

Religion as an indicator of ethnicity in Northern Ireland— an alternative perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the relationship between census data on religious affiliation, and the ethnic structure of Northern Ireland. Examination of the 1991 Census Sample of Anonymised Records suggests that as well as the major unambiguously ethnic Catholic and Protestant groups, three other groups can be identified: those born in Northern Ireland who have No Religion, those born in Northern Ireland who do not declare a religion, and those from outside the province. Members of these last three groups have in the past been allocated to one or other of the two main groups, but it is argued that this approach can no longer be justified, and that a more complex model of the relationship is required. This has implications for social research and policymaking.

Key index words: Northern Ireland, ethnicity, religion, anonymised records.

Conceptualizing Society in Northern Ireland

Much recent social science research focusing on Northern Ireland is underpinned, implicitly or explicitly, by three assumptions relating to the nature of society in the province. These assumptions are that Northern Irish society is ethnically divided, that there are two ethnic groups, and these two groups are monolithic or homogeneous.

The most fundamental assumption is that the major divide is essentially ethnic, notwithstanding the fact that it is denoted by the religious labels 'Catholic' and 'Protestant'. Northern Ireland is, of course, far from unique in having religious identity as a key social marker of ethnicity, as reference to Bosnia, Lebanon or the Punjab illustrates. The idea that the Ulster divide is ethnic, rather than simply religious, can be traced back to the early 1970s, when Poole and Boal suggested that "the Catholic-Protestant dichotomy in Northern Ireland, which assumes considerable homogeneity within the groups and sharp differences between the groups, can ... be regarded as an ethnic dichotomy" (Poole and Boal, 1973: 11).

The conceptualisation was made more explicit in a subsequent paper which defined an ethnic group as

"a group with a shared feeling of peoplehood ... defined or set off by race, religion or national origin or some combination of these categories ... In the Northern Ireland context ... we may view the Catholics and Protestants as two ethnic groups. However, the Catholics form a national group (or part of one) in that they aspire to unity with the Irish Republic, while the Protestants, insofar as they wish to maintain the political separation of Northern Ireland from the Irish Republic, form another national group" (Boal *et al.*, 1976: 79-80).

The concept of ethnicity has now come to be “the most popular portrayal” of the Catholic-Protestant dichotomy by academics writing on the province (Brewer, 1992: 356). The relationship between ethnicity and religion, and in particular data on religion derived from the census, provides the context for the present paper.

At the outset it must be pointed out that ethnic groups originating outside the British Isles are not represented to any substantial extent in Northern Ireland: only 1.0 percent of the population was born outside the British Isles, and non-Christian faiths comprise less than 0.5 percent of the total. Unlike in Great Britain, in 1991 the Northern Ireland census still had no ethnic group question, reflecting the absence of the type of ethnic diversity that is found elsewhere in the United Kingdom. In the 2001 census, however, an ethnicity question was introduced although it did not have the same form as in Great Britain. This was unfortunate in that it did not allow for respondents to indicate, for example, if they considered themselves to be ‘Irish’ or ‘British’. Such responses would have been useful in that they would have greatly facilitated analysis of the relationship between ethnicity and religion in the province.

Poole’s recent discussion of ethnicity in Northern Ireland (1997) emphasises the complexity of the concept, including its fluidity over space and time. He considers the possibility of the existence of a small ‘third force’ in Northern Ireland society, a de-ethnicised group of people who have lost some aspect or aspects of their ethnic identity, and concludes that:

“there is no simple, de-ethnicised bloc in Northern Ireland society. Instead, many people are de-ethnicised in relation to at least one of the many components that define ethnicity - but in many cases, no more than one” (Poole, 1997: 136).

Of the various components of ethnicity in Northern Ireland - including national identity, culture and historical consciousness - religion undoubtedly occupies a key place as an indicator of this ethnicity, in public discourse, academic research and policy formulation. “Ethnic differences are socially marked by religion” (Boal, 1998: 98). The Northern Ireland census is a fundamental source of information, in that it provides data on religious affiliation, and this is used for purposes that go far beyond the merely theological (Anderson and Shuttleworth, 1994; Macourt, 1995). One use is sectarian ‘head counting’ by both political parties and social researchers, with particular emphasis on the question of when or if Catholics/Nationalists might have the voting majority over Protestants/Unionists (see, for example, Compton and Boal, 1970; Compton, 1989; Jardine, 1995; Doherty, 1996; Compton, 1998). Another use is in the implementation of social policy that seeks to address the socio-economic differences that exist between Catholics and Protestants (see, for example, Doherty, 1990; Osborne, 1996). Clearly the relationship between the census religion data and the underlying ethnic structure of Northern Irish society is important for researchers, politicians, and those involved in social policy matters.

