

Zeitschrift: Traverse : Zeitschrift für Geschichte = Revue d'histoire
Herausgeber: [s.n.]
Band: 7 (2000)
Heft: 3

Artikel: National religion and christian faith in Northern Ireland : the power of the transcendent in Northern Irish politics
Autor: Morrow, Duncan
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-19453>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 18.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

NATIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIAN FAITH IN NORTHERN IRELAND

THE POWER OF THE TRANSCENDENT IN NORTHERN IRISH POLITICS

DUNCAN MORROW

RELIGION AND TRANSCENDENCE IN POLITICS

To fully grasp the nature of religion in Northern Ireland, it is essential to abandon the presumption of the enlightenment that religion is primarily a set of codified philosophical beliefs. Religion is more comprehensively understood as that which binds together and orders the whole of culture, the transcendent reality from which all things come and to which all things return. Religion, from the Latin *religio* meaning bind together, always stakes its claim to authority in the lives of the faithful. This more holistic understanding allows us to posit the continuation of the religious in the form of the binding and transcendent in spite of the relative decline or even rejection of any idea of the divine. Religion, in other words, remains critical even when it is not formally recognised by secular society as such. A core component of any social understanding of the religious derives from all of the ways in which the transcendent creates, structures and maintains the lives of individuals and communities.¹

Political societies are societies because they adhere to some common point of reference whose authority is decisive. Without transcendence, claims to power are ultimately self-referential and lacking the capacity to bind the actions of others except by the overt and constant application of force. The precise locus of that transcendence may vary but, as Hobbes knew, without some sovereign law-giver, the very equality of human beings risks a descent into the war of all against all.²

Religious wars, as transcendent concerns, entail the risk of being wars about everything, where every murder and sacrifice is justified by the higher cause they serve. Europe itself emerged in the shadow of the Crusades and military action against heresy; anti-Semitism took root in a religious justification and the reformation and counter-reformation descended into bloody warfare. After the English, American and French Revolutions there was no real prospect of recovery for the medieval notion of the divine right of kings in Western Europe. But the claims to power of the revolutionaries were ultimately no less absolute than those of the divinely ordained. While consciously abolishing religious tran- ■ 33

scendence, the legitimacy of the revolutions still depended on the successful establishment of an alternative, albeit in a more restricted and overtly political realm. Thus, «We, the people» was the ultimate divine ordinance in America while «liberty, equality and fraternity» was the sacred justification for regicide in France.

Even liberal democracies, with their point of reference in majority consent, require the legitimacy of this minimal transcendent and its sacred mantle. It is in the name of the people that the state claims its monopoly of violence and the law makes its sacred claim on the obedience of all citizens. It is transcendence which enables states to act with force against independent sources of violence and to maintain the internal order of communities and societies. By the mid-19th century these democratic political movement had crystallised into three broad strands – the universal ideologies of liberalism and socialism and the potent power of competing nationalisms. By the middle of the 20th century it was clear that secularism had not abolished the violent and oppressive edge of pre-enlightenment Christianity but re-ordered and harnessed it to an unknown level of technical sophistication.

Through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Nuremberg trials after World War II, the victor powers and their allies identified crimes against humanity of such gravity that they were held to override the authority even of independent states, and to make a universal claim on the adherence of every person at all times. While secular liberals and religious adherents may quarrel violently about the source of the transcendent, Dostoevsky is surely right that the abolition of the transcendent makes everything possible. And it remains true that the transcendent itself is ultimately a claim of unique righteousness in the use of violence. As René Girard points out, the substance of the sacred is ultimately violence.³ The point of greatest danger, therefore, is where one claim to transcendent authority comes into conflict with another.

