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**BEYOND THE CATHOLIC-PROTESTANT  
DIVIDE: RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC  
DIVERSITY IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH  
OF IRELAND**

**Alice Feldman**

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**IBIS working paper no. 31**

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**BEYOND THE CATHOLIC-PROTESTANT DIVIDE: RELIGIOUS  
AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH OF  
IRELAND**

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## ABSTRACT

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### **BEYOND THE CATHOLIC-PROTESTANT DIVIDE: RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH OF IRELAND**

This paper explores the challenges posed by the ethnic diversification of contemporary Irish society for conventional understandings of and responses to issues of religion, community and politics. It argues that the particularities of social and institutional histories and structures in the North and South have eclipsed wider considerations of both race and ethnicity and religious identity beyond the Catholic-Protestant divide. This has, in turn, served to obscure the many dynamic changes that such diversity has catalysed both within Irish civil society generally, and within the island's traditional religious institutions themselves. The paper discusses the promises and potentials of conceptualising religion or religious identity and the relationships between religion and ethnicity within broader cultural and political fields, and their implications for the "new" (multicultural) Ireland.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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**Alice Feldman** is a lecturer in sociology at University College Dublin. Her research interests are in the areas of diversity, mobilisation and social change taking place in a variety of national and institutional contexts, and she is currently working on the relationships between ethnic minority communities and the voluntary sector in Ireland. Her recent publications include “Othering knowledge and unknowing law: oppositional narratives in the American Indian religious freedom struggle”, *Journal of social and legal studies*, 9 (4) 2000; “Transforming peoples and subverting states: a pedagogical approach to the international indigenous peoples movement”, *Ethnicities*, 1 (2) 2001; *Religious discrimination in England and Wales: Home Office research report 220* (co-author; London: Home Office, 2001); *Research, development and critical interculturalism: a study on the participation of refugees and asylum seekers in research and development initiatives* (co-author; Dublin: Social Science Research Centre, 2002).



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# BEYOND THE CATHOLIC-PROTESTANT DIVIDE: RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH OF IRELAND

Alice Feldman

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## INTRODUCTION

I arrived in Belfast from the USA in 1996. One afternoon, while chatting to a few friends who were keen to get my socialisation process started on the right track, they asked me if I was Catholic or Protestant. In an effort to find the least problematic way of responding, I drew on an identity available to me, although rarely invoked as I am not practicing, and replied (quite pleased with myself) that I was Jewish. To which they responded, “Catholic Jew or Protestant Jew?”!

Having come from a country where every identity and interest has its own politics, (and where issues of religious freedom figured prominently in my research with respect to religious practices that have been prohibited or subverted as in the case of such groups as the Amish and American Indians) this turn of phrase impressed me as quite a creative way of maintaining a focus on a particular subject: as a way of having a particular conversation (and engaging a familiar rite of passage). Years later, following subsequent research and involvement with many faith communities in England, Wales and Ireland, it strikes me that, taken to its logical conclusion—that is, asking if one is “a Catholic Hindu or a Protestant Hindu”, “a Catholic Muslim or Protestant Muslim” (or a Muslim Catholic or Muslim Protestant, I suppose)—it illustrates the ways in which this particular conversation prevents or sidelines other equally important and pressing conversations, as well as limiting its own viability (not to mention constituting a significant, although unintended insult).

Following my time in Belfast, I spent a few years in England, 18 months of which were spent working on a Home Office research project on religious discrimination in England and Wales carried out by the University of Derby. For this project I interviewed over 300 people representing over 20 different faith communities. Interfaith networks, groups and initiatives had a significant presence in everyday life and institutional landscapes. These activities served to highlight and create contexts in which groups could engage with each other, through issues relating to both the commonalities and shared aspirations of these communities as well as their differences. For example, a key debate of the day concerned whether new religions or new religious movements (a term used to refer to pagan communities) were, in fact, new in light of the ancient beliefs and practices from which they drew.

So upon my move to Dublin, and having this recent and intense experience in the forefront of my mind, upon browsing through a newspaper, my eyes fastened on a headline concerning inter-faith relations in Ireland. I quickly scanned the article to find that it was about the tensions underpinning relations between the Catholic



Church and the Church of Ireland, describing a debate about communion and cross-community church attendance. It was a bit of a jolt.

Such anecdotes are instructive insofar as they illustrate the absence of considerations of ethnic and religious diversity, beyond mainstream ethno-national Catholic and Protestant identities at political and religious institutional levels as well as in the contexts of research and analysis. It is increasingly evident that such omissions lead to ineffective politics and a host of new social problems. Yet they also result in missed opportunities with regard to insights into the nature of a changing, multi-cultural Ireland.

The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to introduce a few new elements to the lens through which the issues of religion, community and politics on the island of Ireland are typically viewed: namely religious and ethnic diversity beyond that which has historically been associated with the “two-community”, Catholic-Protestant dichotomy. It will explore the nature of this diversity and what its inclusion in this long-standing conversation has to offer in terms of expanding the conventional parameters of these debates. It will also consider the implications of the ways in which ethnic and religious diversity have (or have not) been addressed in Ireland and how widening the field of analysis can contribute to developing greater insights into the dynamic social changes that characterise contemporary Ireland as a whole.

