Abstract

This case study examines the complex and multifaceted role of religion in the conflict in Northern Ireland between Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists. The core text of the case study looks at the struggle through the lens of five primary questions: What are the historical origins of the conflict in Northern Ireland? How did domestic forces drive the conflict and its negotiated resolution? How important were international religious and political forces? What role did socioeconomic factors play? How did religion intersect with these other factors in driving outcomes? Alongside this core text, the case study features a timeline of key events, a guide to relevant political, nongovernmental, and religious organizations, and a list of topical publications for further reading on the subject.

About this Case Study

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## Resources

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At first glance, the conflict in Northern Ireland during the late twentieth century pitted Catholics against Protestants in a violent sectarian struggle. But the role of religion was, in fact, much more nuanced. The conflict was not a religious war; most religious leaders on both sides consistently opposed violence; the political views of many leaders and all of the major parties were grounded in economic and political calculations; and religious doctrine was never really at stake. Instead, religion served primarily as a marker of national identity. Protestant Ulster unionists sought to maintain the status of Northern Ireland as a part of the United Kingdom, and Catholic Irish nationalists wanted to unite it with the Republic of Ireland. Religious leaders on both sides of the conflict had some political and moral authority but also had to contend with political, economic, paramilitary, and other local elites concerned about maintaining and extending their influence. While faith communities and their leaders contributed to the successful completion of the 1998 Belfast Agreement (commonly known as the Good Friday Agreement) that put an end to major hostilities, domestic, international, and deeper socioeconomic forces played a more decisive role. The Northern Ireland case demonstrates not only how religious identity can exacerbate a conflict, but also how religious actors can use their authority to promote reconciliation in practice.
The Troubles in Northern Ireland stretched from the late 1960s through the Belfast Agreement of 1998. During that span, over 3,000 civilians, paramilitaries, police officers, British soldiers, and British and Irish officials were killed, with over 50,000 people seriously wounded (the equivalent in the US population would be a half million casualties). Rather than a full-scale war, the Troubles were a low-intensity conflict of large proportions, a blend of rioting, paramilitary attacks, guerrilla warfare, insurgent terrorism, and military and police operations. The majority of deaths took place at the hands of paramilitary groups, especially the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA)—nationalist and overwhelmingly Catholic—and the Ulster Defense Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force—unionist and overwhelmingly Protestant—though the British Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary were involved in about 11 percent of deaths. Even after the Good Friday Agreement, stable power sharing between Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists was slow to come. Finally, in 2005, the IRA destroyed its remaining substantial weapons cache under the watchful eyes of two clergymen and an international monitoring commission, and in 2007, under First Minister Rev. Dr. Ian Paisley and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness (his coequal) a power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly resumed its institutional existence.

The roots of the Troubles stretch back to the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when successive English and British conquests and reconquests of Ireland stripped the native Irish and old English Catholics of ownership of the land and replaced them with English and Scottish settlers. Today, to be Catholic in Ireland usually signals descent from the native Gaelic Irish or the old English Catholics who persisted after the sixteenth century revolution. To be Protestant signals likely descent from the colonial English and Scottish settlers.

The colonial conquests rendered Irish Catholics non-citizens: Catholics were not formally emancipated in the United Kingdom until 1829. The rise of Irish nationalism and unrest in the nineteenth century led to failed home rule efforts, the Easter Rising of 1916, and unrest that continued into 1923. The British partition of Ireland in 1920 divided that part of historic Ulster that had been most successfully incorporated into the United Kingdom (what became Northern Ireland) from the rest of Ireland, which became independent as the Irish Free State (later the Republic of Ireland). Fearful that they would one day be betrayed by Britain and that Irish nationalists were intent on forcibly reuniting Ireland, Ulster Unionists ran a systematically discriminatory regime from 1921 until the British government suspended the Northern Ireland parliament in 1972. Even after World War Two, Catholics faced discrimination, especially in obtaining government employment and access to housing, but also in the private sector.