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN IRELAND BEFORE 1920

Christian divisions became pivotal to Irish politics through their relationship to the spread of British power in Ireland. The reformation left England as the largest Protestant state in Europe, openly hostile to Catholic and especially Spanish power. In this context, Catholic Ireland was regarded as a potential source of strategic threat to Britain and in the course of the 16th and 17th century was brought under the domination of the crown. Only in the north and north-east of the island was political domination accompanied by mass settle-

34 ■ ment.⁴ As a result, the colonial experience was substantively different in these

areas, all of which are within the province of Ulster, than was experienced elsewhere. In identifying religious affiliation with political loyalty, the expansion of British control created an explicit identity between the transcendent political claims of the state and the theological demands of Protestantism. The culmination of this identification came in the 18th century when laws defining social and economic mobility were enacted along strictly denominational lines and the Catholic priesthood was officially outlawed.

Mass political mobilisation in 19th century Ireland took as its point of reference the repeal or defence of anti-Catholic legislation. This division was particularly important in the mixed and contested districts of Ulster, where religious, economic and political rivalries were most acute. Whereas socialism promised to integrate the working classes of Manchester, economic tensions between the working classes in Belfast reproduced the sectarian hostilities of the countryside, and politics polarised along a Catholic/Protestant axis.⁵

When Catholic Emancipation was begrudgingly granted by Westminster in 1829, it transformed the social position of the Roman Catholic Church. As the largest institution in Ireland independent of the state, Church interests and the material advancement of Catholics in Ireland often coincided. This was particularly true in the critical area of education, where the Church successfully campaigned for denominational schools under clerical control. In a world in which material and social progress was determined by literacy and access to markets, denominational education both secured the participation of Catholics and fostered a sense of national and moral distinctiveness. By the late 19th century, formal Church involvement had been extended to include higher education and government support for a national seminary at Maynooth. The Church was often the critical institutional mediator between a segregated and increasingly Nationalist populace and the British state. For Protestant agitators in the North, this was definitive proof, if such were needed, that Irish nationalism and Catholic authoritarianism were effectively identical.⁶

When, in 1885, the British Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone proposed to devolve power to an Irish Home Rule Parliament in Dublin, he thus crystallised a long latent opposition coalition of active imperialists, who opposed any dilution of the unitary Empire, militant religious Protestants who feared the rise of Catholic power and industrialists who feared exclusion from the markets of the Empire. Under the slogan «Home Rule is Rome Rule», this coalition successfully mobilised the overwhelming majority of Protestants in Ireland in opposition to the key policy of the Irish Catholic Party at Westminster. Irish nationalism was now an almost entirely Catholic demand while British Unionism was widely regarded as the Protestant creed. When, after World War One, the British faced growing insurrection in much of Ireland, they were also faced

with potential unrest from Unionists in the north-east if they conceded Irish independence. As a result, Home Rule was devolved separately to the north-eastern Six Counties which had a two-thirds Protestant majority, and the remainder of the island, which was over 90% Roman Catholic.

NORTHERN IRELAND AND DEMOCRACY AFTER 1920

Only the northern element of devolution took root in 1920, coming into existence as Northern Ireland, a self-governing territory within the United Kingdom. Religion was by turns both an overt and a covert dimension of Northern Irish society.⁷ While the overt axis of politics was constitutional, setting a British constitutional settlement against an Irish one, the critical social axis explaining political solidarity was religious tradition. While the constitutional Act of the new devolved Northern Ireland explicitly outlawed religious discrimination, the political division between Unionism and Irish nationalism reflected a deep denominational cleft. Formally, religion played no role in the membership of political parties yet the backbone of the Ulster Unionist Council was in the exclusively Protestant Orange Order. Over 50 years of political supremacy, no Roman Catholic was selected as a candidate for the governing Unionist Party. Organisationally and electorally, post-partition Nationalism was an overwhelmingly Catholic phenomenon. Irish Republicanism, which maintained its formal commitment to the non-denominational ideals of the 18th century enlightenment, made even less inroads into Protestantism, largely because of its commitment to the use of violence in opposing the British presence in Ireland. Only in the area of education was segregation on religious lines overt. And even here, Catholic schools were parallel to “state” schools rather than to officially Protestant institutions.

