



Research Update

Driven to disaffection: Religious Independents in Northern Ireland

By Ian McAllister

One of the most important changes that has occurred in Northern Ireland society over the past three decades has been the growth in the proportion of people who do not see themselves as affiliated with any religion. In the 2001 census, 13.9% described themselves as either having no religion or refused to state a religion, compared to just 2% in the 1961 census. In the most recent **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey**, conducted in 2004, 11.5% described themselves as religious 'independents'.

While this change is in line with the patterns found in other countries, what makes the Northern Ireland case exceptional is the central place of religion within civil society. Who are the people who regard themselves as secular, and what are their religious origins? What



explains their move away from a formal religious commitment, and what are the long-term political implications? This Research Update examines trends in the religious demography of Northern Ireland using a pooled dataset, combining the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes surveys (1989-1996) the 1998 Northern Ireland Referendum and Election survey, the 2003 Northern Ireland Election study and the Northern Ireland Life and Times surveys (1998-2004).

Trends in religious affiliation

Patterns of religious affiliation over time show that while the large majority of the population continue

to identify with one of the main religious denominations, a small group of non-affiliated individuals has emerged in recent years. Changes in the wording of the census question on religion make it difficult to trace the growth of this secular group with any precision, but charting its progress in census as well as survey data provides a reasonably accurate estimate of its growth and size.

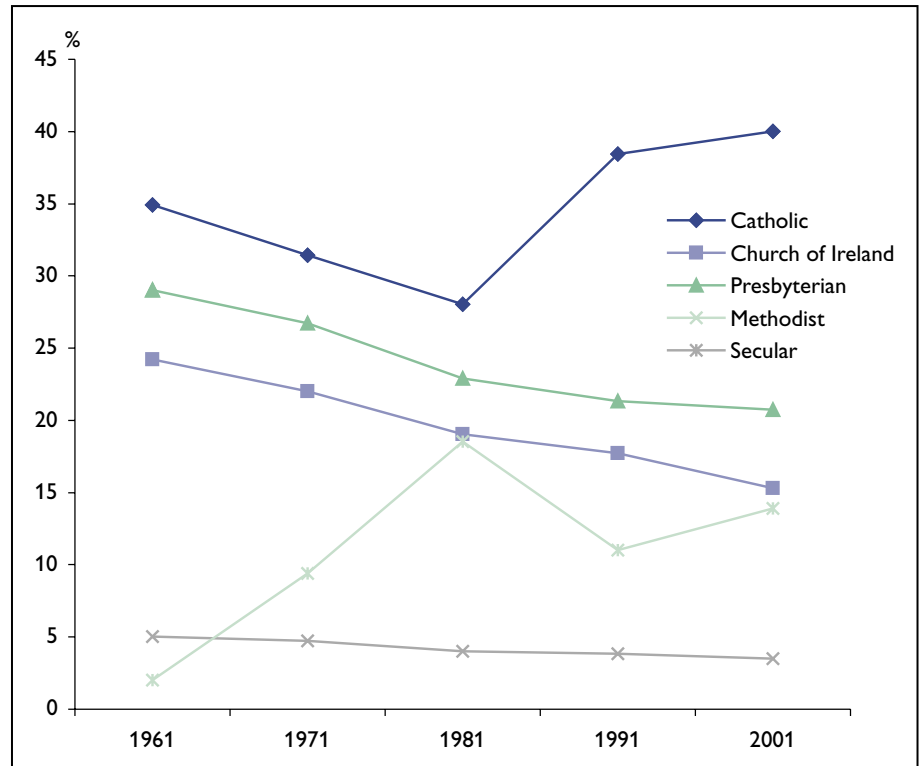
The 1951 census recorded only 221 freethinkers and 64 atheists, amounting to 0.02% of the total population. In addition, a further 5,865 (or 0.4%) did not state their religion. Since then, there has been a large increase in the proportion not providing a religion in the

census, in line with international trends. However, at least part of this increase is attributable to the fact that, from the 1971 census onwards, the religion question has been voluntary.