With the growth of a Catholic middle class in Northern Ireland throughout the 1950s, calls for equal rights from both Catholic Church leaders and secular activists grew into a highly organized civil rights campaign led by the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association (NICRA). A series of high-profile events, especially the 1972 Bloody Sunday killing of 14 civil rights demonstrators by the British military in Derry, escalated the conflict, which pitted the IRA against Protestant militias, ultimately resulting in over 3,000 deaths—most of them civilians.

The leadership of the Catholic Church in Ireland was sympathetic to the nationalist cause but was not the driv-
ing force behind it. During these years of violence and reprisal killings, Church leaders on both sides struggled to prevent their communities from spiraling even further into chaos.

At a number of critical junctures in the Troubles, religious individuals provided important calls for dialogue between political parties, the British government, and militant organizations, but were rarely key protagonists in the conflict or the primary leaders in the peace. For instance, the initial meetings between Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams, the leading face of militant Irish nationalism and republicanism, and John Hume, the head of the non-violent nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in early 1988, took place at Clonard Monastery with the facilitation of Rev. Alex Reid. These negotiations would eventually lead to an IRA ceasefire in 1994, which marked a crucial phase in ending the conflict. At a similar time, Protestant cleric Rev. Roy Magee was meeting with unionist paramilitaries to secure a ceasefire to match the IRA declaration, which came in October 1994. Unionist paramilitary leader Gusty Spence offered “abject and true remorse” to the families of victims when announcing that ceasefire.

When the Good Friday Agreement was eventually signed in 1998, churches were among the most vocal supporters, calling it “a way out of the darkness of the last 30 years” and “another opportunity to make and build peace.” When the IRA destroyed its weapons in 2005, it was two clerics who witnessed the event, Fr. Reid from Clonard and Rev. Harold Good of the Methodist Church. Their testimony, intended to “create universal confidence” that the IRA weapons were gone for good, was a fitting final role for two veterans of Northern Irish peacemaking.
Religious identity was an important dividing line in the Northern Ireland conflict, but a simplistic framing of the Troubles as a Catholic-Protestant war also misses diversity within the warring communities and avoids the challenging work of examining how religion relates to other political, social, and economic aspects of the Northern Irish conflict. Religious leaders on both sides of the conflict had to contend with political, economic, and paramilitary figures along with local power brokers. The symbols of holidays and religious shrines also became important sources of nationalism for both sides. For instance, marches at Easter are important not for religious reasons but because they commemorate the Easter Rising of 1916 (Easter Monday to be exact) when the IRA launched its first modern war against British rule over Ireland. The marches, which cause the most tension in Northern Ireland, are parades by the loyal orders, especially but not only the unionist Orange Order. The marching season does not correspond with religious holidays, but rather builds to a climax with the July 12 celebrations by Protestants of King William of Orange’s defeat of the Catholic King James at the Battle of the Boyne (1690), which confirmed the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, and consolidated the rule of Protestant settlers.

Both Catholic and Protestant religious leaders tended to oppose the use of violence by paramilitary organizations, but found it difficult to exert influence over the factions. This tension between religious leaders and militant groups came into public view in 1981 when IRA and Irish National Liberation Army (a socialist Irish nationalist paramilitary group) prisoners went on hunger strikes to protest their treatment in custody. Religious leaders disapproved of the method of hunger striking, but Cardinal O’Fiaich, Catholic primate of Ireland, expressed shock at “the inhuman conditions” in which prisoners were held. At the same time, like many of his fellow clerics, O’Fiaich was no friend of the IRA, insisting on calling their attacks murder and “cruel and senseless carnage.” Furthermore, hunger strikes as a form of political expression radically and bitterly divided Catholics and Protestants, with the former seeing the strikers as victims of British intransigence and the latter accusing them of committing suicide.

