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Ganiel, G. (2025). Ireland is post-Catholic, but religion still matters. *Current History*, 124(860), 89-94.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2025.124.860.89>

Published in:
Current History

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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Ireland is Post-Catholic, But Religion Still Matters

Gladys Ganiel

Abstract

This article argues that while the Irish religious landscape is “post-Catholic”, religion still matters on both sides of the border. Decline is explained through the lens of the church abuse crisis, while also considering factors like economic growth, increased religious pluralism, societal liberalization, and the end of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland remains less secularized than the Republic of Ireland, as confirmed by higher levels of religiosity and closer church-government relations during the Covid-19 pandemic. While relationships within Northern Ireland and between the Irish and British governments have been strained since the Brexit referendum, religion is no longer a barrier to Irish unification.

Key words: religion, Ireland, Northern Ireland, secularization, Catholic Church, post-Catholic, church abuse, Brexit, Covid-19 pandemic

“A lot of people still say to you: why are you still a Catholic? Imagine, being asked that question in Ireland! It’s quite extraordinary.”

Those are the words of Mary Redmond, a Dublin parishioner I interviewed in 2011. I told her story, and those of others still endeavoring to practice their faith, in a 2016 book titled *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland*.

It has been almost a decade since *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland* was published, and by all the indicators by which social scientists measure secularization, Irish religiosity continues to decline.

But Mary Redmond, like many others, continued to find meaning in her Catholicism despite what seemed like the collapse of the Catholic Church in Ireland. The nation was reeling from a steady stream of revelations of clerical child sexual abuse, which began in the 1990s and culminated in the 2009 Murphy Report on abuses in the Dublin Archdiocese. The mood of anger and disenchantment was reflected in the bright yellow graffiti anthropologist

Hugh Turpin observed on the doorway of a Catholic church in Dublin's docklands: "You have 100% Failed Humanity."

In this context, I felt justified labelling Ireland "post-Catholic". As apparently did the then-Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, who in 2013 wrote in *America* magazine of "a post-Catholic Ireland". But this is not to say that Ireland was once Catholic; and now it is not. Rather what has happened is that a particular expression of Catholicism has been discredited and discarded; and new forms of Catholicism are emerging. The Catholics who "are still a Catholic" – as Mary Redmond put it – practice their faith in a religious landscape and a cultural context that is no longer monopolized by the Catholic Church.

This "fall of Christian Ireland," as historian Crawford Gribben describes it, cannot solely be blamed on the abuse crisis; it also been driven by rapid economic development and social liberalization. The Covid-19 pandemic took even more people out of the pews and a substantial minority of them have not returned. People of "no religion" are now the second largest "religious" group in the Republic of Ireland. Immigration has fueled the growth of Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and other religions, too: there are now more Muslims than Methodists in the Republic of Ireland.

Yet pockets of religiosity persist, not just in the Republic but also across the border in Northern Ireland, where – despite the sectarian dimensions of the "Troubles" (1968-1998) – secularization has not been as visceral or profound. The churches are among the island's few civic institutions organized on an all-island rather than north-south basis, and seem to be entering a new era of ecumenical cooperation, at least among high-level, inter-church leaders. While it is almost certain that Christian leaders will not actively facilitate unification of Northern Ireland and the Republic, it is even more certain that religion is no longer a barrier to unification.

The Fall of Christian Ireland

Gribben's *The Rise and Fall of Christian Ireland* starts with St Patrick and concludes with a chapter titled "Losing Faith in Ireland?", which ponders whether or to what extent Christianity may survive into the twenty-first century. This is a startling question for an island where religion has been important for so long. Indeed, when Western Europe began secularizing in the 1960s, higher levels of religiosity persisted in Ireland. But since the 1990s there has been what Gribben calls "sudden onset secularization". This is driven by multiple factors like the impact of the abuse crisis; increased economic prosperity in the Republic, which has been built on a low-tax environment for multi-national firms; and the end of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. It is likely that the Troubles artificially inflated religiosity because some people identified with their religion to demonstrate communal solidarity, while others used religion to cope with the trauma of the violence.