The change from a compulsory to a voluntary religion question resulted in the 'not stated' proportion of the population rising from 2.0% of the population in 1961 to 9.4% in 1971 (see Figure 1). In the 1981 census, this proportion rose yet again, to 18.5% of the population. However, with the introduction of a separate category for those with no religion in the 1991 census, the 'not stated' proportion declined to 7.3%, as compared to a further 3.7% who specifically claimed no religious identification - a total of 11%. Hitherto, this increase in the 'not stated' religion category has been attributed to the voluntary nature of the question, but clearly many of them simply did not see themselves as having a religion.

The census trends suggest two conclusions. First, the large increase in the 'not stated' category in 1981 was substantially a consequence of Catholics rather than Protestants refusing to state their religion. Second, once the particular circumstances of the 1981 census are removed from the trend, the increase in the size of the secular group has been almost exclusively at the expense of the main Protestant churches. Thus, by 2001,

Figure 1: Religious affiliation, 1961-2001 Censuses



Sources: 1961-91: Northern Ireland Yearbook, various dates; 2001: www.nisra.gov.uk/census/start.html

Figure 2: Religious affiliation 1989-2004

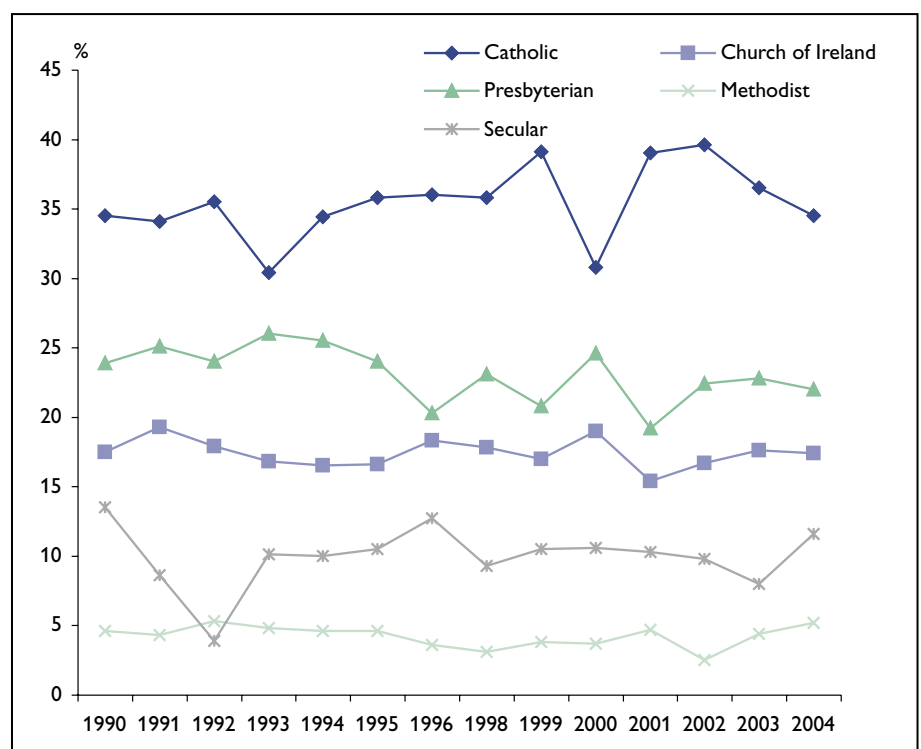
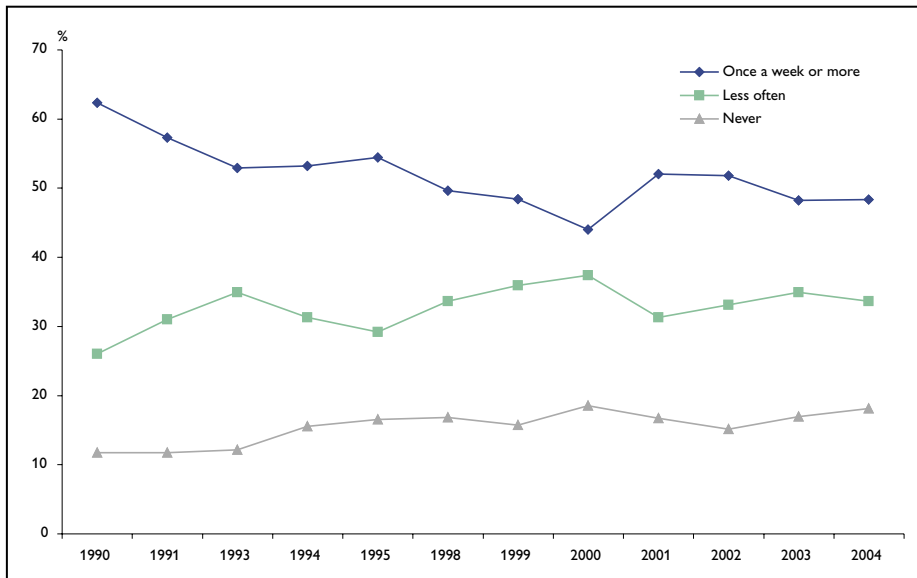


