



Research Update

Catholics in Northern Ireland: Ambivalence Rules?

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Introduction

Clerical child abuse scandals have had a massive impact on the Catholic Church internationally over the past decade, leading to the resignation of at least four bishops, one of them Cardinal Law of Boston. Catholics, both lay and clerical, have been appalled – particularly in the past year – to learn not only of the abuse itself, but of the response of Church leaders. This sometimes involved moving abusing priests to work in contexts in which they were still in contact with children. The issue raised wider concerns about the accountability of Church leaders, mandatory celibacy – which is not required in all situations, for example that of Church of England priests who join the Roman Catholic Church – the role of laity, and the place of women in the Church.

It is not clear yet what the long-term impact will be. Some people have left the Church. Others have stayed on the grounds that they can distinguish between the Church itself and the behaviour of some of its priests or bishops.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Mass attendance has dropped in many areas. At the same time, events like the Clonard Novena or the reception of the bones of St Thérèse of Lisieux continue to attract very large numbers.

Ecumenism has never been at the centre of Church life in practice in Northern Ireland. It has for example made little impact on Sunday or daily Mass. Yet there are signs of hope. More priests are joining clergy fraternals and recently over 100 clergy from different denominations attended an overnight seminar. In addition, couples in mixed marriages may be experiencing fewer difficulties.

This Research Update explores the attitudes of Catholics in Northern Ireland, using results from the **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** (1998-2001) and the **Northern Ireland Social Attitudes survey** (1989-1996).

Identity and constitutional issues

Catholics see themselves as nationalists. This will surprise few. However, while two thirds of Catholics in 2001 saw themselves

as nationalists, only 40% did in 1989. As shown in Figure 1, this increase has been offset by a decrease in the proportion of Catholics describing themselves as neither unionist nor nationalist, which fell from 59% in 1989 to 33% in 2001.

Identity was explored in several ways in the 2001 Life and Times survey. When asked about national identity, 23% of Catholics saw themselves as being 'Northern Irish'. Possible responses included 'British', 'Irish' and 'European'. There was a wide and varying response to the question 'how would you describe yourself?' which listed 25 options based on a wide variety of factors, including class, religion, marital status and national

identity. The most popular response (23%) was 'working class', followed by a tie for second place at 17% between gender and parenthood. 'Irish' came fifth after wife/husband. This suggests that for most people their national and political identity is less important than other aspects of their lives.

When asked about constitutional preferences, three out of five Catholics (59%) wanted a united Ireland, a result which will again surprise no one. Figure 2 shows the fluctuations in responses since 1989. There has been a definite downward trend in the proportion preferring retention of the union with the United Kingdom.

Figure 1: Identity of Catholic respondents

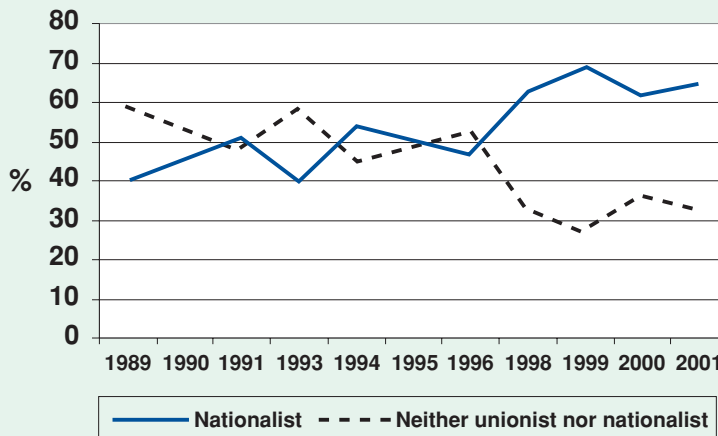
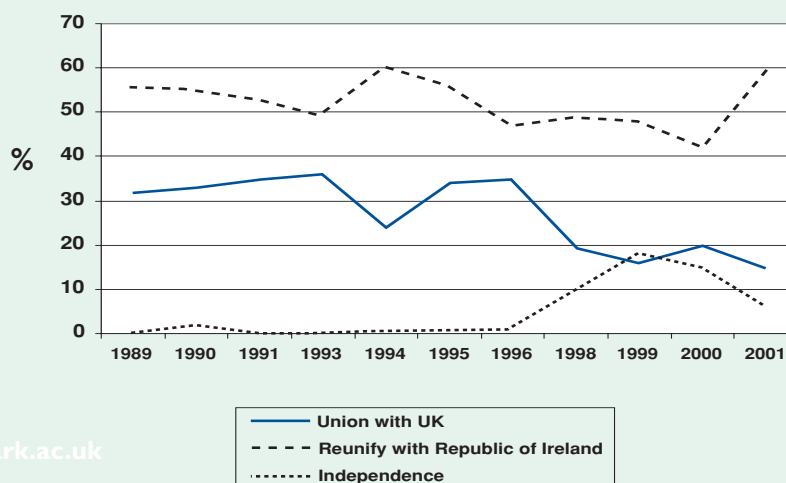


