Managing Identities: Towards a better understanding of Liberal-Catholics

Roman Catholicism has long been the dominant religion in Ireland. Despite a general decline in religious participation across Europe, Ireland has remained, for the most part, devoutly Catholic with some 84%- over 3.86 million people –identifying themselves as Roman Catholic in the latest census (CSO, 2011). However, these remarkably high levels of identification with Catholicism do not tell the whole story. There have in fact been considerable changes in the patterns of religious beliefs and practices among Catholics in Ireland (for more information see Ó Féich & O'Connell, 2015). Our preliminary research has found that levels of attendance at mass as well as levels of confidence in the Church declined dramatically between 1981 to 2010; whilst levels of identification as Catholic, belief, and prayer (a more personal form of religious practice) have, for the most part, remained stable over this period (Ó Féich & O'Connell, 2015). It has been argued that similar patterns evident in other European countries are indicative of a move away from institutional religion and towards a more personal and private form of religious belief and practice (Davie, 1994).

Our findings also suggest that a considerable and growing proportion of Catholics in Ireland have moved away from the traditional teaching, conservative values, and moral norms of the Catholic Church and have become more accepting of things traditionally frowned upon by Catholicism. In fact, our research indicates that more than 1 in 7 (14.6%) Catholics in Ireland can be defined as liberal or very liberal in their attitudes towards issues that are contrary to the traditional teachings and moral norms of Catholicism, for example divorce, homosexuality, euthanasia etc. In 1981 this figure stood at approximately 1 in 25 (3.8%; Ó Féich & O'Connell, 2015). There are many possible explanation for the emergence of this liberal ethos among Catholics, for example institutional detachment (Inglis, 2007), the development of a liberal culture (Cassidy, 2002), socio-economic development, modernisation and human/societal development (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Cao & Zhao, 2012), or the decline of the Catholic Church as the de facto moral conscience of Irish society (Donelly & Inglis, 2010).

The traditionally conservative approach advocated by Catholicism towards a range of different issues is potentially incompatible with the approach advocated by liberalism. Although the proportion of Catholics who also identify themselves as liberal is likely lower than 14.6%, our findings suggest that the proportion of Catholics in Ireland who would also consider themselves liberal is growing. The present research is concerned with how those who consider and identify themselves as both a Catholic and a liberal perceive and manage the relationship between these identities or parts of themselves. In an effort to answer this question the present research draws on two theoretical perspectives of psychology; the Social Identity Approach and Acculturation research. These approaches will now be briefly introduced.

The Social Identity Approach

The Social Identity Approach is made up of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Riecher, & Wetherell, 1987). Social Identity Theory defines social identity as that part of an individual's self-concept which is derived from their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). One of the key tenants of social identity theory is the existence of multiple social identities. Each person is a member of many groups, be they social, cultural, political, professional, or indeed religious. They therefore maintain multiple identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) and each of these identities has their own set of normative attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours.

Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner et al. 1987) holds that in order to simplify and structure their social world, individuals will categorise people into groups and, in the process, categories themselves into groups. Depending on the context of a social situation any one of an individual's many group identities can become salient or dominant and as a result the attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours of the individual in this context become guided by the normative attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours of the salient identity (Turner, 1999). Take, for example, a doctor who is also a supporter of a particular football team. During a football match, his or her identity as a supporter

of this football team becomes salient; therefore his or her attitudes, values, and behaviours become guided by the normative attitudes, values, and behaviours of their salient identity as a football supporter. He or she may feel an increased rivalry with a relevant outgroup (in this case, the supporters of the rival team), may sing and chant, and may even pass a derogatory remark or two about players on the opposing team. However this behaviour would be unacceptable at work. In this professional context, his or her identity as a doctor would become salient and the normative attitudes, values, and behaviours of this salient identity would guide his or her attitudes, values and behaviours, making singing and chanting very unlikely.

Despite some researchers arguing that the study of multiple social identities represents a key area for future research (Brewer & Gaertner, 2004) until relatively recently very little research had been conducted on the nature of and relationship between multiple social identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Researchers have recognized the potentially conflicting nature of some identities that can be simultaneously maintained by the same individual (Kurzban & Aktipis, 2007; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Sirin et al., 2008) for example, Muslim-American, career-orientated parent, or religious-scientist. Others have examined the challenges of maintaining and managing these identities for example Brooks, Garcia, and Fleming (2008) found that maintaining identities that have incompatible behavioral norms can have a negative effect on psychological well-being.

Acculturation Research

Acculturation research focuses on the changes or psychological adaptation of the individual post immigration. There are two broad traditions in the study of psychological acculturation; the study of acculturation attitudes and the study of cultural identity (Phinney, Berry, Vedder & Liebkind, 2006). The former refers to the way individuals prefer to live in intercultural contact situations, whereas the latter refers to the individual's subjective sense of self post immigration. The study of cultural identity refers specifically to the extent to which immigrants subjectively identify with their ethnic group and larger society as well as their sense of attachment to either or both cultural groups

(Phinney et al., 2006). In essence, it aims to better understand how people maintain their old ethic and new national identities, how they perceive the relation between these identities, and how they manage the potentially incompatible demands of these identities. Given that the study of cultural identity deals specifically with the individual's subjective sense of self and their dual-identification with two cultural identities, it may therefore be possible to adapt and apply the methods used in this research to the investigation of dual-identification with two social identities-Catholic and Liberal.

The present research

As noted above, the proportion of Catholics in Ireland who would also identify themselves as a liberal has in all likelihood grown considerably since the 1980s.The challenge of maintaining these potentially incompatible identities is therefore an issue for a considerable and growing number of Catholics in Ireland and warrants further study. The goal of our research is to adapt and apply acculturation research methods in an effort to gain an insight into how those who consider themselves both a Catholic and a liberal perceive and manage the relationship between these parts of themselves and how they manage the potentially incompatible demands of their Catholic and liberal identities.

In order to achieve these goals we need volunteers who identify themselves as both a Catholic and a liberal to take part in our research. To this end we would like to request and strongly encourage any readers of this article who would identify as both a Catholic and a liberal to consider volunteering. If any readers are interested in volunteering please read the information sheet provided, which outlines all the relevant information about the study needed to make an informed decision, and contact the principal researcher, Mr. Pádraig Ó Féich, using the contact information provided in the information sheet. Please note that it is important that both identities are relevant and applicable to all volunteers. If these identities are not relevant for you personally but you would still like to help, please feel free to forward the link to this article to anyone who may be interested. One of the biggest challenges of large scale research such as this is finding people willing to take part

so we would very much appreciate any and all volunteers, and hope that by working together we can better understand what it is to be a Liberal-Catholic in Ireland.

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