### **RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY, DISCRIMINATION AND ACCOMMODATION: EXAMPLES FROM ENGLAND AND WALES**

In 1999, the University of Derby carried out research for the British Home Office on the nature and extent of religious discrimination in England and Wales. Interviewees in the Derby project spoke at great length about the ways in which they, their communities and the wider society perceived and constructed their identities and the ways in which religion played a pervasive role in everyday social and institutional settings. All groups felt discriminated against, including people from the array of Christian faiths, although in different ways and at different levels. Many noted that often it was less overt and more subtle than other forms of discrimination such as racial harassment, but often just as painful: “there’s a whole part of your life that people don’t care about” (Weller et al., 2001: 103).

But, unlike race or ethnicity, people reported that, in the eyes of politicians, service providers, employers and society at large, religion is not seen to be intrinsic to identity as race is. They observed that in an increasingly secular society, people assume that one’s religious identity is negotiable, that it can be bargained away: “it’s a choice and therefore people can choose to live without it—or live without it at least at certain times. In this fashion, people are saying that they don’t want you to change who you are, but just what you do at certain times” (Weller et al., 2001: 18). Because of this, one interviewee felt that a focus on religious identity and difference was even more useful than one on race in terms of discrimination and conflict, as it cuts across the whole continuum of identity—including people who do and do not want to be seen as different.

The Derby Report reflected the struggles of faith communities to maintain a space to live the lives their religious beliefs dictate, and a place within an increasingly secular society and avowedly secular state. It also highlighted the many innovations stemming from positive initiatives in response to both religious and ethnic diversity in England and Wales. It showcased the imagination and resourcefulness of many people throughout the statutory and the third sectors in Britain who are seeking to extend the boundaries of what has constituted “the way things are or the way things work” and thus moves us to reconsider what is possible when it comes to cultivating a functional and diverse society.

Interviewees drew attention to chronic problems of ignorance and lack of education regarding the nature of their communities and practices. They pointed to omissions of and superficial actions regarding their needs and experiences rather than mainstreamed and integrated responses. Despite this, they also emphasised the many innovations that these issues have catalysed including:

- greater involvement of faith communities within local government structures, including equality officers in local councils who liaise with local inter-faith groups, increasing inclusion of faith representatives in consultative structures, particularly stemming from local implementation of national regeneration initiatives;
- inter-agency cooperation, linking actions and information-sharing around issues of anti-social behaviour, racism and religious discrimination;
- a greater concern and consultation regarding diversity by the police, including inter-ethnic and religious advisory groups, hosting of annual multicultural evenings, diversity training for officers and integrating these issues within the structure of police-community relations;
- creative accommodation of diverse religious needs in the public and service provision spheres, including multi-faith prayer rooms in public facilities, refinement of policies relating to areas most central in community interfaces (such as planning); funding strategies that grapple with new understandings and practices concerning the distinction and overlap between cultural and religious activities, and their roles in society; extensive expansion of school curricula and administrative practices, and so on;
- often notable commitment to diversity training on the parts of both employers and service providers, and the development of work environments actively supportive of diverse religious needs, in both public and private spheres based on the acknowledgement that such steps are positive and necessary investments.

Different developments have taken place on the island of Ireland for a variety of reasons. The demands for change stemming from both religious and ethnic diversity have not been as great in comparison with the longer standing diversity among populations of England and Wales. As a result, there have not been the same advancements, opportunities and channels for change, and the infrastructures to support them in Ireland. There has also been a peculiar blindspot towards—even resis-

tance to—the acknowledgement of and engagement with debates concerning difference at a number of levels.

The next section examines how discussions of difference have been structured and how they are evolving. It briefly examines key social and institutional circumstances that have, in effect, sidelined deeper discussion of and response to issues of ethnic and religious diversity in the North and South.

### **THE ECLIPSE OF DIVERSITY IN IRELAND**

Discussions regarding minority ethnic communities in the North and South of Ireland have been relegated largely to debates about racism and, recently, linked almost exclusively to issues concerning refugees and asylum seekers. Meaningful public discussions and official responses to the issue of racism have themselves been, until recently, eclipsed by or overlooked for a number of reasons including: (1) the preoccupation with a two-community, Catholic-Protestant focus that has rendered whole communities invisible; (2) the view that small population numbers render these issues unimportant practically and politically; (3) that, for the South in particular being characterised as “mono-cultural”, this is all simply “new”; and (4) rather than an outgrowth of the nature and history of Irish society, these problems arise in, with and through the presence of people who become the victims of racism themselves.

The religious minorities that fall outside the Catholic-Protestant focus are typically members of groups most subject to racism. How religious diversity is viewed and responded to is therefore closely linked to the response, or the lack of it, to ethnic diversity. And, as noted by participants in the Derby project, both are inextricably linked to racism and/or xenophobia. They are thus shaped by what McVeigh (1992) refers to as the “specificity of Irish racism”. While a detailed discussion of racism in Ireland is beyond the scope of this paper, a few key points in relation to McVeigh’s arguments are worth highlighting.

McVeigh (1992, 1996) draws attention to the following dynamics and legacies that create the foundation for Irish racism to varying extents in both the North and the South:

- the racialisation and subsequent inferiorisation of Irishness, through the broad, European colonial process and the British colonisation of Ireland;
- the racism experienced by the Irish diaspora in emigration destinations such as North America, as well as through Irish participation in the colonial administration of British colonies like India, and its subsequent repatriation in Ireland upon their return;
- the exclusivity of the post-colonial, post-independence construction of Irish nationalism and Irishness;

- the role of Irish antisemitism, in the contexts of the denunciations of Jews under the guise of religious doctrine, pro-Nazi political standpoints, and the notion that Jews had dual or overriding loyalties and so could not be fully trusted or were unable understand things Irish, despite being born in Ireland.

