

CHAPTER 4

The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Religion

The Case of Ireland

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Abstract

Despite being a small island nation on Europe's western periphery, Ireland was not inoculated from the broad and deep impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic evident in other societies. In general, state-imposed restrictions in Ireland were among the strongest in Europe. This chapter considers both the legal and the sociological aspects of the pandemic's influence on religion in Ireland, focusing mainly on Catholic religiosity. Regarding the legal aspect, I show how religious groups pushed back against restrictions by leaning into a broad range of factors, including religion's social well-being contribution, the right to religious freedom, the legal ambivalences of government restrictions, the relative transmission risks of secular versus religious settings, and divergences from the treatment of religious groups in other European societies. On the sociological side, I show how the pandemic impacted ordinary devotees, as well as how religious groups responded to restrictions through various forms of adaptation. Additionally,

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I show how restrictions fostered greater interreligious exchange as well as stoking church–state tensions amid the perceived marginalisation of religious interests by state actors. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the larger takeaway of the Irish case.

Introduction

Despite being a small island nation on Europe's western periphery, Ireland¹ was not inoculated from the broad and deep impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic evident in other societies. In general, state-imposed restrictions in Ireland were among the strongest in Europe (European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2021; Reuters 2021), with extended lockdowns prohibiting basically all social interactions except for essential services, such as supermarkets and pharmacies (Carolan et al. 2021; Government of Ireland 2020a; Kennelly et al. 2020).

Regarding religion, COVID-19 restrictions included the closure of church buildings, the prohibition of the celebration of sacraments, and restrictions on the pastoral ministry of clergy. Only private prayer in churches was allowed in the early stages of the pandemic.² These revealed rights enshrined in the constitution, such as the right to freedom of religion (Article 44), to be conditional rather than absolute, especially in the context of a national public health emergency.

Drawing on a range of data sources including media reportage, legal texts, parliamentary debates, and social surveys, this chapter considers both the legal and the sociological aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic's influence on religion in Ireland, focusing mainly on Catholic religiosity. Regarding the legal aspect, I show how religious groups pushed back against restrictions by leaning into a broad range of factors, including religion's social well-being contribution, the right to religious freedom, the legal ambivalences of government restrictions, the relative transmission risks of secular versus religious settings, and divergences from the treatment of religious groups in other European societies. On the sociological side, I show how the pandemic impacted ordinary devotees, as well as how religious groups responded to restrictions through various forms of adaptation. Additionally, I show how restrictions fostered greater interreligious exchange as well as stoking church–state tensions amid the perceived marginalisation of religious interests by state actors.

Setting the Context

Ireland is a Catholic-majority country that, despite quite rapid secularisation in recent decades, is nonetheless one of Europe's most religious societies (Buckley 2016; Turpin 2022). Although the constitution nods to the numerically dominant religious group via articles acknowledging the centrality of the family (Article 41), it also guarantees religious freedom (Article 44) (Buckley 2016). Formally, it is case characterised by the lack of a state religion (Barro and McCleary 2005).

While Catholicism has historically been linked to the expression of national identity against British colonialisation, this pairing has increasingly been unhinged in the wake of long-running scandals in the church and wider sociocultural shifts, including long-term liberalisation (Turpin 2022).

A notable feature of this case – especially in the last 20 years or so – is growing secularisation, which is reflected in the rise of the 'nones' category (people who self-identify as having no religion) and people giving up their formerly Catholic identities, as well as an increase in non-Catholic religious groups, which has contributed to greater religious/secular pluralisation than before (Buckley 2016; Turpin 2022). According to the 2022 census,³ 69 per cent of the population self-identify as Roman Catholic, a reduction of 4.9 per cent from the previous, 2016 census. The religious groups reporting the highest percentage growth since 2016 were in the ranked order of Hindu (140.7 per cent), Orthodox (64.8 per cent), and Muslim (32.1 per cent) groups. And the number of nones increased from 451,941 in 2016 to 736,210 in 2022, representing a 62.9 per cent increase.⁴

Legal Aspects

It is useful to begin by summarising the legal background regarding COVID-19 restrictions. The restrictions regulating public life were enacted through existing laws as well as new ones (Carolan et al. 2021). Regarding existing law, multiple amendments or statutory instruments were brought in related to the Health Act 1947,⁵ which had originally been enacted to deal with an outbreak of tuberculosis (Carolan et al. 2021). These laws were backed up further by guidance directed at the general population (Carolan et al. 2021). Such was the perceived authority of a medical-driven public health approach in developing

these laws that one member of parliament drew a parallel to Catholic episcopal power in 1950s Ireland (Carolan et al. 2021).

