holy Cross Benedictine Monastery in Rostrevor, Co. Down; the Fermanagh Churches Forum; and a sample of individuals from faith traditions other than Christianity. In total, 113 people were interviewed from across these eight cases, by me and by research assistants Richard Carson and Fred Vincent.

It was the empirical findings of the research that led to the development of my ideas about a post-Catholic Ireland, religious markets, and extra-institutional religion. It was impossible to ignore the long shadow that the seemingly steady demise of 'traditional' Irish Catholicism cast over the project. Unprompted, Irish converts to Pentecostalism spoke about the Irish Catholic Church. As did Protestants, north and south of the border. As did immigrants of various religions from all over the world. And, of course, Irish Catholics themselves. Some even used the term 'post-Catholic' to describe the island they now found themselves living on. It was clear to me that, as the people I spoke with live out their faith day-by-day, they are transforming the religious landscape. They are creating new religious spaces within a post-Catholic environment that is simultaneously undergoing secularization and religious diversification.

So why should we characterize the island of Ireland as post-Catholic?

For me, post-Catholic is a descriptive, empirical concept rather than an epochal one – I am not saying that Ireland was once Catholic, and now it is not. Rather, a dominant, traditional form of Irish Catholicism is being displaced. This is the Catholicism that was a defining characteristic of Irish national identity, that had a 'monopoly' on the Irish religious market (at least in the Republic and among the minority Catholic community in Northern Ireland), had a strong relationship with state power, elevated the status of the cleric to extraordinary high levels, and emphasized the evils of sexual sin. Even if Ireland has largely moved beyond this form of Catholicism, the Catholic Church continues to loom large over the whole island. It retains some social and cultural privileges vis-à-vis other expressions of Christianity, other religions, and secularism/atheism. But a post-Catholic Ireland involves *a shift in consciousness* in which the Catholic Church, as an institution, is no longer held in high esteem by most of the population and can no longer expect to exert a monopoly influence in social and political life. People from a variety of religions, including Catholicism, now often define their faith in opposition or contrast to Catholicism.

Those familiar with the work of Jürgen Habermas will recognize that my use of the term post-Catholic is similar to his use of the term post-secular when he writes about Europe. For Habermas, post-secular involves a shift in consciousness in the way Europeans think about the

public role of religion. I think it is analytically useful to characterize the island as post-Catholic because it captures something of the momentousness and drama of the religious change that has occurred. Who now speaks of ‘holy, Catholic Ireland’ as anything but a period in this island’s history? In a post-Catholic Ireland, Catholicism remains – but no longer commands a monopoly.

Why should we describe the religious landscape as a market?

Even before the identification of a ‘post-secular’ Europeⁱⁱ, the island of Ireland was an interesting counter-narrative to the continent’s secularization story. In the Republic, there were some similarities with other majority Catholic countries like Poland, which tended to retain higher church attendance rates than northern Protestant countries. In Northern Ireland, both Catholics and Protestants retained high attendance rates—remaining among the most enthusiastic church-goers in Europe—but many observers dismissed this as a social practice that simply maintained opposing ethno-national identities: religion was an ‘ethnic marker’ reinforced by abnormal levels of religious practice.ⁱⁱⁱ When conflict subsided, it was predicted, so would religion.

But both the empirical and theoretical claims of secularization have been challenged so much that at the very least, few scholars now claim that secularization processes are as straightforward as once thought. A significant body of work in the sociology of religion links the revitalization of religion to the development of religious ‘markets’ in various national contexts.^{iv} Market-led Rational Choice Theories (RCT) of religion developed in part to counter the once-dominant secularization thesis, in particular to explain why the ‘modern’ United States was not following the path of secularization that seemed apparent in the ‘modern’ democracies of Europe. RCT assumes that religious activity increases where there is a large *supply* of religion—more options to choose from—and decreases where there is not much choice.