As regards diversity, other than Travellers, the primary focus of public and academic attention to national minorities has been on religious communities, like Protestants and Jews. The religiosity of Catholic Irish nationalism—its inherent antisemitic doctrinal elements and its oppositional construction vis-a-vis Protestants (the latter fuelled by the reinvigoration of historic colonial tensions in the Northern conflict)—prevails even in the contexts of increasing secularisation in the South. Thus, despite changes in constructions of Irishness, Fanning (2002: 3) notes that “it continues to be defined within a monocultural religious-ethnic construction of nation”.

It is important here to recall the international dissemination of this nationalism through the work of missionaries, the zenith of which, Fanning (2002: 15) observes, coincided with the emergence of the Irish state, whereby national pride and Catholic religiosity became fused: “The extension of Ireland’s spiritual glory in the missions was linked to the emergence of a Catholic Irish nation at home”, and later, in a struggle to reunite Irish after the civil war. He also argues that the image of the “black baby” arising from these years lives on, as do the paternalistic and inferiorising discourses and stereotypes regarding Africans in particular (2002: 16). These legacies continue to shape attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers today, despite the fact that aid agencies are increasingly secular. They underpin current misinformation and prejudices relating to assumptions that refugees and asylum seekers are draining the system, the refusal to recognise their qualifications, and so on, creating spaces conducive for xenophobic and racist discourse to thrive.

As demonstrated by MacGréil’s (1996) update of his 1978 study, the negative attitudes and racist stereotypes stemming from all of these historical factors continue to be formidable in contemporary Irish society. There is thus a need to examine aspects of past, the “old racisms” of anti-Traveller views and antisemitism, to understand how they have helped to provide a “bedrock for new prejudices to thrive ... [how] the language and images of yesteryear provide templates for the articulations of new fears, about a new group of Others/Strangers/Aliens” (Goldstone, 2002: 168). The links with the socio-religious elements of antisemitism are instructive for societies so deeply enmeshed in a denominational worldview that is unreflexive with regard to the nature of its own racism.

Participants in the Derby project not only identified links and relationships between racism and religious discrimination, but many also noted that any expression of difference can initiate harassment (Weller et al., 2000). This is especially so in the xenophobia-conducive climate of embattled communities coping with decades of social exclusion, disadvantage and policy failures. Recent and ongoing reports in the North and South of the following incidents bear this out: the harassment of Irish converts to Islam, Sikhs being mistaken for Iraqi terrorists because of their turbans,

any people of Asian descent being called “pakis”, claims that refugees and asylum seekers are “bogus” and are living off the state, and so on.

This is further complicated by the tendency for those who are more religiously active or observant to be seen as “weird” or “backward”, and therefore to have a greater chance of being alienated, humiliated or harassed, especially in an increasingly secular society that is moving away from and critical of, religious traditions and institutions (Weller et al., 2001). This poses particular problems for those who are both ethnically and religiously different from the mainstream in terms of their attempts and ability to “fit in”, and who may have certain requirements relating to dress, food, drink, etc., obstructing their participation in every day Irish activities (Weller et al., 2001).

In such contexts, it is ever more necessary to highlight and gain further insight into the reasons why issues of diversity and the needs of minority ethnic communities—outside policies specifically relating to racism or anti-racism or legal equalities protections—are for the most part still overlooked in the development of policy statements, strategies, and implementation plans. It is imperative that issues relating to emerging national minorities are not ghettoised in the contexts of the “problem” with racism, and that their needs are simply second thoughts or “add-ons”. Yet, as the next section illustrates, attempts by governments to determine the religious and ethnic make-up of increasingly diverse communities on the island of Ireland are insufficient for developing effective, mainstreamed policies and providing a foundation for effective social analysis.

### **DEMOGRAPHICS OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCE IN THE NORTH AND SOUTH OF IRELAND**

Accurate demographic information and statistics concerning the religious and ethnic breakdown of current populations in the North and South of Ireland are hard to come by. The 2001 Census carried out in the North included for the first time a question on ethnic identification, the results of which are reflected in table 1.

**Table 1: Ethnic Breakdown, Northern Ireland Census, 2001**

Population	Total	Population	Total
All Persons	1,685,247	Other Asian	191
“Non-White”	14,259	Black Caribbean	254
Irish Traveller	1,715	Black African	491
Mixed	3,313	Other Black	381
Indian	1,572	Chinese	4,144
Pakistani	661	Other Ethnic	1,291
Bangladeshi	246		

Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2003

However, information regarding the breakdown of religious diversity beyond general categories of Catholic (737,412 people), Protestant and Other Christian-related

(895,377 people), Other (9,566), and None (45,909) fails to provide as rich a picture of religious presence and practice as the ethnic identity questions does. The consequences of this gap extend beyond the lack of recognition of small but growing communities of Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Baha'is and Buddhists, although this is an important issue in its own right. But given the political implications of Catholic-Protestant identification and the link between religious affiliation and political preference, such an oversight takes on greater salience. While the 9,566 "Other" people represent a small percentage of the population, their acknowledgment and inclusion in discussions concerning the future of civil and political society in the North is increasingly import. This is especially so if, as Osbourne (2002) notes, as fertility rates among Catholic and Protestant populations become similar, "the main determinant of population changes will probably be decided by migrants". He adds, however, that "it is these groups that we know least about". For example, members of African churches would typically constitute members of churches and faiths that would fall under the "Protestant and Other Christian-related" category. Yet due to the way the census statistics are presented, they may be included in larger political debates where such an identification might be unrelated or inappropriate.