This paper seeks to explore further this relationship, by examining the 1991 Census of Population. In doing this, it is helpful to consider first some models of the relationship between religion and ethnicity in the province, and also to examine some issues relating to the Census.

A binary perspective

As a starting point, it is suggested that until fairly recently a simple binary model provided a useful and successful representation of the linkage. Generally speaking, religious identity mapped almost perfectly onto ethnic identity. Church going and religious practice

were at a high level, and so everyone had a religious identity. Protestant equated with Unionist, Catholic with Nationalist, and inter-marriage between the groups was low. Notwithstanding any individual exceptions that might be cited, a binary perspective worked well.

Censuses in Northern Ireland since 1861 (with the exception of the 1966 census) have included an optional religion question (Macourt, 1995). Up until 1961 these were good enumerations, and only a small proportion of less than two percent declined to answer the religion question. A portion of these non-respondents would have been individuals with no religious persuasion, while the remainder was presumed to be mainly Protestants who did not answer the question on conscientious grounds (Compton, 1993). Up until the 1960s therefore, the census provided good data on the population’s religious affiliations, and the data could be manipulated easily to provide the numbers of Protestants and Catholics at various scale levels. The outbreak of the ‘Troubles’ at the end of that decade had profound impact on virtually all aspects of life in Northern Ireland, including the census of population, with important consequences for the utilization of this data source.

Census data problems

In both 1971 and 1981, the censuses were performed against a backdrop of serious civil unrest and politically motivated campaigns to disrupt the count, which had a considerable effect, especially in 1981 (Compton, 1993). Three distinct problems can be identified in these two censuses, which have specific relevance to research into religion and the ethnic divide. These problems of non-enumeration, non-response to the religion question, and the response of ‘No Religion’, need to be considered separately, and appropriate summary data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Percentage of total population under-enumerated, not stating religious affiliation, or of no religion, 1961-1991.

	Under enumerated	Non-response to Religion question	No Religion	Total
1961	-	1.9	-	1.9
1971	-	9.4	-	9.4
1981	3.0	18.5	-	21.5
1991	1.1	7.3	3.8	12.2

Non-enumeration (sometimes called under-enumeration) is the failure of the census to receive returns from some individuals. In the 1971 census it was not possible to estimate the extent of this problem, because no post-census validation was undertaken, but it was likely to have been higher than usual as a result of the campaign of disruption. A post-1981 census validation exercise suggested under-enumeration of 6000 households. However this was revised upwards, to a final figure of 3 percent of the enumerated population (Morris *et al.*, 1985). This under-enumeration was a serious issue, not just because of its size, but also because it was concentrated in certain localities and population sub-groups.

The second difficulty, non-response to the religion question, is directly quantifiable because the rest of the census return has been completed. In 1971 this figure stood at 9.4

percent, a steep rise from previous levels of non-response. However in 1981, the level rose to 18.5 percent overall, with much higher proportions in some localities and sub-groups. Taking this problem together with the under-enumeration problem in 1981, it can be seen that this census is rather suspect, especially in the realm of religion data.

In 1991 the census was undertaken in much better circumstances, and provided the best enumeration in thirty years (Compton, 1995). In contrast to the two previous censuses, “the Catholic population was urged fully to co-operate with the census by its political leaders, including Sinn Féin and the Republican News” (Compton, 1995: 233). It has been suggested that in 1991 there was a positive incentive to be religiously enumerated, as both communities recognised that resources were being allocated now on the basis of the religious head count (Doherty and Poole, 1995: 83). It therefore was in the best interests of both Protestants and Catholics to ensure that their numbers were not under-enumerated, and this incentive contributed to a reduction in non-response to the religion question. The rate of non-statement of religion thus fell to 7.3 percent, which was below the 1971 level. Furthermore, the level of non-enumeration in 1991 was about 1.1 percent, half the level in England and Wales (Hall and Hall, 1995), which is indicative of the overall high quality of the count.