Figure 2: Constitutional preferences



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However, there is a considerable minority who are ambivalent about constitutional change (15% preferring to remain part of the UK, 6% preferring independence and 20% who don't know). Those who hope or fear that a united Ireland may be imminent may therefore have false hopes or fears, given that any referendum needs majority support both North and South. It is worth noting that the proportion who think that a united Ireland is either likely or very likely in the next 20 years has fallen from two thirds in 1989 to 44% of both Catholics – and remarkably – Protestants in 2001.

This raises a question about the call for a united Ireland: is it something that operates at the level of myth only, and as such serves primarily as a mechanism to interpret past oppression, or is it a concrete change which Catholics want? In what way will constitutional attitudes be affected by continuing experience of devolution, if and when devolved institutions are restored? If Sinn Fein join the Policing Board, as many expect, will this impact on Catholics' wider perceptions of Northern Ireland, and thereby reduce the stated desire for a united Ireland?

Attitudes to devolution and institutional change

1. The Agreement

Some Catholic attitudes to the Agreement have changed. Those who said the Agreement was of equal benefit to unionists and nationalists fell from a high of 74% in 1999 to 47% in 2001 – see Table 1

Table 1: Who has benefited from Good Friday Agreement?

	1998	1999	2000	2001
Unionists benefited more than nationalists	4	5	5	5
Nationalists benefited more than unionists	16	11	14	20
Unionists and nationalists benefited equally	72	74	61	47

One fifth of Catholics believed that nationalists benefited a little or a lot more than Unionists, a rise from 11% in 1999. Most Catholics (69%) believed the

Agreement will be in place in three years time. 78% said they had voted for the Agreement in 1998 and practically the same proportion – 75% — would do so again. The percentage of Catholics who actually voted for the Agreement in 1998 must have been considerably higher than this, so – as always – there will be a measure of difference between answers in surveys and in the voting booth.

The Life and Times results show a measure of ambiguity about the peace process. When asked how they felt about 'the last few years and the search for peace in Northern Ireland', 59% had 'mixed feelings'. As Table 2 shows, just over one in ten (12%) said that they were disappointed, and others felt unhappy, angry or betrayed. At the same time 54% said they were happy with progress. However, when considering the next few years and the search for peace, two thirds of Catholic respondents (66%) said that they were confident about the future, a figure in marked contrast to the 32% of Protestants who shared this view.

Table 2: Attitudes to last few years

	%
I feel happy that we have made progress	54
I have mixed feelings	36
I feel disappointed	12
I feel unhappy	4
I feel angry	4
I feel betrayed	2

Respondents were asked if the Assembly had helped education, health, the economy, and a reduction in violence. Over one third (37%) of Catholics felt that education had been helped, a marginal increase on 2000. Responses on the health issue were less positive: there was a drop from 76% in 2000 to 57% in 2001, if we combine those who think the health service has either remained the same or improved – see Table 3. The corresponding increase in those who think it has got worse looks considerable, although the 12% who thought that it was too early to say must also be taken into consideration. However, it would be

unwise to draw too much from comparisons between two single years instead of looking at a wider period.