So rational choice theorists have long argued that the monopolistic religions of Europe actually have stifled religious vitality.^v For them, the churches of Europe—well-endowed by the state and therefore too ‘lazy’ to compete for adherents—withered away. In the United States, with its early and strict separation of church and state, religious groups (some writers even call them religious ‘firms’) were forced to compete for adherents in a crowded religious market. Stark and Iannaccone used nineteenth century Ireland to demonstrate their argument about the lacklustre performance of religious monopolies, claiming that less than one-third of the population attended Mass in 1840. Mass attendance only rose after the famine and, for the authors, reflected the linking of Catholicism with Irish nationalism, not the vitality of monopoly Catholicism itself. RCT has been criticized for being too specific to the United States, and as ‘ahistorical’, with José Casanova arguing that a better approach is to ‘look less at levels of modernization or at persistent monopolies,

which explain very little, and more at historical patterns of relations between Church, state, nation, and civil society'.^{vi} It is these patterns that better explain variations within Europe, and between Europe and the United States.

I agree with Casanova that historical patterns are crucial. But I think that, as a descriptive term, 'market' aptly captures the evolving religious situation on the island of Ireland. Like other European states where the inevitability of secularization has been questioned, Ireland is developing a 'mixed' religious market. In these religious markets, historic state religions persist in varied forms and new religious actors emerge as more dynamic than the historic state churches. At the same time, those previous monopoly religions retain some cultural, social and political privileges, such as greater recognition or legitimacy than other expressions of faith.

In sum, conceptualizing the religious landscape of the island as a market gives us a better lens for explaining *religious persistence in all its diverse forms*.

What is extra-institutional religion? How does it help us understand religious change?

The 'Transforming' part of the title of my book has to do with how I define my concept of 'extra-institutional religion'. I define this as new religious spaces that are being created (or discovered) within Ireland's post-Catholic environment. These are spaces where people use various methods and strategies to keep their faith alive, *outside or in addition to the institutional Catholic Church*. The term extra-institutional is meant to capture how people's experiences and practices are so often described not only as outside or in addition to the Catholic Church (extra), but also in the Irish Catholic Church's own terms (institutional).

I make three arguments about extra-institutional religion in my book:

- 1) Ireland's religious market is increasingly diverse and, within it, extra-institutional religion can theoretically take on a dynamic role by prompting personal transformation and by creating spaces on the margins of the market where people work together for religious, social and political transformation. The case studies uncovered plentiful empirical evidence of personal transformation – although evidence for wider transformations was not widespread.
- 2) The concept of extra-institutional religion provides a counter-balance to some prevailing theories in which the 'reflexive', modern religious person is seen as constructing a 'God of one's own', quite unmoored from traditional religious institutions.^{vii} While extra-institutional religion in part depends upon the individualization of religion, it also depends on those individuals maintaining some relationship with institutionalized religion, making it more 'solid' than other forms of more free-floating modern religion.

3) The practice of extra-institutional religion has the potential to contribute to reconciliation on the island of Ireland, more so than other expressions of religion such as the island's traditional Christian denominations. From a theoretical perspective, extra-institutional religion enjoys certain advantages not available to 'institutional' forms of religions like denominations, which may be constrained by committees, creeds, and time-worn ways of doing things. People practising extra-institutional religion can take risks. And as we have seen from the examples of Christian peacemakers during the Troubles, who almost always acted *on the margins of the institutional churches*, risk-taking is what is required on the road to reconciliation on this island.

I will illustrate these arguments with some examples. I interviewed 'Michael and Ellen, an Evangelical Couple from Belfast', as part of the case study of people who have some involvement with Holy Cross Monastery in Rostrevor. Michael and Ellen's religious practices illustrate extra-institutional religion, in that almost all of their ecumenical—for lack of a better word, with apologies to Ellen [who was adamant that she is not ecumenical]—activities have taken place in spaces perceived as outside of the strict control of the institutional churches. Fitzroy Presbyterian could be considered one such extra-institutional space, as it has been considered an unusual congregation within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Its model of a fellowship group with a Catholic institution [Clonard Monastery], and its explicit 'peace' vocation, have not been enthusiastically adopted by many other Presbyterian congregations. For example, the Presbyterian Church's Peacemaking programme recommended that all congregations have 'peace agents', but a majority of congregations did not take this up. Likewise, Holy Cross could be considered an extra-institutional space, because it has become a haven both for Catholics disillusioned with the institutional church, and people from various Christian traditions who are attracted by its ecumenical and reconciliatory vocation.