The third difficulty that needs to be discussed is the issue of persons who state that they have ‘No Religion’. However, this is only a difficulty if the simple binary model is applied, since this perspective cannot accommodate persons of no religion. In all decennial censuses up to 1981 inclusive, anyone who indicated that they had no religion was placed in the ‘Not Stated’ (or non-response) category. It is thus not possible to say how many persons responded in this way in 1981 or earlier. However in 1991 the census invited those of no religion to respond ‘None’, and for the first time they were enumerated separately. Overall, 3.8 percent of the population of Northern Ireland in 1991 stated that they had no religion.

The solution to these three problems, which was adopted by analysts, was to make the data fit the model. Those who were not directly classifiable as Protestant or Catholic were allocated (by various methodologies) to one or other group. Paul Compton has been one of the leading proponents of this approach, and over twenty years ago he offered estimates of the religious composition of the population based on the 1971 census, the first to suffer significantly from the non-statement of religion problem (Compton, 1976). After the seriously flawed 1981 census, a specialised literature appeared in which researchers offered their methodology for calculating the numbers of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland and some of its subdivisions (Compton, 1985; Compton *et al.*, 1985; Eversley and Herr, 1985; Morris and Compton, 1985; Compton and Power, 1986). Others used these methods or the results of these studies in their own work.

Following the 1991 census which was acknowledged as a “comprehensive enumeration” (Compton, 1993: 331), 11.1 percent of the enumerated population could not be immediately classified as Catholic or Protestant, either because they did not respond to the religion question or because they stated they had no religion. Once again, the binary model was applied by various researchers and these persons were allocated as either Catholic or Protestant (Compton, 1995; Jardine, 1995; Macourt, 1995; Ó Gráda and Walsh, 1995). Table 2 provides a summary of various estimates of the proportions of Catholics and Protestants that have been made on this basis since 1971. In all of these estimates, a binary model is implicit, and the data are made to fit the model. In both the 1971 and 1981 censuses there may be some justification for adopting this approach, but it can be argued that the social context of the 1991

census was rather different, and this approach therefore may not be valid any more. Furthermore, it may be that the application of the model to the 1991 census is actually hiding a change that is under way within the province, with a breakdown in religious affiliation taking place, and a more diverse social structure than previously.

Table 2: Estimates of the religious composition of the Northern Ireland population 1971-91.

Year	Catholic population	Catholic %	Protestant population	Protestant %	Non-Catholic population	Non-Catholic %	Source
1971	477,919	31.4	899,210	59.2	1,041,721	68.6	Census
	562,500	36.8	951,000	62.3	965,000	63.2	Compton1
	555,047	36.3	-	-	972,495	63.7	Compton2
1981	414,532	28.0	792,843	53.5	1,067,427	72.0	Census
	593,300	38.7	924,100	60.3	939,100	61.3	Compton1
	574,000	37.6	-	-	951,000	62.4	Compton2
	610,900	39.1	-	-	951,300	60.9	Eversley
1991	605,639	38.4	798,136	50.6	972,197	61.6	Census
	641,309	40.6	871,912	55.3	936,527	59.4	Compton1
	641,000	40.6	-	-	936,000	59.4	Compton2
	653,750	41.4	-	-	923,750	58.6	Macourt
	-	42.1	-	-	-	57.9	Jardine
	-	43.9	-	-	-	56.1	Ó Gráda

Sources: Northern Ireland Census of Population 1971, 1981, 1991.
Compton (1995), Eversley (1985), Jardine (1995), Macourt (1995), Ó Gráda (1995).

Notes: Compton1 estimates were derived by apportionment using a simple linear regression model.
Compton2 estimates were derived by estimating the population dynamics.
In the Census data, 'Non-Catholic' means 'not recorded as Catholic'.
Elsewhere, 'Non-Catholic' means 'a group other than Catholic'.

An alternative perspective

One change that is occurring within Northern Ireland – in the slipstream of the corresponding change in Europe as a whole – is a secularisation of society. Secularisation has been defined as “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols” (Berger, 1973: 113). Although religion is still important in Northern Ireland, “there has undoubtedly been a decline in the religious nature of society” (Cairns, 1991: 144), and, as an example of this trend, a survey of church attendance amongst students (Doherty and Pringle, 1995) revealed a marked decline in attendance for Protestants, particularly in urban areas. The 1991 census revealed substantial declines in the numbers affiliated to the major Protestant denominations (Doherty, 1993), and this decrease has been a cause for concern within the groups affected by it.