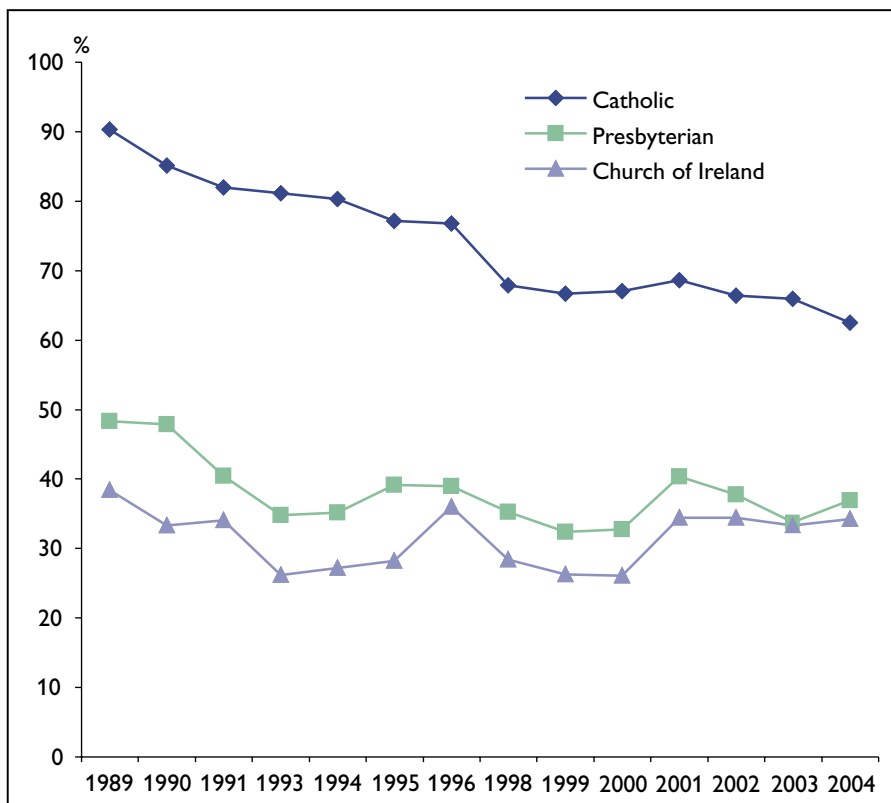
Figure 3: Patterns of church attendance, 1989-2004



the secular group was the fourth largest religious group in Northern Ireland society, after Catholics, Presbyterians and Anglicans.

Figure 2 confirms the incremental increase in the proportion of the

Figure 4: At least weekly church attendance, 1989-2004



show the same consistent decline revealed by the census, albeit to a lesser degree; over the 1989-2004 period, the proportions of Presbyterians and Anglicans have declined by about 1%, with Methodists declining by slightly less.