The foundations for religiosity were firm and longstanding. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Catholic Church established a religious, social, and political monopoly in the Republic and (after partition in 1921) a type of mini-monopoly among Catholics in Northern Ireland. Catholicism was integral to constructing Irish national identity on both sides of the border, over and against a Protestant, British identity. Derek Scally's *The Best Catholics in the World* captures how the young Irish state embraced Catholicism as a means to differentiate itself from the old colonizer – Britain – whose centuries of "penal laws" against Catholics created a historic memory of religious persecution. The Catholicism that emerged was rigid, conformist, clerical, and obsessed with sexual purity and morality. It sought power through direct influence on politicians and on social and economic policies; control of education and health care; and the construction of what Tom Inglis called a "moral monopoly" in almost all aspects of social life. Protestants, especially in Northern Ireland, were wary and fearful of the political power of the Catholic Church. In the early years of the

Irish state, censorship was widespread, with media and books expected to conform to Catholic morality. Contraception was not legalized until 1980. Divorce was not legalized until 1995, via a closely-fought citizens' referendum. Recent referenda have confirmed the Republic's more complete liberalization, with same sex marriage permitted in 2015 and abortion legalized in 2018. When I refer to the island as post-Catholic, then, this is the expression of Catholicism that has been confined to the past. There will be no return to the "Holy Catholic Ireland" of the Republic or to the "chaplains to the tribe" model of religious engagement with politics in Northern Ireland, where the Catholic and Protestant churches sought and gained social and political influence within their communities. The churches' quest for power in Northern Ireland more often than not resulted in the churches reinforcing rather than challenging the sectarianism and inequalities that produced and prolonged the Troubles.

The decline of the churches' social and political influence has been mirrored by declines in religious identification and practice. According to the Census, in 1991 ninety-two percent in the Republic identified as Catholic; in 2022 the figure was 69 percent. Some of this decline is offset by growth in other Christian traditions and religions, related to increased immigration. But most of the decline is explained by the rise of those choosing to say they have "no religion", up from two percent in 1991 to 14 percent in 2022. In Northern Ireland, Catholic identification has remained fairly constant. In 1998 (the year of the Good Friday Agreement) 39 percent identified as Catholic in the Life and Times Survey, rising to 42 percent in the 2021 Census. However, this apparent increase is not straightforward; it rather reflects the demographic decline of people from Protestant/British/Unionist backgrounds. Those willing to identify with Protestant denominations were 49 percent in the 1998 Life and Times; this figure stood at 37 percent in the 2021 Census. Those of "no religion" increased from 9 percent in 1998 to 17 percent in 2021.

There also has been a steady drop in attendance at religious services. Declines have been most dramatic in the Republic, which started from a higher baseline. This is partly due to the greater emphasis on receiving Eucharist in Catholicism, which drives relatively higher rates of attendance among Catholics than Protestants, cross-nationally, not just on the island of Ireland. According to European Values Surveys, in the Republic, monthly (or more) church attendance was 88 percent in 1990, 74 percent in 1999, and 45 percent in 2018; in Northern Ireland it was 68 percent in 1990, 59 percent in 1999, and 45 percent in 2018. More recent polls have put weekly attendance in the Republic at 20 percent; while in Northern Ireland, monthly attendance stands at 46 percent among Catholics and 32 percent among Protestants. While low, these figures are still relatively high. By way of contrast, in 2018 the Pew Research Center found that across Western Europe, a median of 22 percent attend services monthly. Christian Ireland may have fallen, but it has not fallen as far as its neighbors.

“People still need us.”