Nevertheless, it is important not to exaggerate the degree to which Northern Ireland is now a secular society. The most detailed evidence comes from the province’s Social Attitude Survey, particularly that conducted in 1991, the very year of the last census (Stringer and Robinson, 1993). When asked whether they belonged to any particular religion, eight percent of respondents replied that they had No Religion, though only one percent said that they were

brought up as children in this way. Almost everyone else claimed a specific religious affiliation, though fourteen percent admitted that, apart from weddings, funerals and baptisms, they attended church 'never or practically never'. The impact of religion on attitudes, rather than behaviour, is best indicated by the questions on belief in God, and no more than nine percent opted for answers that implied atheist or agnostic views. Thus, although exactly 50 percent of respondents did not go through the public ritual of attending church as often as once per week, a truly secular approach to life is still the perspective of only a small minority in Northern Ireland. As Bruce and Alderdice (1993) emphasise in discussing these findings, religion plays a much more dominant part in the life of Northern Ireland people than it does in Great Britain.

Reliable evidence on the process of secularisation over relatively long periods of time is harder to obtain because of inconsistency of questioning or coding. However, Rose's (1971) material on church attendance showed that 77 percent went to church at least once a month a generation ago, while the corresponding figure from the 1991 Social Attitudes Survey (Bruce and Alderdice, 1993) was 67 percent. This suggests the expected decline, but not an especially dramatic one. Rather similarly, attendance once per week or more often slipped from 66 percent to 50 percent over the same period.

Comparison of the Social Attitude Survey with the contemporaneous 1991 census suggests the possibility that the eight percent who answered No Religion in the sample survey were made up of two roughly equal elements. About half were amongst the 3.8 percent of the population who similarly answered No Religion on the census form, while the other half were amongst those who failed to state their religious affiliation in the census. Since non-statement was 7.3 percent in the census, it may be speculated that about half the Not Stated – and possibly slightly more – in 1991 are really people of No Religion.

If secularisation is taking place, then it is only to be expected that there will be those who give the response 'No Religion' to the census religion question. With regard to those who did not answer the religion question at all in 1991, at least some of these persons may feel that religion is of no significance in their lives, and hence they ignore the question. In the 1991 census therefore, there is little justification for forcing the data into a binary model, which suggests an alternative perspective.

Figure 1 represents diagrammatically a simple binary model, which portrays the situation that pertained for many years, with a direct mapping of religion into the two ethnic groups. In the 1971 and 1981 censuses, a considerable proportion of the population did not declare their religion, for reasons that were to do with the political and security circumstances at that time. It is also possible that some of these had become secularised, and no longer identified with either of the religious groups. However in the analyses of these two censuses, it was assumed that a binary representation of society was still adequate, and the secular/undeclared were allocated into one or other ethnic group using various methodologies. This is represented diagrammatically in Figure 2.

If it is correct to believe that the process of secularisation is making this an increasingly inadequate approach to the conceptualisation of Northern Ireland society, an alternative has to be found. This suggests a ternary model of the relationship between religion and ethnicity, a more complex model that may be a better representation of the present situation (Figure 3). It is undoubtedly the case that the two major groups in Northern Ireland are Catholics and Protestants, ethnic in essence but identified by religion. However, it is suggested that there

	Catholic	Protestant
Religious	a	b

Figure 1: The simple binary model.

	Catholic	Protestant
Religious	a	b
Secular/ Undeclared	c	d

Figure 2: The modified binary model.

	Catholic	Protestant	Third Force
Religious	a	b	e
Secular/ Undeclared	c	d	f

Figure 3: The ternary model.

are also those who have lost their religious identity through secularisation. These persons would constitute a small group who have been de-ethnicised in the religious component of their ethnicity.

Poole has suggested that there is no simple de-ethnicised bloc in Northern Ireland society, but that “there are certain groups in society who are rather more de-ethnicised than others, with degrees of difference involved rather than clear separation” (Poole, 1997). He further states that “there is only limited evidence for the existence of anything more than a small ‘third force’ in Northern Ireland society - a de-ethnicised group ... Moreover, this group

exists separately with respect to each criterion employed in defining ethnicity” (Poole, 1997: 135). In the present discussion, it is suggested that there may be some de-ethnicisation occurring in the religious dimension of society.