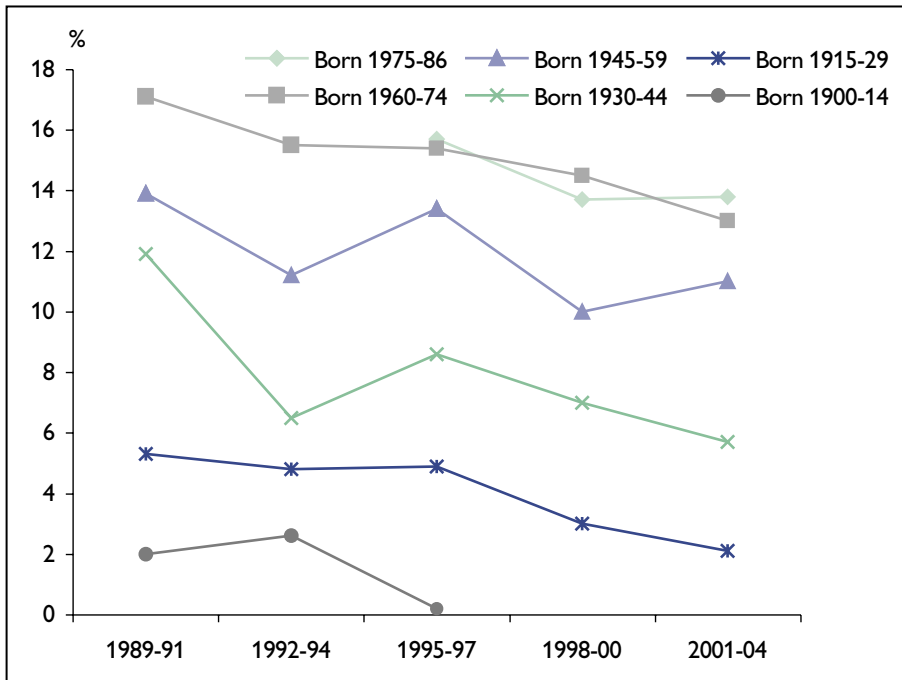
Church attendance and religious affiliation

Patterns of church attendance show a consistent decline, away from regular attendance (defined here as weekly attendance or more frequently) and towards less frequent attendance (such as once a month or less). Figure 3 shows that in the late 1980s, around two thirds of the population attended church at least weekly; by the early 2000s, this decreased to around half of the population, a significant decline in a relatively short period of time.

Which denominations account for the declining frequency of church attendance? Regular church attendance (defined as at least weekly attendance) has declined among the three major denominations, Catholic, Presbyterian and Church of Ireland (see Figure 4). However, the decline has been greatest among Catholics, traditionally the most diligent church attenders.

While these results suggest that the Catholic church is faring less well

Figure 5: Cohorts and secularisation



Figures are the percentage of respondents with no religion

than its Protestant counterparts in countering secularisation, we have to take into account the higher rates of defection away from the Protestant churches illustrated earlier. Thus, while the unpopularity of the Protestant churches is reflected in their members moving away from the church altogether, within the Catholic church, its members have retained their affiliation but simply attended less frequently.

These results suggest that two parallel processes are underway in the Catholic and Protestant churches. Within the Catholic church, secularisation is less obviously visible, and is reflected in declining church attendance - a major change given the Catholic church's emphasis on regular attendance by its members.

Among members of the Protestant churches, the process of secularisation is occurring via a formal move away from the churches, and by expressing no formal religious attachment.

Explaining secularisation

What explains this trend towards secularisation? One group of theories identifies **demographic change** as the driver behind secularisation and identifies basic changes in family formation and the lifecycle, such as extended years of education and delayed marriage and child-rearing. These explanations imply that the proportions of those without a religion should gradually increase as each succeeding cohort enters the adult population.

One test of this explanation is to examine a series of birth cohorts, and to estimate the proportion within each cohort who has no religion. If the demographic explanation is correct, the proportion of those with no religion should be highest among the most recent cohorts, and lowest among the older cohorts. Figure 5 shows the proportion of those with no religion in six age cohorts, the oldest born in 1914 or before, the youngest born in 1975 or after. The estimates are shown separately for the surveys grouped into three-year periods (except for the most recent group, where the period is four years).

The results support the cohort explanation, with the highest proportions of those with no religion in the youngest cohorts, the lowest proportions in the oldest. Moreover, the order is largely preserved based on period of birth, the only exception being that the figures for the newest cohort are almost identical to those born in the 1960 to 1974 period. This implies that a gradual population replacement is indeed driving the growth in secularisation.