This profound intertwining of the ecclesiastical and the political meant that choices on political grounds often had a denominational consequence. Furthermore, there was no clear mechanism to separate the denominational preferences of the respective religious communities from the political goals of the parties. Party politics were not competitions between different coalitions within the state, but proxy referenda on the legitimacy of the state itself. “Democratic” institutions and rituals evolved in contexts where border disputes and inter-communal rivalries do not threaten the fundamental sovereignty of the state are not designed to confront the paradox of treating some “equal citizens” as a systematic threat to the state. In Northern Ireland, continued anxiety about the constitution could be relied upon to force voters to vote on national rather than

The Unionist Party could thus expect to win majorities in perpetuity, answerable to the demands and insecurities of the Protestant electorate alone and yet still claim the right to govern on behalf of all. In a context where electoral outcomes are all but assured through the impenetrable boundaries of ethnic and religious identification, the identification of the will of the majority with democratic legitimacy is both beguilingly simple and deeply problematic. The majority electoral system itself now acted as a bulwark which justified and sanctified the monopolisation of the levers of power not only within one confessional group but also the use of these instruments against others of another confessional group where that was deemed necessary by the majority.⁸

Drawing on the primary claim of representative democracy, that elected parliaments make transcendent law, Unionists asserted that criminal violence was everything which confronted the authority of the legitimately established state. Nationalist hostility to the state, whether through non-cooperation or active violence, was thus equated with an anti-democratic refusal to accept legitimate authority. Given that Irish Nationalism was founded on a claim that, to a greater or lesser extent, Northern Ireland was illegitimate, it was but a short step to a policy of permanent vigilance against an anti-democratic internal minority.

Liberal principles, Protestant claims and possession of the means of political power were conflated to create a powerful doctrine of right which justified all necessary action to protect the state. By implication, no state action was ever illegitimate, no matter how violent, and no active response was ever defensive. In Northern Ireland, the doctrine of democratic legitimacy itself acted to prevent Unionists accepting any responsibility for the spiral of inter-communal resentment that was built in to the construction of the state. Within the Catholic community, the legitimacy of the state was never wholly accepted. Even among the majority who opposed the use of force to confront the state, the simple equation of the state with legitimacy and hence with the right to criminalise others was always ambiguous. Hence even those Catholics who sought evolutionary change rather than the overthrow of the state found themselves suspecting and suspected by the institutions of the state. Common to both Unionism and Nationalism was a pervasive sense that the origins of inter-communal violence lay outside the community. Church rivalry had both contributed to the birth and evolution of this presumption and continued to structure Northern Irish society in such a way that both Nationalism and Unionism were understood by their adherents to be moral as much as political imperatives.⁹

RELIGION AND THE STRUCTURE OF NORTHERN IRISH SOCIETY

Studies of religion in Northern Ireland focus overwhelmingly on the role of the Churches in shaping and supporting inter-communal political divisions. Less attention has been paid to the degree to which Church-centred structures co-exist and compete with the claims of militant nationalism, giving rise to secular and Christian dimensions of the same social phenomena. What is sometimes difficult to discern is the point at which one blends into the other and the way in which the presence of one supports, modifies or directs the other. The causality certainly runs in both directions: Christianity has structured and ideologised secular communities and secular ideologies have been built on the divisions of Christianity.

Organised Christianity is an essential component of the myths, rituals, structures and moral laws of Northern Irish society, the principle means by which Benedict Anderson's famous "imagined community" is translated into something more tangible and experiential. This influence is visibly apparent in the close parallels between political allegiance and religious background. Churches provide a structured context for continuous narrative and community building whose central importance is underlined when the context is one of violent hostility between peoples, where a target is chosen and accepted on a religious or political basis. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Christianity has been central to the development of communal narrative and ideology in Northern Ireland.

