

5.IRL Politics and Society in Northern Ireland

| Sample answer

How did the people of Northern Ireland express their religious affiliation and cultural identity 1949-1993? (2014)

In considering the religious and cultural expressions of the people of the North it is important to recognise that two distinct identities are at play – Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Unionists. Within reference to religion, and others aspects of culture such as history, sport, and the arts, the following essay will examine how on the one side Catholic Nationalists lived out their own values and interests, while on the contrasting side Protestant Unionists portrayed theirs.

Simply put, Catholics and Protestants, though they inhabited the same nation-state, the same territory, they lived culturally disparate lives. Protestants of course followed a different religious doctrine to Catholics. Whereas Catholics adhered to the authority of the Pope, Protestants rejected his authority. And their differences go beyond mere theology. Protestants and Catholics tended to socialise in homogenously discrete circles, attended different churches, different schools, played different sports, voted for different political parties (Catholics voted SDLP or Sinn Fein, Unionists voted for the Unionist Party), and had different levels of wealth and employment. They saw themselves of having different historical identities, one affiliated with Britain, the other with the Republic of Ireland. As a consequence then, both groups had interests in different languages, in different historical narratives, and ultimately had different ambitions for Northern Ireland's future.

The dominant religion of Northern Ireland since its inception in 1920 has been Protestant. Approximately two-thirds of the population is Protestant – for example, Presbyterian. And these people's religion and ancestry more generally can be traced back to the Plantation of Ulster in the seventeenth century. With the planting of settlers from Scotland and England came this Puritan form of Christianity. The values of this denomination, sanctity, holiness, and a respect for the

Sabbath, have been depicted by Protestants in the area ever since. Given that Protestants outnumbered Catholics in the North, predictably in this case, the axiom stood – majority rules. This Protestant identity was synonymous with a Unionist identity, and for many, Catholics were scarcely tolerated. Ulster was seen as British and in no way connected to the Southern Republic. Protestants during the time in question, and even to this day, valued symbols that celebrated their British identity. The Union Jack and British national anthem were paramount to maintaining their true British identity as they saw it, as well as the principle of allegiance to the Crown. Indeed, Protestant churches actively engaged this nationalism, often displaying the British flag and maintained the view that Catholics were enemies of the Northern Irish state.

As has been established, fault-lines have existed between the two cultures since Northern Ireland's genesis; but when Terence O'Neill came to power in 1963 he made attempts to soften the sharp contrast between Protestant and Catholics. He took the view that by attempting to include Catholics in the cultural life of the state tensions would be defused and the union with Britain would be better secured. As an example of a slightly changing attitude, Unionists expressed sympathy at the death of the Pope in 1964, tolerated the 1916 Rising celebrations, and welcomed the meeting of O'Neill and Irish Taoiseach Sean Lemass. However, cultural matters still had the potential to become divisive flashpoints. For example, there was a riot when police removed the Irish tricolour which was on display outside their election office in Belfast. The fact that the tricolour was restricted from public display hints that one culture had supremacy over the other – and that is what Protestants wanted. Protestants were particularly interested in the public proclamation of culturally significant ideas. Marches, for example, were an opportunity to celebrate the tenets of Protestant and Unionist culture.

The Orange Order was one such body that conducted marches as an important expression of Protestant culture throughout the period in question. Founded in 1795, they see themselves as guardians of Protestant and Unionist heritage. Interestingly, there is a distinct overlap in Orange Order membership and cabinet ministers in the North. Between 1921 and the fall of Stormont in 1973 51 out of 54 ministers were members of the Orange Order. Traditionally, they hold parades and marches during the summer marching season, celebrating events of historical significance. One such event is the July 12th marches known as Orangeman's Day which commemorates the victory of Protestant King William of Orange over Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The Apprentice Boys of Derry are also worth mentioning regarding marches and the

cultural displays in the region. Similar to the Orange Order, the parades they conducted were a reminder of Protestant historical victories while serving to remind Catholics of defeat. Such displays served but to antagonise Nationalists rather than ease cultural tensions. The Apprentice Boys' march in Derry on August 12th helped inflame an already precarious situation and, it could be argued, was a contributing factor to the beginning of the Troubles. In fact, with the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969 each culture became even more entrenched in their own world-view. For Unionists, the threat of the IRA and any question of a united Ireland copper-fastened their determination to remain British, and wholly so.

Just as Protestants cherished their identity, Catholics, as the minority group in the region, saw cultural expression as vitally important in the face of the Protestant majority. Catholics regarded themselves as part of the Irish nation, not of the British union. Consequently, Irish history and the Irish language were valued aspects of their culture. The Irish language was taught in Catholic schools and even an Irish-speaking area developed in west Belfast at this time. In an effort to bring about change the Department of Education sent out a circular in 1982 which stated that mutual understanding was a duty and responsibility for everyone in education. Then in 1989 with the introduction of the National Curriculum all schools had to follow the same programme of study. As a result both Irish and British history could no longer be neglected in favour of one or the other. Unionist support for the Ulster Scots language emerged and was largely in response to attempts by Nationalists to promote the Irish language.

Even in sport, the divergence of affiliations between Protestants and Catholics was evident. An obvious example of this developed (and is still seen) in soccer fandom. Catholics in the North tended to follow Scottish team Celtic FC whereas Protestants supported Rangers FC, their Glasgow rivals. The clubs' identities were shaped in opposition to one another, with Celtic associated with Irish Republicanism, Rangers with conservatism and Northern Irish unionism. In terms of Gaelic Games, Catholics saw participation with the GAA as a pivotal opportunity to live out their Irish heritage. Participation was almost exclusively from Catholics and security forces (who were mainly Protestant) were not permitted to join the Association. Also, the arts are another lens through which the separateness of both cultures can be evidenced. Writers like Brian Friel and Seamus Heaney were active during this time and beyond – sympathetic to the Nationalist cause. In 1973 Friel wrote "Freedom of the City" in direct response to the events of Bloody

Sunday. For Catholics, this type of expression was an important method through which injustices taking place could be explored.

Overall, given the history of the region, it is clear that these identities, evolved so to speak, separately. Though Catholics and Protestants have lived side by side in Northern Ireland for hundreds of years, generally speaking, their cultures developed in a parallel fashion rather than becoming intertwined. And, as this essay has shown, the Protestant and Catholic identities' contrasts were evident in numerous aspects of religion and culture during the period 1949-1993.