Although I argue that the marginal position of extra-institutional religion puts it in a good position to contribute to change, Ellen had doubts about this herself. She was very conscious of an 'anti-institutionalism' in her approach, as she explained in a story about attending an 'ecumenical conference':

'I even had it out with [Fr] Gerry Reynolds [from Clonard Monastery], who's a saint. But . . . he was just doing his usual of assuming that everybody in the room . . . were all ecumenical. And I'm sitting there going, "I beg your pardon, and what does that mean?" He said . . . "that we were all one in Christ, and that these people who took a non-sacramental and non-institutional, non-structural view of the faith, were just a kind of irrelevant minority". And I was sitting there going, "what, what, what?" I do love him . . . and we always laugh . . . but we had it out again in October over this stuff. He was trying to tell me

again that we need institutions to do this, that and the other, and we need priests and what not. I'm going, "no, no, no". I asked Ellen if that meant she wanted 'to smash the institutions' and she replied, 'yeah, I think so', before saying that her approach was probably 'inadequate' in 'the wider scheme of things' but that on 'my little individual level . . . it has served me well in terms of what it has enabled me to do and the risks it has enabled me to take'.^{viii}

That is a fair summary of how Michael and Ellen, like many others throughout the island, have found extra-institutional spaces where they feel safe enough and free enough to experience healing, reconciliation, and a type of Christian unity.

Ellen is right to recognize that the transformation she has seen has been primarily individual and small-scale. There is limited empirical evidence for extra-institutional religion contributing to wider social, political or religious transformation. Some limited examples of transformation are provided in my book: the way congregations like Abundant Life, St Patrick's, and Jesus Centre are facilitating immigrants' integration into wider society; or the ways the Rostrevor Benedictines have inspired grassroots ecumenical projects outside the walls of their monastery.

The traditional institutional churches are more often than not tainted by the island's religiously-divided and sectarian past, the churches' perceived failure to act during the Troubles, and the failure to adequately deal with abuse within religious institutions. Extra-institutional expressions of religion are not burdened with that baggage, have more freedom to critique religious institutions, and have more flexibility to form networks with like-minded religious and secular groups to respond quickly to pressing issues and needs.

Extra-institutional religion is not just an interesting sociological development on the fringes of the island of Ireland's religious market. Rather, it is a development that potentially holds the seeds for a wider religious, social and political transformation. Although such an outcome is by no means predetermined, such a transformation could make post-Catholic Ireland a place where religious diversity is celebrated as a gift, rather than seen as a burden to be endured.

SeSecSecurity and Justice, Queen's University Belfast.

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- i The paper was originally delivered at the International Interdisciplinary Conference, 'The Role of Church in a Pluralist Society: Good Riddance or Good Influence?', June 24-26, 2016, Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin, on 22 June 2016. This is a slightly edited version. It relies on text and quotations from *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity* (Oxford University Press, 2016), which are reproduced with permission for publication and oral communication by the publishers.
 - ii Jürgen Habermas, 'Religion in the public sphere'. Address given on receipt of the 2005 Holberg Prize. Available at http://www.holbergprisen.no/images/materiell/2005_symposium_habermas.pdf#nameddest=habermas, accessed 28 March 2015.
 - iii John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
 - iv Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987); Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New

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- Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); do., 'The dynamics of religious encounter', in Michelle Dillon (ed.), *Handbook for the Sociology of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.96-109; Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone, 'A supply-side reinterpretation of the "secularization of Europe"', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 33 (3) (1994): 230-52; Lawrence Young (ed.), *Rational Choice Theory and Religion: Summary and Assessment* (London: Routledge, 1997); Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).
- v Stark and Iannaccone, 'A supply-side reinterpretation'.
- vi Jose Casanova, 'Exploring the post-secular: three meanings of "the secular" and their possible transcendence', in Craig Colhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (eds), *Habermas and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), pp.27-48.
- vii Ulrich Beck, *A God of One's Own: Religion's Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).
- viii Ganiel, *Transforming Catholic Ireland*, pp.13-14.