After the reformation, Catholicism, Calvinism and Anglicanism all made mutually exclusive claims to the status of "one true Church" and legitimised a monopoly on political authority, claims which were always likely to create major political difficulties where there was no territorial separation in their spheres of pre-eminence. In the north of Ireland three potentially exclusive versions of Christianity competed within a social context of colonial expansion and political hostility.

In spite of their political pre-eminence, Ulster Protestants felt threatened by the twin threat of Catholic advance and abandonment by their political support structures in Britain. In the context of a weak state, Protestantism functioned to create a degree of local ideological autonomy for a people under siege. By the early 20th century, the effects of ultramontanistism, and especially the *Ne temere* decree prescribing that all children of a mixed marriage should be brought up as Catholics, reinforced an already entrenched sense that rule by a Catholic majority meant rule by the Papacy itself. «Home Rule is Rome Rule» was a potent and dynamic slogan. The late 19th century coincided with the rise of the exclusively Protestant Orange Order to a central political position complete with its annual

38 ■ rituals and full cultural sub-structure. The government of the newly established

Northern Ireland declared Orange high days into public holidays, and institutionalised Protestant self-organisation as a central element in the defence of the state.¹⁰ When the de Valera Government in the Irish Free State emphasised the distinctive Catholic quality to Irish society in the 1930s, the importance of Protestantism as the critical guarantor of difference in the North was merely underlined. The explicit concern of the Unionist Party in government was to create a “Protestant Parliament for a Protestant People”.

By the 1960s, public reference to “popery” was on the decline even in Northern Ireland. The effects of the Second Vatican Council were seized on by both Protestants and Catholics in Ireland who sought ecumenical dialogue and reform. This in itself stimulated the rise to public prominence of the Reverend Ian Paisley on the back of a vociferous and active opposition to ecumenical dialogue. For Paisley and his Free Presbyterian Church, the Protestant foundations of Northern Ireland were the critical touchstones of their opposition to all things Irish or Nationalist. Behind every move towards ecumenism or cross-community rapprochement, Paisley saw the insatiable authoritarianism of Roman Catholicism. Critically, theological opposition to political change was the ideological touchstone of a new populist coalition which attracted voters and supporters among many with only weak Church connections.

Theology has played a less prominent role in the political ideology of Irish nationalism in the 20th century. Indeed many Catholics seeking parallels with Protestant ideology find that it is an entirely Protestant obsession. Certainly, after emancipation in 1829, Irish Catholics were no longer concerned that the state would seriously attempt to subvert their religious faith and turned their critical attention on the implications of Protestant political power for civic equality. Catholicism was therefore less prominent in the articulation of political demands than in acting as a protective structural rampart behind which a society which was distinctively separate from that of Britishness and effectively of Protestants was constructed. This was especially true in the area of education where Catholic education became the *sine qua non* of every Nationalist child but it was also critical to Catholic self-organisation at community and social level. Catholic Churches everywhere fostered Gaelic Games, despite their expressly anti-British character, and refused communion to Protestants. Thus although political demands were not made in terms of Catholicism, they were made instead by those organically linked together through the Catholic Church.¹¹ But Christianity has had a more powerful and important effect than even these social phenomena. Critically, it has shaped the self-perception of both Unionism and nationalism of themselves as “the moral community”. Running deep through all shades of Northern Irish politics is an unshakeable perspective of victimhood, reinforced over many years by repeated funerals and graveside orations. ■ 39

Through centuries of inter-communal violence, political communities have emerged in the shadow of chaplaincy to threat, a chaplaincy provided by confessionally divided and mutually hostile Churches.