If this suggestion is correct, then a fresh approach to census data analysis is required, which allows for the presence of individuals who have become de-ethnicised at least in terms of their religious identity and who therefore no longer belong unambiguously to the Catholic or Protestant blocs in this specific sense. It is therefore proposed to examine the 1991 census, to see if there is any justification for a more complex perspective, and if so, to try to identify the characteristics of those who do not belong to either of the two main groups. The analysis is conceived as an exploration of the data, which does not pre-suppose a simple binary split.

Ideally, this exploration might be conducted via a customised sample survey, which examined all elements of de-ethnicisation rather than just the religious dimension. However, instead of incurring the expense and delay of completing such a survey, it is proposed to take advantage of the innovatory micro-data made available as part of the 1991 census programme. This has the great merit of constituting a very large sample, even though the coverage of topics is inevitably limited by the conventional content of the census questionnaire.

An exploration of the 1991 census

Analyses of previous British censuses have been restricted to aggregate tabular data in the form of printed reports or small area statistics. However, the 1991 census has provided in addition a radically different form of output, the Samples of Anonymised Records known as SARs (Marsh and Teague, 1992; Marsh, 1993; Census Microdata Unit, 1994). The SARs supply abstracts of individual census records, for analysis by researchers on their own computers in the same fashion as other social surveys. In the present analysis, the Northern Ireland Two Percent Individual SAR is used: this contains data on 31,967 persons, for whom 53 variables are provided.

The SAR data provides eight categories of religious response: Roman Catholic (38.4%), Presbyterian (21.4%), Church of Ireland (17.7%), Methodist (3.7%), Other (7.7%), None (3.8%) Not Stated (7.1%) and Indefinite Answer (0.1%). (A more detailed denominational categorisation is not provided in the interests of preserving the confidentiality of the sample). The small number (36) who gave an Indefinite Answer were dropped from the analysis, rather than arbitrarily allocating them to one of the other groups. The Other category consists overwhelmingly of the numerous smaller Protestant groupings, together with a very small non-Christian element. There is no direct evidence for this from the SAR itself, but the census coverage as a whole showed that, if those giving an Indefinite Answer were excluded from the Other category, then 96.4 percent of the Others are broadly non-(Roman) Catholic Christian. This leaves 2.5 percent with immigrant faiths such as Islam or Hinduism and 1.1 percent atheist or agnostic (Doherty, 1993). For the purposes of this analysis therefore, the Other category was combined with Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist, to give a Protestant category. This gave a four-way classification of Roman Catholic (38.4%), Protestant (50.5%), None (3.8%) and Not Stated (7.1%).

Further examination of the data revealed that 8.2 percent of the sample had birthplaces outside Northern Ireland, principally elsewhere in the British Isles. It was considered that these persons constituted an important group in their own right, - though certainly not a

Table 3: Key Characteristics of the population of Northern Ireland and sub-groups thereof, 1991.

