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'A sort of whirlwind': Political Violence and Changing Patterns of Presbyterian Religious Observance in Ireland

Niall Cunningham

INTRODUCTION

Religion, or rather religious identity, has played a powerful role in the shaping of modern Ireland. The centrality of religion is acknowledged in the concerns of its foremost chroniclers. The two Irish historians invited to deliver the prestigious Ford Lectures at Oxford in recent decades both made the power of religious identity the focus of their attentions. The view of the Northern Ireland conflict as a primitive religious war, fought between antediluvian tribes, was current in popular representations in the U.K. press in the 1970s. It is generally agreed that such racialised stereotyping did not do justice to the root causes of division, but McGarry and O’Leary have argued that the obsession of Ireland’s foremost historians with religion against the backdrop of the Troubles, served only to reinforce popular perceptions of the conflict as primarily driven by theology rather than anything else. Regardless of the accuracy of that perception it is fair to say that analysts from almost every disciplinary precept have focussed on the binary division between ‘Catholics’ and ‘Protestants’, notwithstanding whether they believe those divisions to be religiously substantive or merely proxies for the ‘real’ ethno-national dichotomy. This has been to the neglect of the fact that, in a long-term historical perspective, it is in some senses more appropriate to approach issues of religion and geography in Ireland not as a dyptich but as a triptich of major beliefs. Each of these, Catholicism, Episcopalian Protestantism and Presbyterianism has their own highly distinctive pattern of settlement, shaped by geographies of colonisation four centuries ago, but still having powerful spatial implications up to the present day. This paper will use a novel dataset to explore demographic changes within one of those three major religions, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Analysis of religious demography in Ireland north and south of the border, has tended to focus on the use of census data. The records of the Presbyterian Church provide us with the means to compare metrics of nominal affiliation with those of active religious observance over the long-term and against the backdrop of some of the most traumatic events in modern Irish history. The title employed in this essay refers to the response of the unionist politician and founder of the fundamentalist Free Presbyterian Church, Reverend Ian Paisley to the potential re-partition of Ireland, a plan initially mooted by a Belfast academic and later endorsed by the Protestant paramilitary organisation, the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). While the proposal was welcomed by some within his

1 Research Associate, CRESC: The ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, University of Manchester.
5 http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/mar/02/ian-paisley-in-quotes 'Ian Paisley in his own words’, Guardian website, 2 March 2010 (accessed 10 October 2012); L. Kennedy, Two Ulsters: A Case for Repartition (Belfast: Queen’s University Belfast, 1986); L. Kennedy,
party, Paisley was vehemently opposed to it as much of his congregation resided in areas of Catholic majority population which would be ceded back to the Irish Republic under the plan. Such was his prophecy for the future political stability of the island were such a calamity to befall his flock. While repartition was never a serious possibility the debate highlighted the enduring power of religious geographies in framing contemporary debates on the political future of the island.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Ireland had been under supposed English rule since the Norman invasion of the 12th century. However, over large parts of the island, specifically in those parts of the island beyond ‘the Pale’ - a relatively small area of colonial influence surrounding Dublin, imperial control was non-existent. These ‘Old English’ Normans shared a common religion with the ‘vanquished’ native Irish and soon adopted the language and other cultural modes, becoming in the process, ‘Hiberniores Hibernis ipsis’, or ‘more Irish than the Irish themselves’. This situation altered as the Reformation transformed Ireland’s position in the geopolitical cosmos from a primitive backwater into a fertile potential staging post for the Catholic powers of Europe to overthrow Protestant England.

*Figure 1: Major plantations of Ireland in the early-modern period*

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Ireland was subjected to a series of waves of organized colonization, or plantation schemes, but it was only in the northern province of Ulster that the process really took root. The historic province of Ulster is made up of nine counties, six of which today constitute modern Northern Ireland. The Ulster plantation started during the reign of James I at the beginning of the 1600s and of all the major schemes the northern colonization was by far the most ambitious in terms of scale and ideology. Ulster had long been considered the most volatile and underdeveloped province of Ireland with a tradition of powerful native clans, most notably the O’Neills. Ulster’s position meant that strong ties of kinship with the Catholic highland families of Scotland existed across the North Channel which presented another enduring strategic threat to English authority in the dominion. The Ulster plantation followed the Nine Years War of 1594-1603 which began in Ulster and was led by the Earl of Tyrone, Hugh O’Neill; his eventual defeat at the Battle of Kinsale in 1602 precipitated the collapse of the ancient Gaelic order of nobility and paved the way for systematic colonisation of the O’Neill territory. The objective was to ensure that Ulster would never provide the seed-bed for revolt again.