An ethnicity question was not included in the 2002 Census in the South. According to the Irish government, a question on ethnicity was excluded from the 2002 census because it was deemed to be "too sensitive" and there was not sufficient time to pilot-test a sample question prior to the administration of the census (although a question on membership in the Traveller community was included without such concern).<sup>1</sup> Thus, despite the significant increases in racism and in the nature of immigration to the state that have taken place over the past 10 years, official, accurate records remain elusive. The nearest type of information, shown in table 2, is provided by a question on "nationality" that included only three categories: "Irish", "other" and "none", with a space to write in one's choice under "other". While the detailed census report relating to this and other questions included in the migration chapter are forthcoming, the preliminary report noted that over 21,000 people identified an African state as their country of nationality, over 28,000 an Asian country and over 2,300 reporting multiple nationalities.<sup>2</sup>

The discussion of this question and the data it generated is included in the "migration" chapter of the census report, which deals primarily with the effect of migration by and on Irish nationals and with regard to the Irish diaspora. This is reflected in the other questions concerning usual place of residence, change in residence since last year, those who lived outside the state for one year or more, and country of previous residence. Information generated (or sought) by the census does little to illuminate the contemporary, ethnically diverse nature of Irish society, either in terms of its evolution or consequences. Moreover, it actually derails informed con-

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<sup>1</sup> Stated in the draft of the Irish Government's first report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racism, currently being completed by the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform.

<sup>2</sup> It is unclear why the data pertaining to African and Asian nationality are not disaggregated.

sideration of issues pertaining to minority ethnic communities by ghettoising them within an established focus on Irish emigration. This, in turn, reinforces exclusionary discourses of otherness, alien or non-national, stranger and so on, that locate “problems” with “newcomers” and also clouds issues relating to “indigenous” ethnically diverse communities such as Travellers and Black Irish.

**Table 2: Nationality of Persons Usually Resident and Present in the State, Census, Republic of Ireland, 2002**

Nationality	Total	Nationality	Total
Total Irish	3,584,975	France	6,363
Irish	3,535,676	Germany	7,216
Irish-English	20,491	Greece	253
Irish-American	12,387	Italy	3,770
Irish-European	4,172	Luxembourg	16
Irish-Other	12,249	Netherlands	3,108
Non-Irish	224,261	Portugal	687
EU	133,436	Spain	4,436
Austria	553	Sweden	1,262
Belgium	789	UK	103,476
Denmark	631	Rest of Europe	23,105
Finland	876	Romania	4,978
		Russia	2,703

Source: Central Statistics Office, 2003

It could thus be argued that the nationality question (at least in the absence of any other related questions) is more offensive or harmful than one on ethnicity would have been. Given the importance of adequate demographic monitoring in effective policy-making and resource allocation, the government’s failure to seek accurate information concerning the population it is meant to serve seems to reflect an unwillingness to fulfil such obligations. Without being linked to questions concerning residency, leave to remain, work visas and other categories specifically associated with refugees, asylum seekers and foreign workers, there is no clear statement that such people who are living in Ireland are entitled to its services and protections. It is also impossible to analyse the nature and implications of the transition of “new minority” or “immigrant” communities in Ireland to those of national minorities.

In contrast to the North, the published data from the southern census include a fairly detailed breakdown of religious identification (see table 3) that includes not only diversity among Christian traditions, but also a variety of religions of Asian origin.<sup>3</sup> It also reports a notable increase, since 1991, of respondents identifying themselves as Muslim (19,147, from 3,875 in 1991), Buddhists (3,894, from 986 in 1991), Apostolic/Pentecostal (3,152, from 285), Hindu (3,099, from 953) and “other” (8,920, from 2,197 in 1991).

<sup>3</sup> It does not, however, report any identification as Sikh.

A recent report by the Irish Council of Churches (ICC) sheds some light on the fledgling ethnic diversity among Christian congregations and faith communities in the Republic, and represents perhaps the only published information concerning the practices of immigrant communities, at least as far as Christian-based faiths go (Irish Council of Churches, 2002). Table 4 provides an overview of the development of ethnically diverse Christian churches and congregations reported by the ICC.

**Table 3: Population by religion, 1991-2002**

Religion	1991	2002	Change 1991-2002
Roman Catholic	3,228,327	3,462,606	234,279
Church of Ireland (incl. Protestant)	89,187	115,611	26,424
Christian (unspecified)	16,329	21,403	5,074
Presbyterian	13,199	20,582	7,383
Muslim (Islamic)	3,875	19,147	15,272
Orthodox	358	10,437	10,079
Methodist	5,037	10,033	4,996
Jehovah's Witness	3,393	4,430	1,037
Buddhist	986	3,894	2,908
Evangelical	819	3,780	2,961
Apostolic or Pentecostal	285	3,152	2,867
Hindu	953	3,099	2,146
Lutheran	1,010	3,068	2,058
Baptist	1,156	2,265	1,109
Jewish	1,581	1,790	209
Pantheist	202	1,106	904
Agnostic	823	1,028	205
Quaker (Society of Friends)	749	859	110
Latter Day Saints (Mormon)	853	833	-20
Lapsed Roman Catholic	3,749	590	-3,159
Atheist	320	500	180
Baha'i	430	490	60
Brethren	256	222	-34
Other stated religions	2,197	8,920	6,723
No religion	66,270	138,264	71,994