Many Christian clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, joined with the leading political parties in refusing to speak with paramilitary groups. Among the most important contributions from faith leaders came from those who ministered to Northern Ireland’s impoverished neighborhoods and could leverage personal relationships with paramilitary leaders into dialogue and peace-making opportunities.

Nonetheless, in the end it was the decision of the IRA and its political allies that they could not win their cause by armed struggle, a political and military assessment, which led them to seek a negotiated settlement to the conflict. The leaders of political parties on both sides were impacted by religious leaders and the pressures they exerted through their communities for peace. But they were more responsive to international and socioeconomic pressures pushing them in the direction of peace.
Both secular and religious international actors played a crucial role in shaping the course of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The mediation of political elites like British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern, and US President Bill Clinton was essential to the success of the peace process that led to the Good Friday Agreement. Blair and Ahern worked together more closely than any British and Irish leaders in history, and Clinton visited Belfast in 1995 and appointed Senator George Mitchell as his special envoy, who later served as chair of the International Commission on Decommissioning, the body responsible for overseeing the disarmament of both Protestant and Catholic paramilitary groups.

Mitchell’s patient leadership of these final negotiations led to the Good Friday Agreement with the initial support of all major political parties except Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Other international leaders played a central role in implementing the Good Friday Agreement, especially Canadian General John de Chastelain, who served as chair of the International Commission on Decommissioning. Religious leaders were important voices in working for an end to the Troubles, although it is difficult to ascertain their impact. Vatican officials and various Catholic bishops played an active part in calling for human rights for the Catholic community and condemning the use of violence by militant groups on both sides of the conflict. Pope John Paul II’s visit to Ireland in 1979 was a major event in contemporary Irish history, and he used the occasion to challenge “this generation of violent men to desist from hatred and violence and to repent,” but this had little impact on the hardline IRA or other paramilitary groups. In addition to Vatican leaders, religious networks like the World Council of Churches also lent their support to peacebuilding, but again there is only modest evidence of their substantive impact on the eventual peace accords.

Religious actors in the United States have had a special degree of influence on the Northern Ireland conflict. The American Catholic Bishops partnered with the Presbyterian Church USA to form the Inter-Church Committee on Northern Ireland. The group arranged student exchanges, raised money for small business development in Northern Ireland, and brought speakers from Northern Ireland to tour America throughout the 1990s. Ian Paisley had close relationships with a number of American evangelical and ultra-conservative Protestant leaders.
Socioeconomic factors played a crucial role in stoking the Northern Ireland conflict. Social unrest rose in Northern Ireland as Catholics protested discriminatory government employment and housing practices in the late 1960s. The protesters explicitly drew inspiration from the American Civil Rights Movement, and it was during one such episode of civil disobedience in 1972 that the Bloody Sunday incident took place, in which British troops killed 14 protestors. This event followed others that are often called the beginning of the Troubles, such as the 1966 killing of three Catholic civilians following the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the Easter Rising and the August 1969 Falls Road incident that left eight people dead.
Throughout the Troubles, violence tended to flare most readily in working-class neighborhoods, and West Belfast was among the most impoverished portions of Europe. To this day, miles of barbed wire-topped “peace walls” separate Catholics and Protestants in working-class areas. Male unemployment in Northern Ireland hovered around 20 percent throughout the 1980s, with Catholic male unemployment remaining more than twice that of Protestants for over two decades. Legislative steps such as the Fair Employment Act (1989) have played an important part in closing this employment gap by giving Catholics equal access to government and private sector employment and establishing the Fair Employment Commission to monitor compliance with these equality laws.