*Figure 2: The Ulster Plantations 1609 – 1613*

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The main scheme of the Ulster plantation was focused on breaking up the old centres of Gaelic influence in the west of the province and thus applied to all counties west of Lough Neagh and the River Bann. Most of the land was portioned up amongst English and Scottish ‘undertakers,’ entrepreneurs who undertook to settle their allotments with Protestants. The rest of the land would go to army veterans known as ‘servitors’, native Catholics who had shown their loyalty to the crown during the Nine Years War, and in the form of endowments to the Church of Ireland and the new University of Dublin, to become better known as Trinity College.\textsuperscript{10} The plan for the county of Coleraine was different. Due to a lack of money, James I tried to hand responsibility for its settlement to the powerful guilds of the City of London and it effectively became a private enterprise henceforth known as Londonderry.\textsuperscript{11} Counties Antrim and Down were excluded from the formal colonization process as they had already been the subject of highly successful private plantation schemes under Hugh Montgomery and James Hamilton.\textsuperscript{12} It is here that Presbyterians from Scotland began to settle in significant concentrations.

\textbf{Figure 3: Percentage Catholic (left), Church of Ireland (centre) and Presbyterian (right) populations by barony in Ireland 1861}

By the end of the seventeenth century the religious demography of the island was characterised by three denominations, Catholicism and the two strands of Protestantism, each with their own highly-distinctive spatial distributions. These are indicated in figure 3, which shows that in the immediate post-Famine period Catholics still predominated across vast swathes of the island, but in Ulster the situation was different. Here, Episcopalian Protestants could be found in a band stretching along what would become the border between the North and South of Ireland; while Presbyterians were still overwhelmingly concentrated in the extreme north-eastern counties of Antrim and Down. If we look in even closer detail using contemporary census data published at the 1 kilometre level for Northern Ireland, we can see that the Presbyterian population is still most heavily concentrated in the north-east of Ulster, in precisely the same localities in which they have been living since the Jacobean plantations of the early-seventeenth century. For a half-century before the partition of Ireland, religious differences had been evolving into the diametrically-opposed political ideologies of nationalism and unionism. The partition of the island in 1921 was recognition of the fact that the political differences between Catholics and Protestants could not be bridged, and thus the islands’ patchwork religious geography acted explicitly as the template for its division into an overwhelmingly-Catholic south and a predominantly-Protestant north.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Figure 4: Presbyterians (%) by 1 km. grid square in 2001}

\textsuperscript{11} T.W. Moody, The Londonderry Plantation (Belfast: William Mullan & Son, 1939), p 35.
DATA & METHODS

The type, scope and availability of quantitative data available from the three major denominations in Ireland vary greatly. For the Catholic Church in Ireland, despite the hierarchical and centralised character of the organisation, archival material is not held at a single repository but instead tends to be located within individual sees or indeed, at parish level. In part, this is reflective of the sheer volume of material available, but as such, it is also heavily dependent on the fortunes of specific places. For example, in the Diocese of Down and Connor which includes the city of Belfast, a great deal of material relating to the traumatic period surrounding the partition of Ireland and the creation of Northern Ireland was destroyed as the Bishop’s residence was burned out during the early 1920s, briefly causing the Bishop to flee the city.\(^{14}\) For the Church of Ireland, on the other hand, there has been a system of centralising records at the Representative Church Body Library (RCBLD) in Dublin’s southside. The RCBLD holds extensive, although not exhaustive, collections of ‘Preachers Books’ which hold the attendance records for individual parishes on a service by service basis over considerable time periods. These records contain not only quantitative data but also fascinating commentaries on the material which often indicate why congregations were particularly small or large on given days, such as the Verger’s note, ‘IRA [Irish Republican Army] in town’, in the West Cork parish of Abbeystrewery at the outset of the Irish Civil War.\(^{15}\) However, for the researcher seeking to conduct long-term spatio-temporal research on changes in religious practice, the records of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland provide the most organised datasets of any available from the three main denominations.

Despite the fact that the Presbyterian Church could be considered the least hierarchical of the three main denominations, it collated the most comprehensive, consistent and accessible indices of demographic and economic well-being of any of the religious bodies. The data consist of tabular records dating from 1871 through to the present which provided annual statistical breakdowns on the financial returns from every individual church as well as the numbers of baptisms, weddings and other sacraments which provide indicators as to the demographic vitality of each congregation. These variables are consistent across the entire time period from the late-nineteenth century through to the most recent enumerations. One drawback however, is that unlike the Catholic Church and Church of Ireland, statistics on attendance at services were not based on counts of individuals but rather on the number of families subscribing at any given place of worship. As such, a family could potentially consist of an individual or any number of people. Nevertheless, the measure of families is consistent across places and across time, enabling us to draw meaningful conclusions about changes in patterns of active religious participation over the long-term.