Variable	All	Roman Catholic	Protestant	Not Stated	None	Not NI Born
Sex Ratio (M/F)	48.6/51.4	49.1/50.9	47.3/52.7	50.3/49.7	56.1/43.9	49.6/50.4
Mean Age	33.7	29.4	37.0	29.9	30.0	37.9
Modal Age Group	20-24	5-9	20-24	0-4	0-4	20-24
% * 16 Single	32.6	39.0	28.6	32.1	33.6	30.7
% * 16 Married	55.1	52.3	57.1	57.2	55.2	53.6
% * 16 Remarried	1.5	0.5	1.9	1.8	2.0	2.5
% * 16 Divorced	2.3	1.7	2.4	2.6	5.5	2.4
% * 16 Widowed	8.5	6.5	9.9	6.3	3.6	10.8
Mean No. of Children	2.4	3.0	2.1	2.0	1.9	2.4
% * 2 Children	58.8	46.5	64.1	66.7	68.0	60.5
% No Children	18.1	14.0	19.6	22.8	19.1	19.0
% Single Household, married with children	59.0	64.3	56.6	60.4	55.7	48.3
% Single Household, married with no children	11.0	5.9	14.5	9.7	9.9	15.3
% Single Person Hhold	7.8	5.6	9.1	7.1	9.8	11.0
% Social Class I-III NM	48.9	44.9	50.4	52.5	56.4	49.2
% Managers/ Administrators	12.4	10.5	13.4	10.9	14.4	13.0
% Professional	7.7	7.9	6.9	7.4	10.8	10.7
% Assoc Professional and Technical	6.7	7.0	5.8	9.3	7.8	8.7
Mean No. of Cars	1.03	0.94	1.12	0.99	1.04	0.98
% No Car	27.3	31.3	23.9	28.6	26.0	29.2
% Unemployed	9.2	13.5	6.3	9.7	10.9	7.9
% Owner Occupier Outright	23.0	20.7	26.3	18.8	13.6	22.0
% Owner Occupier Buying	43.4	41.8	44.1	48.4	53.9	37.7
% Public Rented	27.1	32.0	24.0	26.9	24.7	24.9
% >1 Person/Room	11.0	19.7	5.2	10.5	5.4	7.4
% No Higher Qualifies	91.1	91.7	92.3	90.3	82.8	86.7
% With Degrees	7.1	6.8	5.9	7.2	14.4	11.5
% Metropolitan	49.0	34.6	53.5	55.1	73.0	51.0
% Do not know Irish	87.9	76.3	97.4	87.0	93.2	82.6

Source: Derived from Northern Ireland Census of Population 1991, Sample of Anonymised Records, 2 percent Individual File.

homogeneous one - and it would not be helpful to include them in the four-way religious classification. This is because while doubtless some were born to Northern Irish parents temporarily outside the province, others have a non-Ulster family background and could not be viewed unequivocally as members of either of the two Northern Irish ethnic groups. The data were therefore analysed according to a five-way classification based on both birthplace and declared religion: Not Born in Northern Ireland (8.2%), Catholic (35.8%), Protestant (46.5%), None (3.1%) and Not Stated (6.3%), the last four categories all having NI birthplace. While Catholics and Protestants are the two largest groups, the rest comprise a significant section of the population in the province, 17.6 percent of the total.

Examination of the sample revealed that in a number of important characteristics the five groups differed markedly, and Table 3 provides a set of statistics summarizing these.

Discussion

The broad differences revealed by these statistics are now outlined. The two largest groups, Catholics and Protestants, are in many ways mirror images of each other, reflecting long-standing socio-economic and geographic differences. The Catholic group is young with high levels of singleness, low divorce, large families and of a generally lower social class profile, which is reflected in their housing, car ownership and unemployment rate. The Protestant group is older with high marriage levels but small family sizes and a generally higher social class profile, curiously coupled with poorer education, which may reflect the high level of Protestant young people who go to British universities and do not return after graduation.

The characteristics of the other three groups often lie between these two main groups, but with interesting distinguishing features. Those with No Religion are particularly distinctive, with a high proportion of young married couples with children, but also a high divorce rate. They have a high social class profile with many professionals, the highest proportion with degrees and the highest proportion buying their own homes. This group would appear to be secularised, and may therefore be seen as de-ethnicised at least in this component of their ethnicity.

Those Not Stating their religion are less distinctive, but are also characterised by young marrieds with children, and a high social class profile, particularly associated professional workers. These characteristics suggest that at least some of this group may be considered to be secularised, having opted to ignore the religious question on the census form as a less forceful alternative to stating that they had no religion. It is equally plausible, however, that some of those not stating their religion do have such an affiliation, but are traditionally unwilling to disclose it.

Those Not NI Born have a high proportion in the Armed Forces, which explains some of their characteristics. But there is also a high proportion of professional workers and a high proportion with degrees, and this group would seem to include those who have come to work in the province as part of the national labour market. This group is the least coherent of the five, with diversity being one of its key features. This diversity is evident in the birthplaces, occupations, and age-sex structures of its members. It includes the children of Northern Irish parents, spouses of Northern Irish partners, short term migrant members of the labour force raising a family in the province, and temporary migrants from the Armed Forces.

Finally, the geography of the different groups is considered. Unfortunately, the Northern

Ireland Individual SAR file has restricted geographical detail in the interests of preserving the confidentiality of individual cases. The geography consists of only ten areas, which are based on combinations of District Council Areas (DCAs). However, help is provided by the fact that the published reports of the 1991 census contain religion statistics broken down into the 26 District Council Areas, which gives a finer spatial resolution.