Source: Central Statistics Office, 2003

**Table 4: Diversity among Christian traditions in the Republic of Ireland**

Community	Type of church	No. in congregation
African (population of 30,000)	Black Majority Churches, incl: Pentecostal, Apostolic, African Indigenous, White Garment and Independent	10,000
Romanian (population of approxi- mately 20,000)	Romanian Orthodox Romanian Greek Catholic Seventh Day Adventist Romanian Church Roma fellowships	1,000 100-300 100 400 2,000



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Russian (population of 10,000)	Russian Orthodox	6,000 (including 12 nationalities)
Other Communities	Greek Orthodox	160+/400+ (including Greek, Greek Cypriot, Serb, Romanian and Palestinian)
	Coptic Orthodox	150+

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Source: Irish Council of Churches, 2002

Additionally, the report notes that, among established Christian congregations in the South, Methodist and Presbyterian churches are the only ones that reported an increase in attendees from refugee, asylum seeker or other “new” immigrant communities. This increase is quite small, involving some where around 1000 additional members overall for the churches responding to the questionnaire. Respondents attributed such a small number of new members to the transient nature of these communities. The report also highlights the potential attraction of Irish Pentecostal, Evangelical and new churches to those who were members of more evangelically-oriented churches in their home countries.

## RELIGION AND DIVERSITY IN IRISH LIFE

### *The global contexts of religion in Ireland*

In their introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of migration studies*, Godziak and Shandy insightfully summarise the state of the field:

Despite the diversity of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices that sustain many refugees and forced migrants in their processes of displacement, migration, and integration in to the host society, contemporary considerations among both researchers and policy makers tend to neglect the role of religion and spirituality as a source of emotional and cognitive support, a form of social and political expression and mobilization, and a vehicle for community building and group identity. Despite the fact that religious persecution figures prominently in the UN definition of a refugee and faith-based organizations provide emergency relief to refugees, facilitate the settlement of refugees and provide them with a wide range of social services, public debates about migration and displacement on the international and national levels have tended to ignore religious issues. This neglect can also be seen in scholarly treatments of religion and spirituality among refugee populations (Godziak and Shandy, 2002: 129).

When religion is taken into consideration in this way, it is usually in the contexts of its role in conflict settings, i.e., the politicisation of religious identity and the subsequent catalyst it provides for flight. As such, religion constitutes a central basis for claiming and gaining asylum, and is institutionalised as part of the legal definition of a refugee. In most cases, however, in terms of policy and provision as well as academic scholarship, the fulfilment of religious needs and the promotion of faith community development fails to attract adequate attention, and the religious lives and institutions associated with “new (immigrant) communities” carries on unnoticed.

Yet it is important to highlight the historical links between international and national religious issues. The role of missionary work is often underestimated in countries typically associated with the creation and arrival of refugees. This is a notable omission in the case of Ireland, as missionary work has played such a long and integral role in Irish history and society. People ask, “why Ireland?” with regard to the arrival of an increasing number of refugees. The common discourse turns on the assumption that the country is a “soft touch” with respect to asylum policy, and this has created a “pull factor”, drawing opportunists to the island. Many refugees, in fact, when asked “why Ireland?” respond that they have always known of and felt an affinity with the island because, as long as they can remember, missionaries either visited or were a part of their communities (Rolston and Shannon, 2002).

Missionary work further served to contribute to transformations in Irish society in that “radical new ideas about democratising parish life or applying the principles of liberation theology, learned in Africa or South America” were brought back with the return of Irish priests, nuns and development workers (Kiberd, 2001: 49). Also overlooked is the influence of religious factors in the process and consequences of international relief work. Godziak and Shandy highlight crucial ethical dilemmas stemming from the religious missions of denominational refugee resettlement organizations by posing the questions:

In what ways does religious affiliation influence the selection process of groups for assistance? What opportunities and constraints govern cross-faith efforts? What is the influence of refugee workers’ training in secular therapeutic interventions? The contributions stemming from a focus on religious diversity, and the ethnic diversity within religious communities, cut across disciplines, from history to sociology, development studies to policy analysis (Godziak and Shandy, 2002: 133).

These questions are particularly salient because they now apply both to the development and aid work of religious organisations undertake internationally as well as to their increasing participation in work directed towards the situation of refugees or asylum seekers and anti-racism here at home.

### ***Faith-based organisations, community development and civil society***

The social capital generated by faith-based organisations, both in general and in relation to Ireland specifically, has received increasing attention among academics in recent years (Bacon, 2002). According to Godziak and Shandy (2002), in the case of immigrants and refugees, religious beliefs and organisations play a particularly important role in facilitating the development of communities by defining their identity, coping with trauma (a new area of study), serving as the basis for interpreting experiences of their journeys, and managing the transition and integration within the country of settlement. Religious beliefs and institutions thus provide a basis for community continuity and maintenance. In fact, Godziak and Shandy (2002: 131) argue that “the establishment of permanent religious institutions is a sign of an enduring, committed presence of newcomer religious communities in their new homelands”.

Ugba's (2003) recent work concerning the study of the role and dynamics of African churches in the Republic confirms this positive role. Rather than contributing to the development of ethnic ghettos within the mainstream society, he conceptualises these churches as helping more to create "enclaves", in both a psychological and social sense, and as serving as platforms for interaction, communication and solidarity, which in turn constitute the basis for self-mobilisation and for negotiating a place in the wider community. For "new" minority communities who are particularly vulnerable in their positions as outsiders (and often unwanted outsiders) and in terms of the pressures stemming from significant material disadvantage, such comfort and support is particularly critical.