The fact that information is available for individual places of worship means that the data lend themselves very well for spatial analysis, and in this study have been incorporated into a Geographical Information System (GIS). While the data are extremely well-organised, particularly in comparison to those available for the other faiths, there appears to have been an uncharacteristic inconsistency in the naming of individual churches within the record over time. The number of Presbyterian places of worship, particularly in the north-east of the

\(^{14}\) Conversation with Deputy Archivist of Down and Connor, Rev. Thomas McGlynn, St. Peter’s Cathedral, Belfast, August 2010.

island, expanded rapidly around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the population grew rapidly to serve the burgeoning shipbuilding, engineering and linen industries of Belfast and its hinterland. In many larger towns there was a convention of naming churches in an ordinal fashion in terms of their dates of opening. However, as populations shifted and some churches closed it appears that some places of worship either changed name or may have been mis-recorded in the dataset. In general terms, the use of generic names differentiated only by ordinal numbers rather than the dedication of places of worship to saints, as is common practice within the Catholic Church and Church of Ireland, has made tracking changes across time between specific sites, problematic. For this reason, data for small and medium towns was often aggregated to the settlement. This still provides a far higher degree of spatial granularity than that available from successive censuses.

CHANGING PATTERNS OF PRESBYTERIAN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Figure 5 shows the total number of Presbyterian families enumerated across the island of Ireland on a decennial basis from 1871 to 2001 as well as the total number of individual Presbyterians tallied at each national census. The convention of holding major censuses in the first year of each decade commenced in 1821 and continued unbroken for almost a century until 1911. However, at various points during the course of the twentieth century major political and other events caused that continuum to be interrupted. After the 1911 census, the next major enumeration would probably have been held in 1921. However, in this year the War of Independence was at its height in Ireland, and the execution of the census against such a backdrop of political and social turbulence was unthinkable. The next major survey was thus delayed by five years until 1926, and by then the partition of the island into the independent Irish Free State and Northern Ireland had introduced another layer of complexity. The creation of two political jurisdictions resulted in a parallel fracturing of the census mechanism between north and south. Not until 1961 would major censuses take place in the same year in both parts of the island. Thereafter, the pattern stabilised, with the exception of 2001 and 2002, the Republic choosing to delay its enumeration by a year in order not to exacerbate a serious outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. In order to provide direct comparisons it has therefore been necessary to estimate population change in the census across dates. This has been done by calculating the mean annual change across census intervals and multiplying this number by ten. The assumption is therefore one of constant change by year, which albeit unsatisfactory, does provide a reasonable indication of approximate Presbyterian census populations in the estimated years for direct comparison with the returns of the Presbyterian Church.

Figure 5: Total Presbyterians (census) and total Presbyterian families

The graph shows a marked contrast in the overall trends across time between those professing nominal Presbyterian affiliation in the census and those actively attending places of worship. Across the entire time period, the number of Presbyterians enumerated in the census has continued to fall. This has been most notable in the late-nineteenth century and in the latter-half of the twentieth century. This comes in contrast, however, to the pattern evident from the Church records. These show a century of unbroken growth in the number of Presbyterian families running from 1871 through to 1971. Only thereafter does the number of registered families begin to decline. If we break those patterns down into the two
jurisdictions created as a result of the partition of the island in 1921, we find that those patterns diverge across the island’s political spaces. Taking the census trends first, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of the island’s Presbyterian population was located within the six counties which remained part of the United Kingdom and which became Northern Ireland in 1921. Consequently, the sharp decline in the Presbyterian population in 1981 is explained largely by Northern Ireland and this came against the backdrop of the Troubles. During this period there was significant increase in the number of people refusing to respond to the religion question in the census for a variety of reasons. For Catholics the 1981 census came around the time of the Hunger Strikes and many Catholics refused to participate in the survey as a form of political protest.\(^\text{16}\) For Protestants, particularly in isolated areas in which they constituted a minority, refusal to reveal their religious identities may have been linked to the increase in so-called ‘tit-for-tat’ sectarian killings during the second-half of the 1970s.\(^\text{17}\) South of the border, the Presbyterian population was always much smaller. However, the pattern of decline commenced long before partition and the Troubles of the 1920s; the steepest decadal fall in the Presbyterian population actually occurred between 1871 and 1881 when it dropped by 36% from 121,000 to just under 77,000. Even in the traumatic years between 1911 and 1921 which covered the First World War, the Easter Rising and subsequent War of Independence between the IRA and crown forces, standardisation reveals a Presbyterian fall of only 26% in the South.