Irish nationalism has long understood its demands in moral terms. The political marginalisation of Catholics within the British Empire, reinforced in the case of Ireland by the experience of famine and emigration, shaped an ideology whose claims were understood from within as the claims of divine justice. The collapse of the imperial idea in the 20th century and the widespread presumption of its moral bankruptcy throughout Africa and Asia have reinforced this perspective from outside. It is not surprising, therefore, that Irish Republicans have understood their conflict with the British state as a moral crusade.¹² Drawing on a profoundly sacrificial reading of Catholicism, Patrick Pearse, the leading ideologist of radical Irish Republicanism in the early 20th century sought blood sacrifice as the guarantor of the sacred quality of Irish resistance. His wish was granted in 1916 when he was shot by the British for his part in the Easter Rising of 1916. 65 years later, the death of ten IRA hunger strikers in 1981 was deliberately and widely compared with the crucifixion of Christ.¹³ Although liberation theology has had only a marginal effect on the orthodoxy of the Catholic hierarchy, its identification of the people of God with the most marginal in society, in the case of Northern Ireland the Catholic working class chimes closely with the fundamental perceptions of Nationalists of all shades in Ireland.

Although the climate of world opinion has moved sharply against those perceived to rely on imperial claims to power, Unionism too has comforted and understood its predicament in moral terms. Drawing deeply on the presumption that Protestantism represents a liberation from Vatican authoritarianism, Unionism has proclaimed the superiority of Protestant liberty. This alone has secured the Paisleyite understanding of Protestant Ulster as the people of God, reverberating as it does through larger Protestant Churches and the Orange Order.¹⁴ But even for those Unionist uncomfortable with such simple identifications, the creation of Northern Ireland in 1920 is understood as an act of democratic self-defence, threatened by Catholic encroachment and Republican terror. The defence of Northern Ireland against these threats sets a legitimate and democratic state against a violent and anti-democratic opponent. Terror is thus primarily a Nationalist phenomenon against which the dominant institution of Irish nationalism, the Roman Catholic Church, refuses to act. No matter what the shortcomings of Unionist domination of Northern Ireland, the descent into terrorism makes the defence of Northern Ireland and its institutions a matter of moral importance.

The morally absolute claims of each cause are the point at which the religious
40 ■ and the political converge into a dangerously violent concoction. Christian

antagonisms were useful to political power precisely because of the absolute quality of their claims to loyalty and defence. In modern political terms, the assertion of righteousness is argued through the vehicles of debates around justice and democracy. The critical pivot of the ecclesiastical and the political is the transcendent moral claim made in both to the righteousness of the cause. This transcendence depends less on a conviction that the self is righteous than on a solidarity around the experience that the other is evil, although there is a necessary, if paradoxical relationship between the two. In Northern Ireland, both communities are therefore profoundly dependent on each other as the mutually central points of internal unity for each other. The historic theological hostility of Christian Churches to one another therefore converges with secular experience to create a conflict whose ultimate justification is sacred. Any war, in this setting, is “always already” a just war for its combatants. It is also effectively impossible to distinguish whether violence is committed in the name of secular nationalism or Christian denomination, as one has intimately shaped the other. Whatever the conscious motivation, the act remains religious. More profoundly, the inheritance of Christianity in a post-Christian Nationalist setting may be of a religious conflict stripped of the controlling elements central to Christian teaching.

PARADOXES OF THE RELIGIOUS IN IRELAND

Unsurprisingly, then, Northern Ireland has become a by-word for religious conflict throughout the Western world. The fact that Christian Churches have become entangled in political conflict is inescapable. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the continued use of terms such as Catholic and Protestant is also deeply diversionary. By using Church-based labels, both the British and Irish political authorities face considerably less danger to their own political core than would be the case if the labels “British” and “Irish” were applied to the parties with consistency. What distance has been gained by the British and Irish governments in relation to their potential clients in Northern Ireland has been won by treating their predicament as a matter about which the wider British and Irish communities know little. In the 21st century, religious denomination is no longer a religious obligation, but defence of co-nationals in distress is a much more potent one.

