

## Does Religion Still Determine Ethnicity & Identity in Ireland?

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Ethnicity has been linked with religion in Ireland for centuries and continues to be connected even today. The identity of the nation of Ireland was and still is a Catholic one. Whereas religion was a true synonym for ethnicity for much of Ireland's Christian history, it has now evolved into being a determinant of a complex Irish identity rather than the Irish identity itself. In this way, a sense of Irishness has changed over time. Ireland was a homogenous society for so long with no outsiders, and everyone was an Irish Catholic. Today, many still identify as Irish Catholic, but this is one piece of the bigger puzzle of Irish identity. Religion, specifically Catholicism, has a rich history in Ireland and will always have a role in determining ethnic identity, but like many aspects of Irish culture and society today, Irish identity has evolved to be more inclusive and fitting for all of Ireland's people.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online, ethnicity is defined as the "status in respect of membership of a group regarded as ultimately of common descent, or having a common national or cultural tradition" (*OED*). So, how is the common Irish cultural and national identity defined? Well, the "Irish identity is a complex concept that is ingrained in colonial/post-colonial narratives and struggles for national independence" (Considine 655), but the distinction between the Irish and the others (anyone who could not be classified under the umbrella as Irish) began as a distinction between Native Irish (Gaels) and Anglo-Normans. The Normans invaded Ireland in the twelfth century and established their presence in Ireland from that point onwards. The true Irish, the Gaels, were descendants of those who were in Ireland

before the Norman invasion and had claims to legitimate Irish ancestry. The Anglo-Normans were descendants of Norman invaders in Ireland from the twelfth century. This twofold distinction changed, however, in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the English saw Ireland as a place that needed to be conquered since Catholic Ireland proved to be a threat to them. Ireland was a colony to England, and “the sporadic imposition of Protestantism was bound up not only with the military conquest of Gaelic Ireland but also with the marginalization of the Old English nobility and gentry” (McBride 299). According to the English, Ireland was certainly not equal in status and needed to remain loyal to the Crown and the Church of England. As a result, the distinction morphed into a differentiation between Catholics and Protestants which was synonymous with Irish and English respectively. Because this new class of Protestant elites arrived in Ireland, the Anglo-Normans were lowered to be known as the Old English and belonged to the greater denominator of Irish, meaning Catholic. It was “during the eighteenth century, [that] many Protestants in Ireland continued to see themselves ... as a ‘sort of colonial garrison to keep the natives [Gaels] in subjection’” (McBride 302), which emphasizes that the Protestants were definitely not Irish by nature – they were English. The Irish are the natives, and the Protestant outsiders were in Ireland to keep the Irish Catholics in line without the power that an independent Ireland would provide. Throughout the late 1700s and early 1800s, “Catholicism was and remained deeply embedded among the vast majority of the Irish population” (Barr & O Corrain 70), despite English attempts to convert the Irish to Protestantism.

As illustrated within this historical twofold separation between Irish and the others, it is evident that ethnicity “has become increasingly multidimensional, as well as a site of contestation and struggle” (Considine 655) in Ireland because of the highly religious (Catholic)

aspect. In fact, “the single most striking feature of Irish people is surely their obstinate religion” (McBride 295). Catholicism had proved to persevere throughout various English occupations, but it also faced its problems. In the mid-eighteenth century, there were a lot of Irish priests who were being educated on the mainland of Europe and dispersed to countries around Europe. This led to a shortage of priests in Ireland, but Ireland’s Catholic ethnic identity was solidified throughout this trying time in the mid-1800s. Even though “the Catholic hierarchy [in Ireland] did not have the personnel to provide, let alone impose, their preferred forms across the island” (Barr & O Corrain 71), Ireland maintained its strong Catholic identity. The Protestant Ascendency of the eighteenth century presented another difficult time for Catholicism in Ireland, but the Catholic Church re-emerged underground “in direct opposition to the regime” (McBride 304) after this. Even among these times of struggle without having the manpower needed to run the Catholic Church in Ireland, the Irish people fought and remained Catholic as a majority and in their identity despite conversion efforts by the Church of Ireland and other Protestant sects. You could knock the Irish Catholics down, but because Catholicism was so central to the Irish ethnicity in terms of their culture, their personal beliefs, and how they lived their lives, the Catholic Church maintained a prominent role in Ireland, albeit sometimes secretly. These are instances of how the Irish ethnic identity was unmistakably a Catholic one regardless of attempts to eradicate the majority religion of the Irish people. It is because of this persistence of Catholicism as the pinnacle of Irish identity that those who were not aligned with the Catholic Church were not considered to be of Irish ethnicity.

Despite Catholicism’s domination of Irish identity and the fact that a majority of the ethnically Irish were Catholic, there was and is such a thing as an Irish Protestant. They are not

the quintessential person that one would consider when thinking about Ireland historically, but they are a minority in Ireland. An Irish Protestant is a person of Irish descent who is Protestant, more importantly non-Catholic. Even though their roots may be Irish, they are likely loyal to England and believe in the English historical position of authority over Ireland. Protestantism was not compatible with Irish ethnic affiliation because “during the early modern period, Irish people did not, with relatively few exceptions become Protestant; instead Protestant people were imported to Ireland, on a scale with no obvious contemporary European parallels” (McBride 296). Their religious affiliation, Protestantism, was dominant over their national and cultural heritage because it was not seen as compatible with Irish ethnicity. This reiterates how Irish ethnicity in Ireland (which was defined by Catholicism) was the singular determinant of Irish identity. Still today, the Republic of Ireland is majority Catholic despite the presence of Protestantism and many other religions. These same sentiments exist by some people who feel that the Irish Protestant is not truly Irish at all.