Previously published work may also be drawn on, which shows substantially different spatial distributions for the major groups (Doherty, 1993; Compton, 1995). This is in fact the most distinctive feature of the four groups born in Northern Ireland. Catholics predominate in the west and periphery of the province. They are increasing their proportions in these areas, and in Belfast and Lisburn. The Protestant distribution is essentially a mirror image of this, with Protestants moving out of Belfast, both to the suburbs and to the ring of dormitory towns beyond. The distributions of persons of No Religion and those Not Stating a religion are both strongly focused on Belfast. It should be noted that all these distributions include those born outside Northern Ireland, and so are not fully comparable with the groups in the present discussion, which treats the Not NI Born separately.

This is also true of the discussion of the geography of the groups within Belfast in (Doherty and Poole, 1995). This showed that Belfast Catholics are concentrated in a single sector in the west of the city (Doherty and Poole, 1995: 62-63). The east of the city is a large Protestant sector, and there are several other highly segregated Protestant areas in the north, south and centre of the city.

The mapping of those Not Stating and those of No Religion (Doherty and Poole, 1995: 84-87), is of particular interest here. Within the Belfast Urban Area, 8.3 percent did not state their religion (compared with 7.3 percent province-wide). These had a distinct spatial distribution, being particularly concentrated in areas of high social class, and rising to 15.2 percent in the Whiteabbey area immediately south of the University of Ulster. This geography would tend to counter the suggestion that persons Not Stating are doing so out of fear, since the areas of high incidence are not areas of the city where sectarian violence has been focused.

The distribution of those having No Religion was very strongly concentrated in just four small areas: around Queen's University, in Holywood, Knock and Lambeg - all areas of fairly high social status. The area around the University also has a distinctive age structure, with a high proportion of young adults.

Returning to the SAR data set, the basic distributions of the five groups may be summarised by considering the percentage that live in Belfast and the three surrounding SAR areas. This may be thought of as the metropolitan segment of Northern Ireland, and comprises the District Council Areas of Belfast, Ards, Castlereagh, North Down, Down, Lisburn, Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownabbey. Overall, 49.0 percent of the population of the province lives in this metropolitan area. However only 34.6 percent of Catholics live here, compared with 57.5 of Protestants, 51.0 percent of the Not NI Born, 55.1 percent of the Not Stated, and 73.0 percent of the None. Those of No Religion are a particularly metropolitan group, who are also especially concentrated in specific areas within Belfast.

Conclusion

What are the implications of this analysis? The key finding would seem to be that it is no longer appropriate to allocate automatically those who do not have a religious affiliation, or

who do not state one in the census, to one or other of the two main faiths/ethnic groups. It is also doubtful if it is appropriate to allocate all those with birthplaces outside Northern Ireland to these two groups. Clearly, there is an urgent need for research into the nature of the relationship between religion and ethnicity in the province, in the light of these findings.

A ternary perspective, as introduced before in Figure 3, may be more appropriate in future analyses, in that it allows for the greater complexity that now seems to exist in the religious responses in the census. Such a model allows for Northern Irish who are 'Secular', in that they declare that they have no religion, and also for those who for whatever reason do not declare a religion - the 'Undeclared'. Some of the Undeclared may be religiously Protestant or Catholic, as traditionally assumed in Northern Ireland analysis. However, some will have greater affinity with those who state that they have no religion.

Furthermore, as the analysis has demonstrated, there are those who are immigrants to Northern Ireland and again it must be questioned if all of these should be considered as members of the two major ethnic groups, as has been the case in other analyses. The Not NI Born are heterogeneous: some, like the children born to Ulster parents temporarily abroad, can be classified ethnically according to their religious affiliation. But equally, others cannot. For example, can an English Catholic be automatically ethnically classified with the Northern Irish Catholic? Or the Republic of Ireland born Protestant with the Northern Irish Protestant? The answer to both questions is 'Yes' in some instances, but 'No' in others, because this is a complex issue, and other, similar questions could equally be posed. The only thing that can be stated unequivocally here is that there is a pressing need for customised research into these categories.

	Catholic	Protestant	Third Force	
			De-Ethnicised	Non-Ethnicised
Religious	a	b	e	g
Secular/ Undeclared	c	d	f	h

Figure 4: The modified ternary model.