Current research on "new" minority community and voluntary organisations in the North and South of Ireland shows that mobilisation on the basis of ethnic and religious identities is not imminent at this time (Feldman, 2003). This is because minority ethnic communities are focusing their organising activities almost exclusively on meeting basic needs (such as culturally appropriate service provision) rather than on more conventional or extensive forms of identity politics or political mobilisation (such as standing for office, lobbying and so on, as seen in Britain and elsewhere in Europe). Religious organisation, for the most part, is still located on the periphery of the conventional, institutional landscape of the community and voluntary sectors, in the sphere of the pastoral and communal rather than key civil society actors. But faith communities and religious institutions do provide key foundations for the development of immigrant (and increasingly national minority) communities. As Ugba (2003) notes, they provide platforms from which such mobilisation springs. New initiatives addressing voter registration, for example, will bring a further focus on and engagement with local and national political structures.

Moreover, in terms of giving rise to self-help, community development, voluntary work and other such activities, churches and faith-based organisations often avoid many of the problems of more conventional, minority-led third sector organisations. They are generally financially self-sustaining, centrally organised, and provide immediate benefits and returns given the religious and spiritual rewards of participation. This contrasts notably with the situation of most community and voluntary organisations. These efforts typically involve long hours of unpaid work, are plagued by chronic lack of resources and are directed towards long-term goals that are, inevitably, slow in coming to fruition. In this context, most volunteers are more apt to wonder "what is this organisation doing for me or my community?".<sup>4</sup> With respect to Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, and often Jews, for example, the place of worship typically serves as the hub of all cultural and civil society-based activities for the community. Typically functioning more behind the scenes rather than visibly in society, faith-based organisations, particularly among "new" minority communities, are a growing component of changes—and in many ways, continuities—in the broad landscape of

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<sup>4</sup> Stated by a participant at a capacity building seminar for minority-led organisations hosted by the Amnesty International Anti-Racism Policy Group, February 2003.

Irish social and civil society (and the historical role or influence of religious-based philanthropy and volunteerism).

Godziak and Shandy (2002) also note that the role of religion is a contradictory one: it both facilitates and impedes integration, and can create a powerful, and often problematic, role for spiritual leaders and faith-based organisations in resettlement and integration. Many people working in refugee and asylum seeker support or solidarity groups in Ireland have found significant obstacles posed by gatekeepers in the hostels in which asylum seekers are living, who are often religious or church leaders and who subvert contact with community workers and service providers, for example, with regard to women's issues or domestic violence. Moreover, the links between religious institutions and dictates and the politicisation of identities are well known, as are conflicts around the accommodation of practices, whether in the contexts of expanding religious education in schools, providing for alternative holidays by employers, or protection from female genital mutilation and forced marriages. There is the recognition that, in Britain for example, as Bacon (2002) observes, despite the government turning to faith communities, they are still viewed with suspicion, and seen as being outside of what is considered the "conventional" and secular third sector.

### ***Innovations in the third sector work of traditional Christian organisations***

The rapid rise in recent years in the numbers of individuals seeking refuge and asylum in Ireland has led to a focus on the complexities of policy and provision for such individuals, as well as issues related to integration and racism. The voluntary sector has been a focal point for contact with and support for refugees and asylum-seekers in order to supplement official policy and service provision. While the third sector has historically played a significant role in Irish society, many voluntary (and statutory) organisations are now struggling to expand their conventional remits to include anti-racist and interculturalist initiatives. Their unique roles in and capacities for community empowerment and participative democracy place them in a critical position to respond to these contemporary dilemmas.

Many voluntary and statutory organisations are now struggling to include anti-racist and interculturalist initiatives and/or to expand their capacity to respond to the needs of "new" minority communities (Feldman et al., 2002; Faughnan and O'Donovan, 2002). Community development and newly established support groups in particular have been struggling to fill in gaps left by often unplanned, under-resourced and poorly implemented government policy and service provision. Such organisations must now extend their conventional focus on the social inclusion of marginalised "indigenous" Irish communities to develop specific initiatives and provide services that address the needs of refugees and asylum seekers. They are providing support services, such as needs assessments for example, for groups also involved in these activities, and are becoming key members of emerging solidarity networks. These factors have catalysed a dynamic synthesis and cross-fertilisation of community development, development education, anti-racism or interculturalism, human rights or social justice and research-based initiatives.

Religious institutions have played a longstanding role in the Irish third sector. As such, innovations taking place within the community and voluntary sector as a whole have both reflected and catalysed new practices within the more conventional charity work of traditional Catholic and Protestant organisations in Ireland. Numerous organisations such as the Vincentians, the Dominicans and the Little Sisters of the Assumption, for example, as well as individual religious have become integral to work being done in the areas of refugees and asylum seekers and anti-racism more broadly. Work undertaken in these areas has expanded the nature and breadth of religious institutions' participation in rights and justice work at local, national and international levels. One representative of the Catholic Church in the South observed that, in a sense, the Republic of Ireland is playing catch-up with England and Wales regarding issues of interculturalism and the cultivation of a long-term ethos regarding the realities of diversity.<sup>5</sup> She reported that while activities vary among parishes, a variety of ground-breaking, interfaith and inter-church activities have been organised for special occasions including New Year, Ramadan, St Patrick's Day and World Refugee Day, often combining them with cultural events involving food, music and dance. She noted that such events are "approached with care", and not equated with Mass and formal worship. As reflected in the ICC report, Methodist and Presbyterian churches have taken the lead in involving people from other backgrounds and traditions in the contexts of worship and sharing space for their services. Ethnically diverse church choirs have also been established, such as the Kilkenny Gospel Choir.