**Figure 6: Total Presbyterians (census) and Presbyterian families in the Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland areas**

Turning to the Church data, the graph shows that the growth observed over the long-term between 1871 and 1971 was a feature solely of the Northern Ireland area. In 1871, there were only 10,473 Presbyterian families scattered across the twenty-six counties of the South, while nearly 67,000 were enumerated north of the border. By 2001, the number of Presbyterian families in the South had halved to 5,280, while in Northern Ireland it had increased to just over 109,000. We can combine these datasets in an analysis by using the background census data to provide a potential indicator of family size over time from the Church records. This is provided in figure 7. The graph provides some fascinating insights. It suggests a fairly implausible average family size of 11.5 for the Republic of Ireland area in 1871. This is unlikely to be the result of massively-inflated fecundity rates among Presbyterians in the South of Ireland. Rather it reflected the fact that Presbyterian Church congregations in the south and west of the country tended to relatively underestimate the background Presbyterian populations enumerated in the national census. As will become quickly apparent from mapping the dataset, the Presbyterian Church infrastructure was extremely sparse across vast swaths of the south and west of the island, reflecting the tiny number of devotees in these areas. In many counties in the provinces of Connacht and Munster, only the largest towns had Presbyterian churches, and even then it is likely that they did not exist across the entire time period. From the start of the twentieth century,


family sizes started to converge and remain very similar for Presbyterian populations on either side of the border.

_Figure 7: People (census) per family in the Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland areas_

In the Republic of Ireland area, a decline in family size was accompanied by a decline in families. However, in the Northern Ireland area, a decrease in average family size went hand-in-hand with an overall increase in the number of families. In this sense, the Church dataset shines a light on broader social changes with the decline in family size reflecting not only the decline in fertility rates within the Protestant population but also the increasing number of people living alone more generally. The other interesting aspect is the modest rise in Presbyterian family size between 1991 and 2001 which is a reflection on the increased religious and cultural diversity brought on by a sharp rise in immigration during the Republic’s ‘Celtic Tiger’ period of economic prosperity. During the 1990s both major strands of Protestantism saw robust growth in census-enumerated populations due to the buoyant economic climate and this is clearly reflected in the upturn in the fortunes of the Presbyterian Church south of the border.

_Figure 8: K-means cluster analysis of Presbyterian congregations (families) 1871-2001_

Notwithstanding this development, the overall trend for Presbyterian congregations over most of the island has been long-term decline. This is apparent from figure 8 which uses k-means clustering as a means of grouping congregations together in terms of their demographic behaviour over the entire study period. Across most of the island, Presbyterian congregations have been characterised as small and in decline, although as we noted, the economic boom of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries halted the linear slump. This pattern was limited not only to churches south of the Irish border, but also covered much of the territory within Northern Ireland as well. Large swathes of the south and west of Northern Ireland have been characterised by the same pattern of small populations in long-term decline. In what might be termed the ‘heartland’ areas of Presbyterianism in counties Antrim and Down even more serious falls have been recorded, and these areas are marked in red on the map. These are more closely focussed on Belfast and its hinterland. However, the mass of green points also shows that there exist areas of substantial growth in Presbyterian congregations. These are also located in the Greater Belfast area, in the commuter towns of the Lagan valley and along the shores of Belfast Lough.

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INTERPRETING CHANGE

In recent months, the Irish government has come under increasing pressure to address its role during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) was responsible for the deaths of many Protestants and members of the British security services, particularly along the border with the Irish Republic. In South Armagh, the majority of IRA victims tended to be British soldiers. Further west, where the threat posed by the Provisionals was deemed to be lower, security operations were more often under the control of the civilian police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the reserve military organisation called the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR). The responsibilities of the RUC and UDR increased as a result of the British government policy of ‘Ulsterisation’, which sought to lower the number of British Army casualties by increasing the security burden on the local forces, thereby drawing the attention of the British media and public from the crisis. Many of these RUC and UDR victims were part-time members, and thus were deeply embedded in local communities along the border in parallel civilian roles as teachers, farmers and so on. Thus, a great many Protestant families in border areas had some connection to the security services. Bruce has further argued,

‘Many of the casualties in Border counties have been British soldiers, not Ulster Protestant farmers. But such attacks are pointed reminders to Border Protestants of their vulnerability. It also seems clear from the reactions to Border murders that they have an effect beyond their numbers. The IRA murdering a loyalist in Glencairn [Belfast] does not lead to the sectarian geography being re-drawn; the murder of a Protestant young farmer in South Armagh often means the removal of a whole family and further territory falling into Nationalist hands’.