Because of their grassroots infrastructure and experience in social service, churches on both sides of the Northern Ireland conflict became key partners in government-sponsored economic development initiatives, especially Action for Community Employment (ACE) throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In particular, religious Catholic organizations over time came to be the main beneficiaries of ACE funding targeted at the Catholic community. Since the nineteenth century, the British government—unwilling to fund community organizations with ties to the IRA or other militant Catholic groups—directed the lion’s share of its community development funding through official Catholic Church organizations. This decision at once made the Church a prime source of economic development in the Catholic community and exacerbated rivalry between the Church and the IRA-aligned political group Sinn Féin as the latter competed with the Church for leadership of urban Catholics. The demographics of this divided province played a further role in explaining the dynamics of violence. The Protestant majority had decreased consistently since the 1960s, stoking fears of future Catholic dominance. Protestants made up 63 percent of the population in 1961, but numbered only 46 percent in 2001 (compared to 40 percent Catholic). This trend towards a greater Catholic population was due to a combination of factors, including higher birth rates and a dramatic increase, mostly among former Protestants, in those who identify with no religious community, up from two percent in 1961 to 14 percent in 2001. Most importantly, the end of local unionist control over the Northern Ireland parliament in 1972 permitted, eventually, fairer prospects for those of Catholic origin, causing their proportionate rate of emigration to fall.

The general Protestant majority obscures significant religious diversity within the Protestant community. No single religious institution speaks for Protestants in Northern Ireland: over 75 percent of Protestants belong to either the Anglican Church of Ireland or the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, but the remaining, mostly evangelical, Protestants are fragmented into 45 distinct denominations. This historical fragmentation long complicated efforts to unify the Protestant community behind the peace process.

In spite of the Good Friday Agreement, the geographic demographics of Northern Ireland remain highly segregated by religion. Many large areas are fairly homogeneous, such as sections of Protestant County Antrim and Catholic County Fermanagh, and even “mixed” areas like Belfast are highly segregated at the local level. More than half of Belfast residents live in areas that are over 90 percent homogeneous. Schooling likewise remains largely segregated, with most Catholic children attending Catholic schools and Protestants attending the Northern Irish public schools.
Conclusion

The arrival of peace in Northern Ireland required a comprehensive political settlement of the questions surrounding the territory’s status relative to the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, an end to paramilitary activities on all sides, great dedication to peace from the British and Irish governments, and a willingness of Northern Ireland’s political parties to share power across the national and religious divide.

The churches played a role in this process, but it would be wrong to give Christianity too much credit either for causing the conflict or for its resolution. Religion served as a marker of identity, compounding a nationalist conflict, while also eventually facilitating its peaceful resolution. Sectarian tension continues in Northern Ireland today, but not on a scale comparable to that seen during much of the latter twentieth century.

Beacon of Hope sculpture, Belfast
Key Events

The Hunger Strikes
The hunger strikes of IRA prisoners in the Maze Prison in 1981 were a seminal moment in the Northern Ireland conflict. Roman Catholic leaders found themselves torn over how to respond, both because of general disapproval for IRA methods and the specific question of whether hunger striking constituted suicide. Church leaders ultimately allowed Christian burials for the strikers who died, while convincing families to order resuscitation for striking relatives who had slipped into unconsciousness. This event deepened the existing rivalry between the Catholic hierarchy and the militant republican movement, although some argue that it also extended Sinn Fein’s support base beyond its core and won sympathy for republicanism among some junior clergy.

Clonard Monastery Negotiations
Located in the heart of the Catholic Falls Road area, and steps away from a “peace wall” dividing the Falls from the Protestant Shankill Road heartland, Clonard is literally in the middle of Catholic life in West Belfast. Clonard priests ministered to the wounded and dying during Belfast riots, and served as important mediators in the conflict. In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, Clonard served as a secret meeting place for government officials and leadership from Sinn Fein. Fr. Alex Reid, one of Clonard’s priests, played a crucial role in arranging and facilitating secret communications between Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams and John Hume, leader of the more moderate SDLP and eventual winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. The Hume-Adams negotiations were an essential early stage in clarifying the conditions that would eventually lead to an IRA ceasefire in 1994.