Those were the words of a Catholic priest serving in the Republic in May 2020. He wrote them in response to a write-in question on an online survey I conducted in partnership with the Irish Council of Churches. We designed the survey to gauge how faith communities were responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. His words capture a sense of the resilience and even optimism that was present among faith leaders in the first months of lockdown. On the survey, faith leaders reported how their communities had played important roles in providing pastoral care and social services during those difficult times. Seventy-four percent of faith communities from the largest denominations – Catholic, Church of Ireland (Anglican), Presbyterian, and Methodist – were providing social services to the wider community. Faith leaders also reported that people were praying more. As another Catholic priest in the Republic put it: “I could keep the church heated from the shrine candles alone!”, explaining

how parishioners were regularly visiting the church building (which was allowed to stay open), even if in-person services had been banned.

In the absence of public gatherings, faith leaders reported that people were accessing online services far more frequently than they had expected they would. Before the pandemic, 66 percent of faith communities had provided online worship opportunities; by the time of the survey, that figure had jumped to 87 percent. Seventy percent said that they wanted to retain at least some aspects of online ministry when restrictions were lifted. As a non-denominational minister in the Republic wrote: “Be online, prepare for more online, prepare your faith community to ‘walk by faith, not by sight’.” My later analysis, with Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill, of public documents (press releases, news reports, etc.) produced by churches, Muslims, and Humanists during the pandemic found almost unqualified support for government restrictions and vaccinations. In this way, the island’s religious institutions carved out places for themselves in the public sphere, positioning themselves as stable and trustworthy promoters of the common good. As the island’s largest and most longstanding religious institutions, the statements of the churches received more media and public attention than those of minority religious groups.

At the same time, the churches’ participation and acceptance in public spheres was accomplished through remarkably non-religious discourses. Church documents used language like “the common good” and urged followers to respect “the science”. There were comparatively few religious or theological justifications for following pandemic guidelines. The churches also did not attempt to claim special status or religious freedom protections, either north or south. It is likely that church leaders did in many cases value and respect the advice of experts. But this secularization of Christian discourses was also likely driven by a clear-eyed assessment of the churches’ declining influence, betraying a fear that if church voices strayed too far from societal norms, they would alienate people and lose their place in

the public sphere. In contrast, Muslim organizations' discourses were much more theological than those of the churches, frequently citing the Quran.

As the pandemic wore on, this sense that "people still need us" wavered. A September 2020 poll commissioned by the Iona Institute found that among those who were regular mass-goers in the Republic prior to the pandemic, one in five did not know if they would return to in-person services. A March 2023 poll found that 59 percent of pre-pandemic mass-goers were attending again, with 66 percent of men and 52 percent of women returning. Among those who had not returned, 31 percent still had concerns about Covid-19 and public places. But 31 percent reported that "my faith isn't as strong as before Covid-19", and 20 percent said, "I prefer to watch the mass on TV, online, or on the radio nowadays".

A Tale of Two Lockdowns

If the pandemic experience weakened the faith of a substantial minority of individuals, it also exposed the churches' declining influence on politics. Here, religions' experiences in the Republic and Northern Ireland were very different. As Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill has put it, this "tale of two lockdowns" revealed that the Republic's government either did not trust religious groups or did not consider them particularly important; in contrast, Northern Ireland's government privileged engagement with religious groups, setting up a dedicated faith forum.

The Republic's restrictions on public religious practices were among the longest and most stringent in Europe. The Irish government dictated these restrictions, without meaningful consultation with religious leaders. In a 2024 interview with Ní Dhónaill, a Protestant leader noted that the Irish government set up a "forum", but this was not a place of engagement: "A government official would simply tell us what was going to be done and would be informing us of the regulatory plans and that would be it." In Northern Ireland, the

government requested the establishment of a faith forum including Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Baha'i, and Humanist leaders. This allowed direct access to politicians, and was used by religious leaders to request mitigations around restrictions. As a Protestant leader told Ní Dhónaill: "We weren't being dictated to. We were able to talk and challenge." In 2020, when restrictions around weddings in religious buildings were eased, Humanists used the relationships established in this forum to petition government leaders to also relax restrictions in secular venues. This request was granted within 10 days, enabling Humanist and religious weddings to have equal status.