Furthermore, there may be those with birthplaces outside Northern Ireland, who by virtue of marriage to an Ulster-born spouse, and/or having lived in the province for a lengthy period, have been assimilated into one or other ethnic group. Equally, there may be those with birthplaces outside Northern Ireland, who may or may not have a religious affiliation, and who have not assimilated at all into either ethnic group. These would constitute a non-ethnicised component of a third force, as illustrated in Figure 4.

In sum, what is being suggested is that there is a need to allow for a more complex relationship between religious affiliation as recorded in the census, and ethnicity. It is very doubtful that the automatic allocation of all of the None, the Not Stated, and the Not NI Born to either Protestant or Catholic ethnic group, adequately represents the true position. And if this more complex perspective on the census religion data is correct, then it has implications in a number of areas, in particular for research and policymaking.

With regard to social research in the realm of sectarian headcounting, the application of the binary model to 1991 data has led to an overestimation of the numbers in both ethnic groups. This analysis suggests that the true numbers of Catholics and Protestants ethnically speaking, are rather lower than the estimates given in Table 2. As some of those who are None, Not Stated or Not NI Born will be ethnically Catholic or Protestant, the true percentages in these groups will be higher than indicated by the raw census data, but not as high as the estimates, in particular the more inflated figures of Jardine, Macourt and Ó Gráda. It follows from this that predictions of the date of Catholic voting majority are also optimistic - from an Irish Nationalist or Republican perspective - since they are based on an overestimate of present Catholic numbers.

In the realm of policy making, it would seem that the sectarian mindset of the binary model still prevails, in that policy is perceived in terms of Catholics and Protestants, with little consideration given to those who are not part of either group. For example, in the realm of equal opportunity, Northern Ireland now has the most stringent legislation in Europe. All employers of ten or more employees are legally required to register with the Fair Employment Commission (Osborne, 1996). They are required to ensure that their labour force composition reflects the religious/ethnic composition of the area. "These judgements ... are made on the basis of comparisons with 'labour availability data' derived mainly from the population census" (Osborne, 1996: 186). However, in determining the ethnic composition of an area, the binary model is applied. Yet as has been shown, in some areas, particularly in Belfast, persons who have not indicated that they are Protestant or Catholic make up a substantial proportion of the population. This being the case, it may be that the labour force composition of some employers is being compared with an erroneous local area ethnic composition.

The problem is that policy is focused on ethnicity as indicated in the census by religious affiliation. This is too simplistic a view, because, as argued here, religious affiliation in the census is now an imperfect indicator of ethnicity. Furthermore, the fact that policy seeks to ensure equality of opportunity for Catholics and Protestants, encourages the perpetuation of the sectarian divide, and does nothing to encourage those who wish to break free from their traditional positions.

The binary model of the relationship between religious affiliation and ethnicity in Northern Ireland has been used successfully for many years. However, with the beginnings of secularisation in the province, the religion statistics from the census no longer map directly onto ethnicity as they once did. If secularisation continues, as seems likely, this problem will become more acute. In addition, for many years the province has had a very homogeneous society in terms of birthplace (Compton, 1995: 19). It must be the case that the Troubles, coupled with their negative economic impact, have acted as a disincentive for people to move to the province for employment. With the coming of a greater political stability, which hopefully will both continue and produce economic benefits, it can be expected that the province will see more persons of non-Ulster birthplace coming for employment. This greater

heterogeneity in the population will cause further problems for religion-based measurement of ethnicity.

If a binary perspective has been inadequate for analysis of the 1991 census, it will be even more inadequate when analysing the 2001 figures. The 2001 census contained a religion question in similar form to its predecessors. But it also included a further question for those who indicate that they did not belong to any particular religion, asking them "what religion, religious denomination or body were you brought up in?" The responses to this follow-on question will be helpful in researching the extent and nature of secularisation in the province. However it seems likely that the responses may also be used to allocate those of no religion to one or other of the two main groups - in other words, continuing to apply the binary model. It would be regrettable if this were to happen, as future policy needs to be developed in the light of a more complex perspective on society. There is also a need for research into the ethnic affiliation of those born outside Northern Ireland, and those, locally born, who do not record affiliation to either of the major groups, so as to gain an understanding of change in the religion-ethnicity nexus, a fundamental aspect of society in the province.

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