It is the dual-status of many of these Protestants and the demographic implications of the PIRA’s campaign along the border which has caused some unionist politicians to argue that the activities of republican paramilitaries were more of an exercise in ‘ethnic cleansing’ than in advancing any political agenda. Figure 9 draws these dynamics together by mapping change in Presbyterian congregations at the urban and rural district level against the deaths of Protestants and members of the British security services using a technique called kernel density smoothing. This creates a continuous surface layer from individual point events, giving points in closer proximity to one another greater weighting than those further apart. This gives a clearer measure of the intensity of deaths across space.

The map makes a number of points. Firstly it is clear that the deaths of Protestants and members of the British security services were heavily concentrated in particular parts of Northern Ireland, as indeed were all victims. The major concentrations were, of course, in Belfast to the east of the map and Derry/Londonderry in the north-west. There were also other clusters in towns such as Portadown, Armagh and Enniskillen. The last of these clusters was almost completely the result of just one incident: the PIRA’s bombing of the Remembrance Day service in the Fermanagh market town in November 1987.27 This is overlaid on the Presbyterian Church data aggregated to districts, which shows that the greatest falls in populations were in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. Within the latter, the number of Presbyterian families dropped by well over 50 percent over the three decades of conflict as the Protestant population of the city more generally declined during this period, moving out of the western (Cityside) bank to become almost exclusively located on the eastern (Waterside) shore of the River Foyle. The only exception to this rule now lies in the Protestant enclave of the Fountain, nestled by a corner of the city walls. The border regions of western Tyrone and south Armagh saw significant drops in the number of Presbyterian families. Spearman’s correlation of change in Presbyterian population and deaths returns a \( \rho \) value of .275. Certainly, Presbyterian populations fell in areas where violence occurred. However, these dynamics cannot be divorced from much wider demographic trends during the period. The collapse in Presbyterian congregations in parts of Belfast and the flourishing of churches beyond the city boundary is indicative of much wider processes of urban decline, doughnut effect and suburbanisation. Between 1971 and 2001, the population of the Belfast Urban Area fell by 50 percent from 417,000 to less than 277,000. Certainly some of the impetus for the movement was the Troubles and the concentration of conflict in particular parts of the city.28 But that decline seems less striking when we compare it with those of some northern British cities with which Belfast has most in common in a historical sense. Over the same thirty-year period, the population of Liverpool fell by 28 percent, Manchester by 38 percent and Glasgow by a whopping 55 percent. In this comparative light, Belfast’s demographic decline seems far less dramatic. Furthermore, if Presbyterian populations have declined along the border, which is undoubtedly the case, then at most the thirty years would appear to have only exacerbated long-term processes of religio-political realignment on the island. It is remarkable to consider that long before partition became a possibility, much less the knowledge of the actual form that partition would take, the three southern counties of Ulster to be excluded from Northern Ireland were already seeing declines in their active Presbyterian populations, while on the other hand, the six counties that remained part of the United kingdom all witnessed long-term and progressive increases.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has provided an initial exploration of a new dataset on active religious observance. The type, quality, temporal and spatial coverage of records available from Ireland’s major religious denominations varies greatly. However, as has been demonstrated here, the records of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland provide a remarkably granular and complete account of the demographic fortunes of the institution across the long-term. It has been noted that census returns are in some respects an unreliable indicator of religious identity, particularly in contexts where such identities are so closely woven into broader political antagonisms. Church records unquestionably provide a more consistent measure of identification and this is reflected in comparison of the census and Church material.

At a substantive level, analysis has shown that change in the Presbyterian population is probably better explained by longer-term demographic processes than by shorter-term political developments. The Presbyterian population is, as is the Protestant population more generally, retreating from the Irish border. However, it is a long-term retreat not a short-term reaction, which appears to have started in 1871 rather than 1971.
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* Estimated for both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland area
† Estimated for the Republic of Ireland area only

**Figure 5: Total Presbyterians (census) and Presbyterian families**

* Estimated for both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland area
† Estimated for the Republic of Ireland area only

**Figure 6: Total Presbyterians (census) and Presbyterian families in the Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland areas**
* Estimated for both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland area
† Estimated for the Republic of Ireland area only

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