A second test of the cohort explanation relates to the transmission of religious attachments from parents to children. The declining religious attachments of each succeeding generation suggests that the process of family

Table 1: The inheritance of religious attachments

Current religion	Family religion				
	Catholic	Presbyterian	Church of Ireland	Methodist	None
Catholic	92	*	1	*	1
Protestant denominations					
Presbyterian	*	74	8	7	2
Church of Ireland	*	5	69	5	*
Methodist	0	2	2	62	1
Other Protestant	0	3	2	2	3
Other Christian	1	6	6	9	3
None	7	10	12	15	90
Total (N)	100 (6,795)	100 (5,329)	100 (4,254)	100 (924)	100 (402)

* = Less than 0.5%.

socialisation into religion may be undergoing change. Moreover, as the proportion of those with no religion in the population increases, this in itself is an important driver of change.

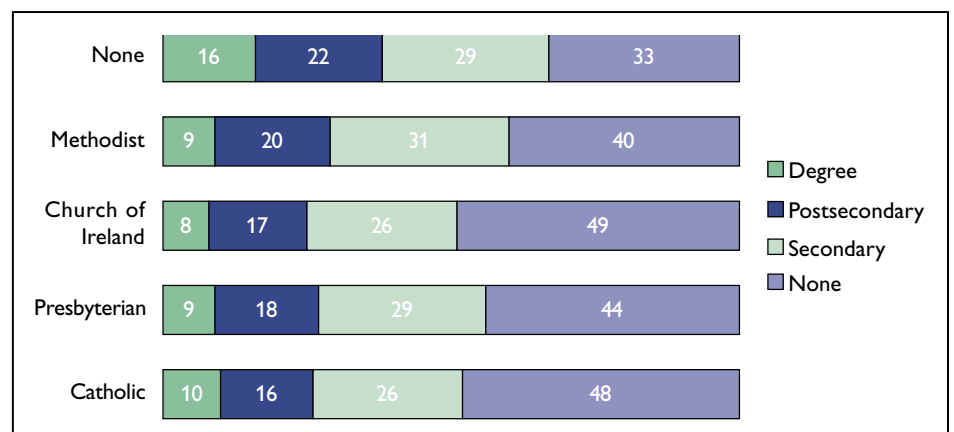
Table 1 shows the religion that the person reported being brought up in, and their current religion. If the cohort explanation holds, we would expect similar levels of inheritance between the various denominations, and among those who were brought up in secular families. The findings suggest substantially different levels of transmission between the various groups. The strongest transmission occurs among Catholics, with the second highest level among those who were brought up in families that had no religion. In

contrast to those from Catholic and secular families, the Protestant denominations show varying levels of inheritance.

These findings suggest less support for the cohort explanation than was evident earlier. In contrast

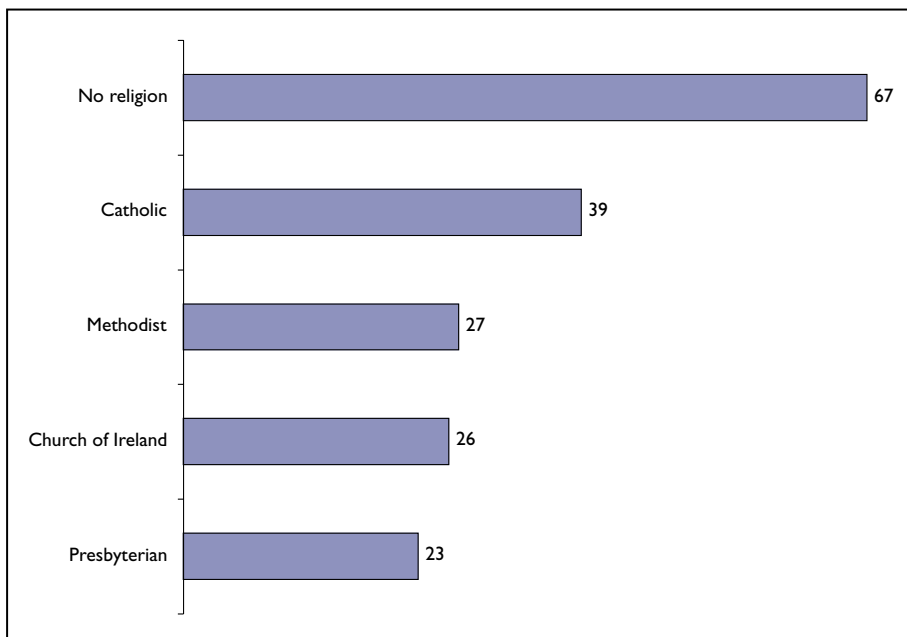
to our expectations, those from families without a religion were substantially more likely to pass their religious outlooks onto their children, at a level far higher than the Protestant churches and at a level only two percentage points lower than Catholic families. This in itself