Both north and south, churches and other religious groups publicly supported restrictions and almost never raised issues of religious freedom. There was just one significant lawsuit on the island, brought to the Irish High Court in 2020 by a private citizen, Catholic businessman Declan Ganley, who claimed that Covid-19 restrictions had violated his religious freedom. This case was dismissed in 2021, after those restrictions had lapsed. The *Irish Catholic*, a weekly newspaper, provided the most consistent public criticisms of restrictions, especially as the pandemic dragged on and restrictions on other public venues (but not churches) were eased. Some writers compared pandemic restrictions on religious practice to the penal laws from the era of British rule (circa 1695-1829), which banned the practice of Catholicism. In the Irish context, comparing one's own government to the colonial British government is almost unimaginably harsh.

The Irish government's treatment of religion during the pandemic confirmed that the Republic is truly post-Catholic in the sense that neither the Catholic Church nor any other religion retains political privileges. This is less so the case in Northern Ireland, which reflects its population's higher levels of religiosity as well as the personal piety of some individual politicians, not least in the Democratic Unionist Party, which was founded by the late Rev Ian Paisley and has a long-standing association with evangelical Protestantism.

Finally, both jurisdictions' policymakers rarely (if ever) met representatives of a single religion; representatives of different faiths were expected to present their case to governments together. This trend pre-dates the pandemic, and reflects a long, historic weakening of the influence of religion (especially the Catholic Church in the Republic) on politics. Faith leaders have, by and large, embraced this impetus to work together, recognizing that it is better to join together than to fight each other in increasingly secular societies.

A New Era

Indeed, there has been a historic shift in high-level inter-church relations. Cooperation at this level is more frequent and united than at any other time in Irish history. Perhaps this is not saying much, given the centuries of sectarianism that have scarred the island. These good relationships were reflected in unprecedented inter-church collaboration around pandemic-related issues such as closing and re-opening church buildings. Collaboration was facilitated through the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter-Church Meeting, the island's main ecumenical structures; and the Church Leaders' Group. The Church Leaders group consists of the Catholic and Church of Ireland Archbishops of Armagh, the Presbyterian Moderator, the Methodist President, and the President of the Irish Council of Churches. Beyond the churches, there are inter-faith networks and structures. But during the pandemic, Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill and I found that representatives of minority religious groups such as Islam felt that Christian concerns drove the agenda.

The Church Leaders' Group was established in 2015 to provide a unified platform for liaising with government officials and intervening in public debates. This group formalizes long-standing cooperation among high-level leaders, which during the Troubles included joint statements advocating peace. In November 2024 the Church Leaders' Group had a

private audience with the new UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Hilary Benn, raising concerns about societal polarization since Brexit and the British government's policies for dealing with the past in Northern Ireland. The group has put these two issues at the top of its agenda for several years.

Brexit has strained relationships within Northern Ireland, as well as between the British and Irish governments. In the 2016 Brexit referendum, an overwhelming majority of people from Catholic/Nationalist/Republican backgrounds voted to remain in the European Union; while a majority of those from Protestant/Unionist/Loyalists voted to leave. Now, some Nationalist/Republican leaders see Brexit as an opportunity to put a border poll for a united Ireland on the agenda. Pressure groups such as Ireland's Future have been established to work towards unification. In 2021, the Life and Times Survey found that 63 percent of people in Northern Ireland think that a united Ireland is more likely after Brexit; and 37 percent reported that Brexit has made them more in favour of a united Ireland. Church leaders have studiously avoided taking a political position on Brexit; instead, in 2018 the Church Leaders' Group pointed out that politically there was "a divisive and unhealthy atmosphere of needlessly destructive debate and broken and fractured relationships"; and urged politicians to prioritize the "common good".

Even if church leaders wanted to, they could neither facilitate unification of the island; nor mobilize against it. This is a far cry from the Home Rule crises of the early twentieth century. Home Rule would have established a self-governing parliament for the whole island. The first signatories to the 1912 Ulster Covenant resisting Home Rule were two politicians, followed immediately by Protestant church leaders. Now, religion is not a barrier to unification.