Table 3: Have health and education service provision got better under the Assembly?

	%			
	Health		Education	
	2000	2001	2000	2001
Better	17	15	32	37
Worse	17	28	1	5
Same as before	59	42	55	38
(Too early to say)	0	12	0	15
Don't know	8	3	12	5

Perceptions on education provision under the Assembly have improved slightly, with a rise of five percentage points in those thinking it had got better. The fall in those thinking that it was the same as before is tempered by the 15% who thought that it was too early to say.

Looking at the economy, 32% thought it had been helped by the Agreement, up from 24% in 2000. Forty four percent thought that prosperity would increase if the Agreement stayed in place, and only 10% if it ended. Two thirds thought that violence would increase if the Agreement ended, whereas only 5% shared this view if it remained.

The overall impression is that the Agreement is still popular with Catholics. However, more are coming to accept the view that unionists and nationalists have not benefited equally. While there is a decline in the proportion who think it has helped education and health, the vast majority think it helps keep violence in check. Despite this, the three out of five Catholic respondents who expressed mixed or negative feelings about the peace process is worth noting: many Catholics are unhappy about aspects of the current situation.

2. The Equality agenda

Equality issues were always central to nationalists during the Troubles. They are even more important for Republicans as arguably they provide cover for the move towards participation in Northern Ireland institutions devolved from a British parliament.

The overall picture which emerges from Life and Times results is surprisingly positive.

- Although 28% of Catholics agreed that their culture was always the underdog, nearly half (47%) disagreed.
- Nearly three quarters (70%) felt confident about their culture and only 9% disagreed.
- Four out of ten (40%) thought that Catholics are treated better now than 5 years ago, and a further 53% thought there was no change.

Most Catholics are very positive about a range of state services, other than policing. For example, the vast majority think that Catholics and Protestants are treated equally by the Health Service (92%) and by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (81%). These figures are similar to those in 1998. Most Catholic respondents (85%) said they had not been discriminated in job applications against in the past ten years, and 96% had not been treated unfairly in job promotion or at work.

3. Policing

The results on policing are ambiguous. Just over half of Catholic respondents (55%) believed that Catholics and Protestants are treated equally by the police in Northern Ireland. This is a rise from the 33% figure for the previous two years.

Table 4 shows that, when asked if they would encourage a relative to become a police officer, the 2001 figure rose to 32% from 23% the previous year. However,

there has also been an increase in the proportion that would discourage a family member from joining the police force. Given this, and the fact that 44% said that police reform has not gone far enough, it is difficult to see grounds for optimism about Catholic attitudes towards the police.

Table 4: Would you encourage a close relative to become a police officer in Northern Ireland?

	%		
	1999	2000	2001
Encourage	28	23	32
Neither encourage nor discourage	23	36	29
Discourage	33	24	29
It depends	13	10	6

Community relations

There is little evidence of on-going, regular ecumenical programmes involving shared worship. Although 69% of Catholics had at some time attended a Protestant religious service in Northern Ireland, only half of these had attended in the past year. Of those respondents who have never attended a Protestant religious service, 9% said that they would not be happy to attend a wedding in a Protestant Church. Most people do not believe community relations have improved. In 1989, only one quarter (23%) of Catholics believed that relations between Protestants and Catholics were better than they had been five years previously. Although this had

risen to 60% in 1998, by 2001 this figure had dropped to 33%. However, when Catholics were asked about their own individual attitudes, the responses were more positive than they thought the response of others would be. Although 70% of Catholics thought that most people in Northern Ireland would not mind if a suitably qualified person of a different religion were appointed as their boss, 89% said they personally would not mind. This trend has held firm since 1989. Respondents were also asked if they would mind having a suitable qualified boss of Chinese origin. Again, Catholic respondents thought that other people would be less accepting than they were personally: 56% said that other people would not mind, compared with 83% saying that they personally would not mind. These are similar to findings in 1994.