Loyalist Paramilitary Ceasefire
Rev. Roy Magee, a Presbyterian minister who grew up in the Shankill Road area of Belfast, was a crucial figure in mediating indirect and eventually direct relations between loyalist (unionist) paramilitaries and the Irish government. With a congregation that included members from multiple paramilitary organizations, Rev. Magee had the personal relationships and moral standing needed to play a central role in brokering a ceasefire from the loyalist paramilitary community. This complicated process balanced not only tensions with the Catholic community, but also internal Protestant rivalries between paramilitary groups such as the Ulster Defense Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force. The ceasefire eventually came in October of 1994, six weeks after the IRA’s ceasefire declaration.

Witnesses to IRA Decommissioning
While the 1998 Good Friday Agreement set out the path to peaceful coexistence in Northern Ireland, it was not until 2005 that the IRA finally decommissioned its weapons stockpile. To verify that this secret act did indeed take place, Fr. Alec Reid, a Catholic priest, and Rev. Harold Good, the former moderator of the Methodist Church in Ireland, served as religious observers to the process. Their joint statement verifying decommissioning played an important role in building public confidence that the IRA’s weapons were in fact destroyed.
Political Organizations

Democratic Unionist Party
http://mydup.com/
The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is Northern Ireland’s largest unionist political party. It has been linked to Free Presbyterianism since its earliest days under the formative leadership of Rev. Dr. Ian Paisley. Rev. Paisley was a preacher before he was a politician. His leadership of the Free Presbyterian Church has been marked by inflammatory rhetoric about Catholicism and the slow rise of the DUP to overtake its other unionist rivals. His religious and political views stoked conflict throughout the 1970s, he called Pope John Paul II the Antichrist in a speech before the European Parliament in 1985, became close friends with American Protestant ultra-conservatives like Bob Jones, Jr., and rejected numerous conflict settlements, including the Good Friday Agreement, before finally agreeing to share power with Catholic parties in 2007. On agreeing to share power after so many years of strident competition, Rev. Paisley commented in 2007, “If anyone had told me that I would be standing here today to take this office, I would have been totally unbelieving.”

Ulster Unionist Party
http://uup.org/
The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) is Northern Ireland’s more moderate Unionist political party, and since the Good Friday Agreements has seen its former popularity fall while the anti-Agreement DUP surged in political influence. Historically, the UUP has been closely affiliated with the Orange Order, a Protestant social organization whose marches commemorating the military victories of Protestants under William of Orange became major sources of tension during the Troubles. Sections of the UUP were leading supporters of the Good Friday peace process, and its leader at the time, David Trimble, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, along with the SDLP’s John Hume, for his efforts. However, Unionist frustration with the slow implementation of the agreement weakened the UUP, and in the 2005 elections for the British Parliament, the party lost all but one of its seats in the legislature.

Sinn Féin
http://sinnfein.org/
Sinn Féin is currently the largest republican (pro-united Ireland) political party in Northern Ireland. During the Troubles, secularist Sinn Féin was shunned by most political parties and governmental officials because of its links to the IRA. Under the leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, Sinn Féin played a leading role in the eventual disarmament of the IRA and the transition of hardline republicans from violence to political participation. Sinn Féin surpassed the more moderate nationalist party, the SDLP, in the 2005 British Parliamentary elections, and in 2007 agreed to share power with the DUP in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Social Democratic and Labour Party
http://sdlp.ie/
The Social Democratic and Labour Party is Northern Ireland’s second-largest nationalist political party, and tends to draw support from more moderate Catholic voters. Unlike its chief rival, Sinn Féin, the SDLP consistently rejected the violent tactics of the IRA during the Troubles. Former SDLp leader John Hume was a central player in the negotiations with Gerry Adams for an IRA ceasefire, and a key supporter of the peace process that led to the Good Friday Agreement. Hume and UUP leader David Trimble would share the No-
Albert Peace Prize for their work on the peace process. The SDLP has seen its power fade since the Good Friday Agreement, although it still maintains significant representation in both the British Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The SDLP has stronger ties with the Catholic Church in Ireland than does the secularist Sinn Féin.