The most violent people in Northern Ireland are those who attribute transcendent importance to the prosecution of the national cause, combining in one the overtly religious with the transcendent claims of nation. In spite of Paisleyism and Republican liberationism, much of the most active opposition to this kind ■ 41

of identification has come from within the Churches. The vast majority of Church leaders have seen it as their paramount task to maintain order, to call for reconciliation and to demand that their flocks forego revenge. This has often left them into a complex position of calling for peace while defending the boundaries of their Church from impure invasion.¹⁵ The fundamental structures of Catholic and Protestant Churches predetermine that each will exclude each other from the core rites of the confession. Thus Catholic communion remains a forbidden fruit for believing Protestants and many Protestants refuse to share worship with Catholics for fear of suggesting that the two are theologically equivalent. This apparent contradiction has led still others into new inter-Church and ecumenical ventures which pose both a serious theological challenge to the traditional Church structures and provide a visible refusal of the absolutist boundaries of confession and nation.

The very fact that this movement has continued in the face of 30 years of direct political violence suggests that what Christianity “is” depends on the theology of state and nation which the Churches adopt. What Northern Ireland undoubtedly shows is that where religious confession is raised to an issue of state, it has the effect of combining the transcendent claims of nation and Church. The religious claims of doctrine are combined with the claims to the political authority of the armed state. Alternatively, there is a sense in which Christianity is potentially the vehicle through which the absolute claims of nationalism are subordinated to other concerns and commitments. Northern Ireland is important because it reveals both sides of this equation at once. In the 20th century, both Church and state in Britain and Ireland have been confronted with the logical consequences of their commitment to defending their own transcendent claims with force and have drawn back. The question at the turn of the next century is whether the experience of conflict in the shadow of religious claims will give way to a renewed fight to the death or lead to a new breakthrough which shapes politics on the basis of the end of the absolute claims of the old religions.

Notes

- 1 This thinking is drawn from the important work of René Girard especially *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore 1972 and *Things hidden since the foundation of the world*, London 1987.
- 2 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, London 1971, XIII, 183–189.
- 3 Girard, *Violence* (cf. note 1), 45.
- 4 Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland*, London 1987, 12–13.
- 5 K. Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland since 1800*, Hemel 1999. Also Frank Wright, *Two Lands on One Soil*, Dublin 1996.
- 6 Wright (cf. note 5), chapters 3 and 4.

- 7 Frank Wright, *Northern Ireland: a comparative analysis*, Dublin 1987, 151.
 8 Wright (cf. note 7), 274–275.
 9 Duncan Morrow, «Violence and the Sacred in Northern Ireland», *Contagion 2* (1995), 145–164.
 10 Neil Jarman, *Material Conflicts*, Oxford 1997, 163–170.
 11 Duncan Morrow, *The Churches and Inter-community Relationships*, Coleraine 1994.
 12 Des Wilson, *An End to Silence*, Cork 1987.
 13 See the *Andersonstown News*, 9/5/1981, 1.
 14 This is discussed at length in Steve Bruce, *God Save Ulster*, Oxford 1986.
 15 Duncan Morrow, *It's not everyone you could tell that to*, Belfast 1997, 10–12.

ABSTRACT

NATIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIAN FAITH IN NORTHERN IRELAND. THE POWER OF THE TRANSCENDENT IN NORTHERN IRISH POLITICS

Conflict in Northern Ireland has always had a strong religious dimension. The anti-Roman Catholic basis of the British state until 1829 made Catholic Emancipation the first ideological theme of Irish nationalism. Thereafter, the Catholic Church was often only agency able to mediate between the British and Northern Irish authorities and the Catholic laity. The Protestant Churches cooperated closely with the state itself. The importance of protestantism was less as a locus of independent institutions than ideological, providing a sustainable base of opposition to Irish unity under Catholic domination.

Political ideologies were overwhelmingly identified with communities of one confession or another and even in an age of secularisation, religious tradition still defines the boundaries of national identity. The transcendent claims of Christianity and nationalism were fused and the boundary between the two blurred. The decline of formal church attendance may not therefore mean the end of religious element in Northern Irish politics. Rather, nationalism is understood as making religious demands on its adherents and the conflict itself is understood as sacred.

This article explores the interconnection between Christianity, nationalism and the sacred in Northern Ireland since 1920.