The Catholic Church has begun to respond more strongly to racism in Ireland and has taken active steps in the wake of the 2001 World Conference Against Racism. This is reflected in the conference entitled *Responding to racism*, which was held in 2001, to "explore further the scriptural and doctrinal basis for the Catholic Church's opposition to racism and to work towards a definition of 'good practice' in the everyday life of the Catholic Community, in welcoming the 'stranger' and in opposing racism". Dr Sean Brady, Archbishop of Armagh opened the conference, which enjoyed a lengthy discussion of the array of forms that racism could take, posing a challenge to participants to go beyond denunciations and develop a "comprehensive pastoral response".<sup>6</sup>

The establishment of the Refugee Project is a noteworthy example of these objectives. The project is involved in both service provision and activities supporting policy change in civil society and statutory contexts with respect to refugees and asylum seekers. It facilitates an inter-church group called the Churches' Asylum Network (CAN) that includes groups and individuals involved in similar work. Nearly all the dioceses have a representative in CAN to ensure a local focal point for this work. The group meets every two months for information sharing and often provides an opportunity for input or presentation from a visitor from a key statutory agency. It links with other EU and European Church groups such as the Churches'

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<sup>5</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>6</sup> See [www.catholiccommunications.ie/Pressrel/5-feb-2001.html](http://www.catholiccommunications.ie/Pressrel/5-feb-2001.html)

Commission on Migrants and Emigrants, the Commission of Episcopal Conferences of the EU and the Migration Working Group of Caritas Europe. The Refugee Project increasingly has more contact with minority-led churches and meetings with pastors in collaboration with the ICC, leading to the nomination of a contact person representing these churches on CAN.

The Refugee Project also works with the organisation Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) and the Churches' Commission on Racial Justice (CCRJ), and participates in such activities as the celebration of the Racial Justice Sunday (2 September) designated by the CCRJ even though an official day has not been set in Ireland.<sup>7</sup> The refugee project is an official link with the CCRJ even though the Catholic Church in Ireland is not an official member of CTBI. This work also provides a link to the longstanding and unique tradition of involvement in racial justice and minority rights on the part of the World Council of Churches.

Working from some of the momentum of inter-faith work and institutions developed in England and Wales, the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum was established in 1993, following extensive discussions among members of ethnic and religious communities. The forum "aims to promote friendship and mutual understanding across the spectrum of religious and ethnic life in Northern Ireland and to encourage charitable purposes for the community as a whole". It is comprised of members of the Jewish, Baha'i, Muslim, Hindu, Chinese, Buddhist, Sikh, Catholic and Protestant communities.

In 1998 the first international Multifaith Conference on Religion, Community and Conflict was held in Northern Ireland.<sup>8</sup> It included international speakers involved in peace-building projects around the world as well as representatives of churches, minority religions and faith-based as well as community organisations for two days of discussion about issues relating to religion, community and conflict and to develop and disseminate new models of community relations for peace workers and policy makers. The conference was coordinated by such organisations as Armagh City and District Partnership and Council, the Irish School of Ecumenics, Northern Ireland Interfaith Forum, as well as Action for Peoples in Conflict and the World Conference of Religions for Peace. The conference also received support from the Community Relations Councils of Armagh and Belfast.

## **CONCLUSION**

A focus on ethnic and religious diversity beyond the Catholic-Protestant divide in such areas of study as ethno-nationalism or secularisation invites the consideration of conceptual and empirical issues quite different from those typically examined with regard to religion, community and politics in Ireland. Do they fit? Do they be-

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<sup>7</sup> See [www.ctbi.org.uk](http://www.ctbi.org.uk)

<sup>8</sup> See [www.interfaith-centre.org/conf/armagh98/press.htm](http://www.interfaith-centre.org/conf/armagh98/press.htm)

long in this conversation? Can they be integrated with conventional categories and discourses to apprehend the emerging issues related to a multi-cultural Ireland? Can we expand our lens to include all communities in Ireland without losing some of the acuity that has been cultivated with regard to the conflict in the North or the peculiarities of the South?

This review of current transformations in religious and ethnic diversity in Ireland highlights the salience of broader considerations of religion both in the global contexts of migration and within local and national contexts of resettlement, integration and the evolution of multi-cultural societies. In both cases it is imperative that we know about our neighbours, our fellow communities, both casually and socially, as well as in terms of institutional responses necessary to effectively respond to the needs and rights of burgeoning national minorities, in religious as well as broader socio-political and economic terms. Such discussions, along with those historically held with respect to religion, politics, identity and community in the North and South of Ireland, must be sustained and advanced. As history has shown, failure to do so impairs the ability to respond to and prevent a host of new conflicts and social problems.

Longley (2001) argues that “mono-cultural attitudes have been changing more rapidly in the Republic. There exclusivism is directly challenged by pluralism; whereas the North’s twin blocs perpetually squeeze the pluralistic centre”. Thus the preoccupation with the Catholic-Protestant dichotomy undermines the momentum and infrastructure arising from interfaith collaboration and greater inclusion of religious communities in the policy making process that is taking place in the rest of the UK. It also takes away from the space that has been created by the ceasefires and peace process for the voices of other minority ethnic communities to be heard. The exclusion of minority ethnic communities within discussions, visions and strategies relating to peace and reconciliation in the North because they have not been “directly implicated” in the history of the conflict<sup>9</sup> effectively places them in a no-man’s land—left out of the imagined future and institutional transformations of society in the North.