**Alliance Party of Northern Ireland**
http://allianceparty.org/
The Alliance Party is Northern Ireland’s primary cross-sectarian political party. Although tiny compared to the four main nationalist and unionist parties, the alliance has played a role in the negotiation and implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. It was the first non-Catholic party to agree to negotiate with Gerry Adams, and its leader John Alderdice was the first presiding officer of the post-Good Friday Agreement Assembly. Some hoped that non-confessional parties would become more influential with the end of the Troubles, but the alliance continues to lag behind the other parties. The alliance also prioritizes work with Northern Ireland’s ethnic and religious minorities, particularly the growing Asian and Eastern European populations.
Nongovernmental Organizations

Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI)
http://contemporarychristianity.net/
The Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI) played a leading role in peacebuilding, particularly within the loyalist community. ECONI grew out of grassroots meetings of faith leaders in the late 1980s, and was incorporated in 1994. ECONI’s work included clergy training, public statements, international conferences, and production of Bible study resources for use in congregations throughout Northern Ireland. With the end of the conflict, ECONI changed its name to the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland, and is currently involved in efforts to build forgiveness by dealing with the past, and to engage Northern Ireland’s increasing diversity.

Clonard-Fitzroy Fellowship
Clonard Monastery, a center for the Redemptorist Catholic Order in West Belfast, continues to play a crucial role in peacebuilding within Belfast. In partnership with Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, the Clonard-Fitzroy Fellowship has provided a unique forum for parishioners to gather in an ecumenical environment to discuss their shared political future. The fellowship has regular meetings in both congregations, featuring religious leaders from across the religious divide. The founding group is currently fostering similar church relationships around Northern Ireland to spread the Clonard-Fitzroy model.

Corrymeela Community
http://corrymeela.org/
Corrymeela is over 40 years old, having been founded in 1965 as a Christian intentional community. As Northern Ireland descended into the Troubles soon after Corrymeela’s founding, the community members began to host peacebuilding retreats at their coastal Ballycastle facility. Over time, this resulted in a network of Christians committed to reconciliation throughout Northern Ireland. Corrymeela currently serves over 6,000 individuals each year through these residential retreats, and has become an international leader in grassroots peacebuilding training.

Irish School of Ecumenics
http://tcd.ie/ise/
The Irish School of Ecumenics (ISE) has campuses in both Dublin and Belfast, and has served as a major center for theological research related to Northern Ireland and conflict resolution. Its Moving Beyond Sectarianism project stretched from 1995 through 2001 and produced a major body of work on how Northern Ireland could promote reconciliation after the arrival of peace. Since then, ISE has expanded its focus to the religious roots of human rights protection, and incorporating diverse religious communities into Northern Irish society.

Community Dialogue Northern Ireland
http://communitydialogue.org/
Community Dialogue (CD) was founded in 1997 to host dialogue events across Northern Ireland’s Catholic-Protestant divide. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, CD trainers have conducted grassroots workshops geared toward reducing sectarian tensions and exploring how the lives of average individuals will change with the arrival of relative peace. Fr. Brian Lennon, an Irish Jesuit, works for CD, along with his work
for the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. He has been a mediator of conflict in Northern Ireland since 1980, spending many of those years living on the flashpoint Garvaghy Road in Portadown, the site of contentious clashes around the July marching season.

**East Belfast Mission (Methodist)**
http://ebm.org.uk/
East Belfast Mission (EBM) was founded in 1985 to engage in community development and service in the Newtownards Road, Ballymacarrett district of Belfast. EBM is the oldest and one of the largest community organizations in Northern Ireland with a staff of 50. By working in partnership with a variety of social service and governmental organizations in Belfast, EBM plays a central role in homeless services, job training, youth outreach, and housing work in Protestant East Belfast.