Figure 6: Educational qualification and religion



Figures are the percentage of respondents with each level of qualification for each denomination

Figure 7: Rejection of a unionist or nationalist identity



Figures are the percentage of respondents who said they had neither a unionist or a nationalist identity

is a strong explanation behind the large proportion of those with no religion in the population; if this level of transmission were to continue, it would suggest a significant future growth in the proportion of those with no religious affiliation.

A second explanation for secularisation is **socio-economic change**; as people become more affluent and are exposed to a wider range of life experiences, their interest and commitment to traditional forms of religion declines. Education is often seen as the prime indicator of such change, in so far as the post-war expansion of university education is often regarded as having resulted in more questioning of the basic tenets of traditional religions.

The relationship between education and religious affiliation in Figure

6 shows that the influence of education on affiliation is, at best, modest. Among members of the larger denominations especially, the pattern of educational qualifications is very similar between all of them. The exception is those with no religion who, as modernisation theory would predict, are more likely to have tertiary education.

The final explanation for secularisation is **politics**. Recent debates in the United States over moral issues such as abortion and euthanasia have shown that, on these issues at least, religion and partisanship have become more closely aligned than at any time in the recent past. Observers have argued that the increasing alignment between religion and politics may be motivating people to disavow a religious

attachment, in order to avoid its political connotations.

To test this hypothesis, Figure 7 shows the proportions of each religion who refused to identify themselves as either 'unionist' or 'nationalist'. Those with no religion are overwhelmingly more likely than either Catholics or Protestants to label themselves as 'neither', and about two thirds of them choose this option. By contrast, just 39% of Catholics, and around one quarter of the three Protestant denominations, refuse to label themselves as either unionist or nationalist.

One possibility to explain this significant relationship is that in order to break away from the religiously-based political system, some have chosen to move away from the religion that they were brought up in. In other words, political disaffection has led to secularisation. Another possibility is that individuals may have broken away from religion for a variety of (mainly non-political) reasons and, as a result, display political outlooks which are at variance with their former co-religionists. In this interpretation, secularisation has led to political disaffection.

There is no way to definitively test either model, since we do not have data on the same individuals over time. However, one way to gather suggestive evidence in support

of one or other explanation is to examine the distribution of opinions across the six cohorts identified previously. If political outlooks are driving secularisation, we would expect that the trend for the secular group across the age cohorts would show an increase in the proportion with no national identity. Thus, those growing up earlier in the twentieth century but having no religion would be very similar in their political beliefs to their religious counterparts, while those growing up more recently would have more distinctive outlooks. If secularisation is causing political disaffection, then we would expect the trend to be flat, since all cohorts would be affected equally.

Figure 8 shows the proportion in each of the three religious groups who did not have a national identity, calculated separately for each of the six cohorts. The results provide strong support for the interpretation that political disaffection is driving secularisation. Those who are secular and who reject a traditional national identity - answering 'neither' when asked if they see themselves as unionist or nationalist - are increasingly more numerous among the younger age cohorts, while the proportions in the oldest cohort are almost the same as Catholics or Protestants. Indeed, the trend for the secular group is in marked contrast to Catholics, who have virtually the

same proportion with no religious identity across all six age cohorts.