Northern Ireland also has not dealt effectively with its past. Unlike other post-conflict societies, there has been no truth commission and many victims feel their suffering has not been acknowledged. With few exceptions, there have not been effective public apologies from the main protagonists. In contrast, in 2021 the Church Leaders' Group released a joint statement for St Patrick's Day, which included the churches' most comprehensive confession ever for their historic contributions to sectarianism:

As Christian churches we acknowledge and lament the times that we failed to bring to a fearful and divided society that message of the deeper connection that binds us, despite our different identities, as children of God, made in His image and likeness. We have often been captive churches; not captive to the Word of God, but to the idols of state and nation.

The Church Leaders' Group's apology went almost unnoticed, with limited reporting in the media. Church leaders have offered further apologies and said they are committed to contributing to efforts to deal with the past. Yet their words may be too little, too late: they would have been more effective had they come decades earlier.

At the same time, individual church leaders have apologized for their churches' own historic abuse, including in dioceses and in church-run institutions like Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes. This is in a context where there have been multiple state inquiries into abuse in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. Church apologies have often not been well-received, with some perceived as insensitive and begrudging. There also is a sense that churches would not have apologized had their deeds not been exposed by the state and the media. Indeed, the Irish state has itself issued five official state apologies for historical abuse in church-run institutions. Most recently, in September 2024 it set up yet another inquiry, this one into sexual abuse at schools run by religious orders. And while many

citizens are not fully satisfied with the state response, apologies by state officials have generally been better received than those by church leaders. Having once had so much power, the Catholic Church in the Republic has been held especially responsible for its sins and has lost legitimacy.

This means that this new era of high-level inter-church cooperation is undermined by a lack of wider influence, fueled by the churches' own past sins of sectarianism and abuse.

New Religions and New Patricks

While both parts of the island remain numerically dominated by the historic Christian churches, immigration has created greater religious pluralism, with significant growth in Orthodox Christianity and Islam. These minority religions have few opportunities for meaningful participation in public debates. Muslims, moreover, have borne the brunt of anti-immigration protests in both jurisdictions. In August 2024, protesters in Northern Ireland planned to march on Belfast's Islamic center; when this route was blocked by police, they attacked hotels housing asylum-seekers and immigrant-run businesses. Some Loyalist protesters claimed they were protecting Christianity. They were joined by so-called "Irish patriots", who were bussed in from the Republic, creating an unlikely anti-immigration alliance between Northern Ireland Loyalists and southern Republicans. Church leaders condemned the protests, but it was not clear if their words had an impact.

Some church leaders have appealed to the ancient example of St Patrick, reminding people that he was an immigrant to the island. At a 2021 inter-church service marking the centenary of the partition of the island, Rev Sahr Yambasu, the then-President of the Methodist Church and a native of Sierra Leone, articulated and embodied this point. Yambasu (and other leaders) present immigrants as sources of life and vitality who can help renew the island's religious landscape.

Crawford Gribben has even called those who remain committed to Christianity the “new Patricks” who are keeping faith alive in what seems like a hostile environment. He has noted that there are strong conservative enclaves within all the Christian churches on the island. These Christians find meaning not only in their everyday faith practices, but also in resisting what they see as increasingly aggressive secular state policies on issues like abortion and same sex marriage. They often identify strongly with institutional churches. In contrast, in *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland*, I analyzed those who continued to practice their faith while distancing themselves from institutional churches. Most were Catholic. I described them as practicing “extra-institutional religion” because they spoke about their faith practices as happening *outside or in addition to* the structures of the “institutional” Catholic church. While disgusted by church abuse, these people also often disagreed with the church hierarchy on issues like women priests, abortion, and same sex marriage. There is considerable vitality among both these liberal and conservative (if we can call them that) “new Patricks”; as well as tensions between them. It is for these “new Patricks” that religion still matters. Their actions will shape Irish Christianity for decades to come.

Acknowledgement: This article refers to research conducted by Gladys Ganiel and Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill as part of the Trans-Atlantic Platform/AHRC funded project, “Religion in Societies Emerging from Covid-19” (project code AH/X001369/1).