On mixed marriages, one half of Catholic respondents believed most people would mind either a little or a lot if a close relative married someone of a different religion. 80% said they themselves would not mind. These responses have not changed much since 1989. A large majority (72%) would prefer to live in a mixed area, similar to the 1989 figure of 75%. However, the proportion of Catholics preferring to live in a mixed area reached a peak of 85% in 1996, and has decreased since then. A similar pattern is found for the proportion of Catholics preferring a mixed work force (82% in 2001).

Most Catholics do not think of themselves as bigoted. But this attitude may mask a lack of understanding of the dynamics of sectarianism, as outlined for example by Joe Liechty and Cecilia Clegg (2001). The self-satisfaction of Catholics may mask, in particular, the extent to which many overlook or fail to take seriously enough Protestant culture and worship.

Church attendance and importance of religion

In 1989, the vast majority of Catholic respondents (86%) said that they went to Mass at least once a week. By 2001, this proportion had dropped to 66%. This is similar to the figure of 63% found by a Royal College of Surgeons survey carried out in the Republic of Ireland between January and May 2002, some months after



the Life and Times survey was conducted.¹ It would have been interesting to know the impact of clerical child abuse scandals on Catholics' belief and practice, but Life and Times does not deal with this. In the College of Surgeon's survey, 77% of respondents felt that the Church was 'not dealing adequately with the problem'. In the same survey, over one half of respondents would not trust the Church to safeguard children, and one third reported that the scandals made a negative impact on their faith. Would Northern responses have been greater or less than these?

Attitudes to moral issues

The fact that Catholics continue to go to Mass does not mean they accept Church teaching on moral issues. Catholic respondents to the 1998 Life and Times survey showed considerable divergence from Church teaching among respondents.

Pre-marital sex was seen as not wrong at all by 44%. A survey by Accord² commissioned by the Northern Bishops in 2002 and due for publication in 2003 found that 50% of teachers disagreed with the statement that pre-marital sex was always wrong. That report also found that 71% of teachers surveyed agreed with the statement that they did not accept some Church teaching, and only 11% believed that couples should not use artificial contraception. However 88% of the teachers believed that marriage is a lifelong commitment.

One quarter of 1998 Life and Times respondents thought that same sex relations between adults were wrong only sometimes or not at all. Only one in ten thought that it was wrong not to report all taxes, although a further 26% said it was only a 'bit wrong'. Only one in twenty thought that giving false information to get benefits was wrong, and a further 14% saw it as only 'a bit wrong'.

All these figures show a good deal of independence from official Church thinking, which again will be no surprise to those who know the Catholic community.

References

Liechty, Joseph and Clegg, Cecilia 2001, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland*, Dublin: The Columba Press

¹ Irish Times, 6 November 2002

² Accord Catholic Marriage Counselling Service, 56 Lisburn Rd, Belfast, www.accord.ie

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Key Points

- There is continuing support for a United Ireland but 21% would prefer a different option and 20% don't know.
- 33% saw themselves as neither nationalist nor unionist. 'Irish' came fifth as a self-definition after 'working-class', gender, parenthood and marital status.
- The Agreement remains popular with Catholics, 75% would support it again in a referendum, although 59% had 'mixed' or more negative feelings about the peace process.
- Many Catholics felt positively about a range of equality issues. However, responses about policing were ambiguous.
- Only 33% believed community relations had improved, although there was much support for mixed marriage.
- Over 60% of Catholics said they go to Mass weekly. The impact of clerical abuse was not researched in this survey.
- Catholics' acceptance of Church teaching was limited.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2001, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The Life and Times survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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