There are many reasons why Catholicism cemented its place in Irish identity and why it has continued to dominate the definition of Irish ethnicity for so long. The Catholic Church’s “educational and welfare provision ensure[d] its extraordinary dominance in independent Ireland” (McBride 305). Catholicism was more than just a religion where people went to mass on Sundays and forgot about it for the rest of the week. The Catholic Church played a huge role in education (as Irish schools were Catholic), the welfare of the people, politics, and Ireland’s independence. During the fight for the creation of the free state, “the identification of and national political identity, first harnessed by Daniel O’Connell, strengthened during the various efforts to end the Union and emerged triumphant in independent Ireland” (Barr and O Corrain

75). These attitudes became even stronger for many because the Irish wanted to be given the respect that they deserved as an independent, majority Catholic nation free from the grip of the Protestant Crown of Britain. Catholicism was the Church and state of Ireland, and “[it] was further embedded in Irish nationhood after the Treaty of 1922, in which the Irish Free State was instituted” (Considine 656). Ireland’s push towards independence “was different because Catholicism was a key component in the struggle for political independence and in the subsequent state-building project” (Barr and O Corrain 75). The legacy of Catholicism as Irish ethnicity goes even further in “the Constitution of 1937 [when it was] declared that the State recognizes the special position of Catholicism as the guardian of the nation professed by the great majority of its citizens” (Considine 656). In Ireland, “the political culture had a pronounced Catholic ethos [that] was inevitable given educational formation of successive generations of Irish elites in politics, business, and public service, and an extraordinary level of religious homogeneity” (Barr & O Corrain 78).

The role of Catholicism as a definition of Irish ethnicity was absolute for so long, but when did the shift away from this happen? After the creation of the free state and “during the first fifty years of independence, both Church and state leaders, irrespective of political party, shared a desire to develop the country to a philosophy of Catholic nationalism” (Barr & O Corrain 78). This solely Catholic identity in Ireland helped create the free state and sustain it for another fifty years. As the 1970s approached, there was a movement towards focusing on economic growth rather than the role of religion in Irish government. This resulted in a “decline in the authority and pre-eminent position of the Catholic Church, the rise of secularism, and efforts to dismantle legislative and constitutional support for a Catholic ethos [that] can be traced

back to the early 1960s” (Barr & O Corrain 75). This was not the end of the Catholic identity of Ireland, however, and “although identification with Catholicism and religious practice in Ireland remained atypically high, survey evidence since the 1970s has revealed dramatic changes in the nature of being Catholic” (Barr & O Corrain 75). Thus, Ireland’s Catholic identity defined by Irish ethnicity was shifting and better fitting the needs of a growing free state. As the Irish entered the twentieth century, religion began to be a huge point of contention in terms of Church, state and education in Ireland. People pushed back against the Church’s “special position” in government, and “Irish Catholicism was less secure than it appeared in the rising tide of secularism” (Barr & O Corrain 81).

The creation of the Irish free state was huge in determining what modern Irish life looks like today and what shapes Irish identity. There is still this notion of a complex identity in Ireland determined by ethnicity and religion, but “the newest challenges to Irish identity do not come from geneticists questioning the origins of the ‘Irish race’, but rather ‘the incorporation of thousands of foreign nationals who now live, work, and go to school in Ireland’” (Considine 655). Many people still identify as Irish Catholic, “despite the dramatic failure of leadership and the loss of power, credibility and moral authority of the institutional Church - 84.2 percent described themselves as Catholic in the 2011 census [which] suggests that Catholicism remains an integral, if difficult to define, aspect of Irish identity” (Barr & O Corrain 76). Catholicism is not the Church and the state as it has been for so long in Ireland. When trying to determine the makeup of a modern Irish identity, there must be a “[shift] in our attention to the various characteristics of Irish identity, [so that] we can see how the complexities of national identity become even more glaring” (Considine 655). There is no denying that Catholicism’s role as

Ireland's identity and ethnicity has transformed, but from evidence of the census and Ireland's Catholic past, religion still determines Irish identity today. It is a part of the puzzle of ethnicity and identity, not the whole picture as it had been for so long. Further, there has also been a decrease in the percentage of people in Ireland who identify as Catholic due greatly in part to the diversification of Ireland. Today, Ireland is no longer a population of solely Irish people with only those of Irish ethnicity having legitimate claims to the Irish identity. Irish people are a lot more mobile and open to change than has been the case historically. They still have that sentimental attachment to home, but it is not as tied up in the religious aspect.

Religion will always be a part of ethnicity and identity in Ireland because Catholicism has such a rich history there, but "as an institution, the Catholic Church currently labors under the challenges of coping with the past and salvaging the precarious position to find a relevant role in contemporary Ireland" (Barr & O Corrain 86). Today's difference is the change over time to incorporate more aspects of the Irish people in determining ethnicity – a sense of evolution into what modern Irish identity is. It does not mean solely religion, and it does not necessarily mean that one has Irish ancestry. This is a good thing, and it does not take away the importance of religion for individuals and its role in Ireland as a whole. Religion, specifically Catholicism, continues to be a huge aspect of many Irish people's lives, but it has dwindled in its prominence in determining one's ethnic identity. This has allowed for religion to be associated with identity (however big that role is for Irish individuals and on the larger scale of Ireland as a whole) as one of the many factors of the complex, evolving Irish ethnic identity. Irishness has to accommodate the element of change that is inevitable and crucial in the malleable definition of what the Irish identity is for such a diverse population.





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