However, Longley also cautions that “two broad obstacles remain to a fully multi-cultural Ireland. The first is when multi-culturalism is a minimalist goal; the second, when it is not necessarily seen as a desirable or valued goal” (2001: 5). The commitment and will in Ireland to embrace multiculturalism (as a broad policy which seeks to accommodate and nurture diversity in society) at the institutional level is, at best, unclear. The failure of the Irish government to take a strong stand against racism and the implementation of policies that fuel segregation and anti-immigration sentiments, coupled with the lack of systematic monitoring and analysis of the ethnic diversity of the populace does not bode well for the “new” Ireland. The avoidance of its obligations to fully and effectively respond to the needs of an

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<sup>9</sup> This was the reason for limiting the scope of recent research pertaining to social capital, faith based organisations and the revitalisation of civil society in Northern Ireland to Catholic and Protestant groups (Bacon 2002).

increasingly ethnically diverse society directly detracts from the valuing of multiculturalism.

Positive moves by traditional religious institutions in the South and North illustrate, however, that they can play a significant role in promoting good practice through their own activities and initiatives. This is particularly so for those whose focus extends beyond “other” Christians and beyond a conventional paternalistic discourse of need, and towards the expansion of inter-faith activity and discourse in the South. Removing obstacles to the development of more positive intercultural relations on the basis of religious identities—whether with regard to Black and Asian Christians or across religious faiths—is essential to this process as it creates additional foundations and opportunities for cross-community engagement and solidarity building.

Godziak and Shandy (2002: 133) observe that “viewing religion in the narrow and static manner in which it is sometimes conceptualized undercuts our ability to utilize religion as an analytic category”. They advocate broadening our concepts and purviews to include socio-political as well as spiritual dimensions of religion. This creates an opportunity to view difference as a resource and religious practices as everyday life manifestations of social engagement. It enables examination of how spiritual beliefs and religious identities mediate understandings of local religious institutions as well as shaping policies relating to social inclusion, equality and anti-discrimination. Thus, in order to develop effective analyses of social change in Ireland, religious identities, communities and practices must be seen within the full array of identities and differences to which people subscribe, rather than remaining relegated to very specific debates concerning ethnic conflict or ethno-nationalism, and excluded even within those.

Including ethnic diversity and the politics of “new” minority communities within more conventional research programmes and theoretical lenses concerning religion in Ireland would thus be interesting in itself. But it would also make important contributions to existing areas of scholarship in relation to peace and reconciliation in the North, and modernisation and secularisation in the South. Ultimately, we must ask ourselves whether it is still possible to develop useful analyses or effective policies that are based on what are now, in the current context, narrow conceptualisations of national identity, religion and religious institutions, community and so on that systematically exclude or ignore the influences and dynamics of ethnic diversity in the North and South of Ireland. If not, we must begin building a research programme that responds to such challenges, and which might integrate the following dimensions:

1. examination of the religious beliefs and practices of new faith and ethnic immigrant communities in everyday life contexts as integral dimensions of the changing landscape of religion in Ireland, as well as with regard to their social and policy implications. This includes understanding religiosity (as well as lack of observance) among newer immigrant communities as well as the views of those who have experienced religious conflict in their home countries.



2. placing analyses of religion and ethnicity, and the relationships between them, within a broader political field. In this fashion, religion may be conceptualised as more than just a marker of identity, as an indication of political preference or a vehicle for a thin, exclusive nationalism that maintains a framework of essentialised, static identities that belie its inherent and changing diversities. Such narrowness has proven to limit effective comprehension of the emergent mobilisation of new communities and national minority identities and, as such, the contexts of changing political relationships and even the changing nature of the third sector in Ireland itself.
3. situating understandings and debates concerning religion and ethnicity in terms of equalities or human rights paradigms, rather than limiting them solely to the creases of the Northern conflict or a status of perpetual other/stranger/foreigner in the South. This is necessary in order to facilitate a wider, more informed discussion of new forms of mobilisation around rights and social justice issues, and the effective development of fledgling equalities and human rights frameworks in both jurisdictions. It would also create an active, inclusive place for minority ethnic communities—faith-based and secular organisations—in the processes of peace and reconciliation, cross-border relationship building and in the development of a viable Irish society generally, North and South.
4. developing broader, more integrative theoretical frameworks such as that articulated by Bourdieu which provide adequate conceptual space and empirical guidance for mapping and analysing change taking place within intersecting fields of society, set within an historical context of change.<sup>10</sup>

Longley (2001: 13) observes that “where there has been culture war, we need a cultural peace, a cultural process. Indeed, Ireland’s great creative moments...have either stemmed from inter-cultural endeavour or from resistance to Irish monoculturalism”. This is, perhaps, where history can offer a way forward—a foundation for articulating and responding to current religious and ethnic transformations in Ireland. It is through exploring the nature of these moments with an eye toward pushing the boundaries of conventional and narrow conceptualisations of Irishness and Irish identities, religious and otherwise, that we may galvanise an enlightened and enlivened Irish nationalism that serves as momentum for, rather than an obstacle to, a healthy, multi-cultural society.

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<sup>10</sup> See for example the work Inglis (1998) has done with regard to the Catholic Church and social change in Ireland.

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