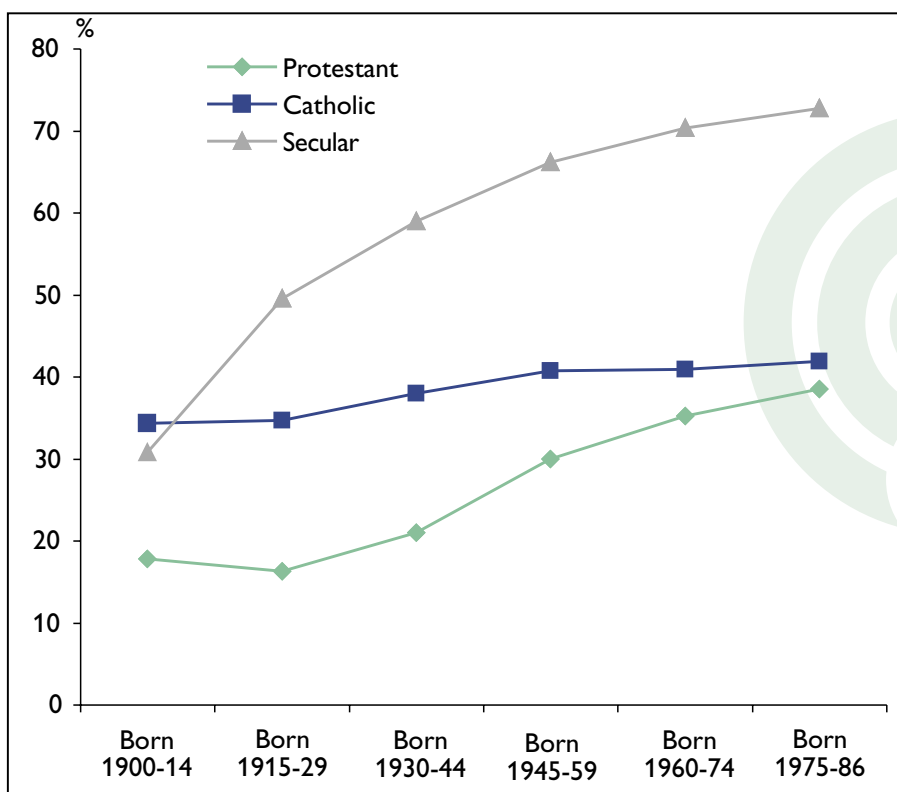
Implications

Northern Ireland is often regarded as being atypical in debates about secularisation, because of the high levels of affiliation and church attendance. Yet the results presented here have shown that secularisation has progressed as far in Northern Ireland as anywhere, despite the religious nature of the society. In particular, the secular group has grown sufficiently for it to become the fourth largest group, after Catholics, Presbyterians and Anglicans. If these trends continue, secularists will represent the second or third largest religious group in Northern Ireland society by the time of the next census, in 2011.

Our test of three explanations to account for this trend suggests that the gradual turnover of age cohorts, supplemented by differential rates of parental transmission of religion, has strong empirical support in the surveys. There is, at best, only modest support for modernisation as an explanation, and again strong support for the view that disaffection from politics has been a motivation to reject religion. What are the implications of these findings? Does the move towards secularisation suggest a reduced role in politics for religion?

The answer to this question,

Figure 8: Rejection of a traditional national identity



Figures are the percentage of respondents who said they had neither a unionist or a nationalist identity

paradoxically, is no. In the first place, religion acts as an ethnic marker, demarcating community boundaries, and is a formative influence on many of the key social processes within the society. To have any substantive impact on this key role, secularisation would have to progress much further than we have observed here.

A second reason is based on the political behaviour of those who see themselves as secular. Their disaffection from politics has led to their move away from religion, and ironically, they have left the political arena almost solely to those who retain a religious identity. In the short to medium term, this is likely to enhance the role of religion in

politics, not reduce it, since the most religious are the most politically active and exert the most influence on parties and politicians. If secularisation is to have any impact on the political process, those who see themselves as secular will have to re-enter politics and influence it from within.

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Key Points

- In line with international trends, a significant minority in Northern Ireland (approximately 10%) see themselves as having no religion. This group is now the fourth largest religious group in Northern Ireland.
- If these trends continue, those with no religion will form the second or third largest group in Northern Ireland by 2011.
- Those with no religion are more likely to come from Protestant than Catholic families. There has been a significant decline in church attendance among Catholics.
- There is evidence to support gradual population replacement as one explanation for the growth in secularisation.
- There is also suggestive evidence that disaffection with politics is causing the growth of this secular group.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues.

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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