**Society of St. Vincent de Paul**
http://svp-ni.org/
The St. Vincent de Paul Society of Northern Ireland is one of the largest social service organizations in the region. It conducts home visits to 2,500 families a week to assist with utility payments and food provisions. It provides services to families regardless of religious affiliation, and has partnered with Protestant organizations like the Salvation Army of Northern Ireland and Belfast Central Mission on a number of charity drives. The St. Vincent de Paul has also prioritized work with Northern Ireland’s growing immigrant populations.

**Roman Catholic Church**
http://catholicireland.net/
The Catholic Church in Northern Ireland is a part of the Catholic hierarchy of Ireland. Forty percent of the general Northern Ireland population identifies as Catholic in recent censuses. The Archdiocese of Armagh, the Diocese of Derry, and the Diocese of Down and Connor service Northern Ireland. It remains a major institutional presence, especially in the realm of education and community infrastructure. Approximately 95 percent of students in Northern Ireland attend religiously non-integrated schools. Throughout the conflict, the socialist-leaning leaders of Sinn Féin struggled with members of the hierarchy for authority within the Catholic community. Violent paramilitarism was a challenge to both the moral teachings and the institutional authority that the Church had traditionally held in Ireland.

**Church of Ireland**
http://ireland.anglican.org/
The Church of Ireland exists in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, with the majority of its members in Northern Ireland, where they make up 15.3 percent of the population. It is affiliated with the Anglican Communion, was the established state church of Ireland until 1871, and maintains a strong presence among the Republic of Ireland’s Protestant elite. The Church of Ireland launched the Hard Gospel initiative in 2003 to confront two questions: how to revitalize the church in the twenty-first century and how to minister effectively in
rapidly changing Northern Irish society. Northern Ireland membership dropped throughout the twentieth century, down from 27 percent of the population in 1937 to 15 percent in 2001.

**Presbyterian Church in Ireland**

[http://presbyterianireland.org/](http://presbyterianireland.org/)

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) is the largest Protestant denomination in Northern Ireland. Like the Church of Ireland, its membership dropped during the twentieth century, but remains at just over 20 percent of the population. The PCI played a substantial peacemaking role in Northern Ireland, especially in partnership with the Presbyterian Church USA. Its Church and Society Committee worked to contain the spread of violence during the Troubles, and in support of mediators like David Ervine, who influenced loyalist paramilitary groups toward a ceasefire.

**Methodist Church in Ireland**


The Methodist Church has not seen the same substantial membership drop-offs as other Northern Ireland Protestant denominations. Membership has held fairly steady at approximately 3.5 percent of the population, and actually grown since 1900. It maintains many important institutions in Northern Ireland, including one of Northern Ireland’s leading grammar schools (or fee-paying high schools) and a number of social service organizations. The Methodist Church has been at the forefront of peacebuilding activities among the Protestant denominations. This leadership was demonstrated when former Methodist Church President Rev. Harold Good was the Protestant minister chosen to witness and verify IRA disarmament in 2005.

**Other Christian Churches in Northern Ireland**

Other Christian denominations that make up approximately 6 percent of the population in Northern Ireland include Baptists, Free Presbyterians, and Brethren. This category showed considerable growth from 1991 to 2001, from 80,000 up to over 100,000. Among these denominations, Rev. Ian Paisley’s Free Presbyterian Church is especially noteworthy due to Paisley’s political career, not its large membership or influential religious ideas. It counts approximately 12,000 members, including much of the leadership of the governing DUP.
Further reading


**Discussion Questions**

1. What are the historical origins of the conflict in Northern Ireland?

2. How did domestic forces drive the conflict and its negotiated resolution?

3. How important were international religious and political forces?

4. What role did socioeconomic factors play?

5. How did religion intersect with these other factors in driving outcomes?

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1 The complete text of this statement and other related ones is available at: http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/decommission/hgar260905.htm

2 Demographic data can be found at the CIA World Factbook. A discussion of these trends can be found in David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002).