In the area of religion, initially these regulations prohibited public rituals altogether, though private prayer was permitted, but as restrictions were gradually lifted they were allowed to occur under certain conditions, such as capacity limits, social distancing, and sanitising practices. One of the noteworthy legal provisions related to the definition of ‘essential workers’ (Redmond and McGuinness 2020), whereby religious personnel – as either chaplains or providers of funeral services – were included in the ‘Administrative and support activities’ and ‘Public administration, emergency services and defence’ categories (Government of Ireland 2020b). This meant that priests could travel beyond the five-kilometre travel restriction to provide online services, funerals, or weddings (Midwest Radio 2020). Later, a tiered approach to religious-related restrictions was adopted, depending on the level of community transmission (Government of Ireland 2020c). For example, under the lowest two levels 50 people were allowed to attend religious services, while at higher levels (i.e. levels 3 to 5) services were required to move online (Government of Ireland 2020c).

The early restrictions and public health efforts were supported by religious leaders, with the Catholic leadership encouraging compliance with public health responses, including vaccination (Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference 2020a, 2020b), and Muslim leaders praising health care staff for caring for patients (Dublin City Interfaith Forum 2020). Also, different religious groups prepared their own guidelines to help adherents comply with those produced by the state (e.g. Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference 2020a; Presbyterian Church in Ireland n.d.).

However, as the pandemic developed, more and more criticisms of their perceived severity against public worship (*libertas ecclesiae*, as distinct from private beliefs, *libertas fidelium*) (Colaianne 2020) were brought out by Catholic bishops – like their counterparts elsewhere (see [Chapter 11](#), this volume) – and others, including priests and laypeople. Likely responding to grievances from devotees ‘below’ as much as their own dissatisfactions from ‘above’, this pushback – which revealed laboured cooperation between church and state authorities – leaned into different factors, including the social well-being contribution of religion, the right to religious freedom, the legal ambivalences of government restrictions, the relative transmission risks of secular

versus religious settings, and restrictions applying to religion in other national contexts.

For example, Bishop Alphonsus Cullinan of Waterford and Lismore – in line with episcopal colleagues such as Archbishop Eamon Martin (Kelly 2021a) – appealed to religious freedom rights to challenge the state:

I feel that the spiritual well-being of our people has not been given any serious attention by the authorities ... I sympathise with the governmental authorities at this very difficult time, but appeal to them to take into consideration the spiritual care of hundreds of thousands of Catholics and many people of other faiths who wish to exercise their rights as guaranteed by our constitution. (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference 2021a)

The Catholic primate revealed that the Catholic leadership even sought legal advice regarding indoor gathering restrictions brought in in April 2021 (Keena 2021).

Similarly, religious freedom was invoked in a legal challenge to laws prohibiting Catholic Masses (O'Loughlin 2021), one of several challenges to COVID-19 restrictions taken by various individuals and groups (Carolan et al. 2021). More specifically, businessman and well-known lay Catholic Declan Ganley took a case to the High Court (*Ganley v Minister for Health* 2020/825 JR⁶) (Carolan et al. 2021; O'Loughlin 2021). As restrictions lifted before the case was completed, a judge ruled that the challenge had been rendered moot (Breaking News 2021). This state-level decision-making may have made it difficult to move such cases 'upwards' to the European court system (du Plessis and Portaru 2022).

Religious leaders also leaned into a perceived differential treatment of religious settings as compared to secular ones with basically similar risk factors (Storslee 2022). For example, Archbishop Dermot Farrell of Dublin drew attention to the different rules applying to similar secular and religious settings: '[I]t's okay to have a bash in the Merrion Hotel [a well-known Dublin hotel] with 50 people present but yet it's not possible for a parent to take their child along to receive a sacrament' (*The Journal* 2021). Another bishop criticised a perceived undervaluation of religion revealed by the severity of restrictions imposed on it (O'Keefe 2021).

This aspect brought out the relative value of the religious as compared to the secular in the judgement of political elites (Storslee 2022) and pointed to a possible breach of ‘the general applicability’ principle, whereby the law does not differentiate between basically similar contexts (Storslee 2022). This implied an inconsistency in the government’s approach, with different rules for basically similar secular and religious events. It also seemed to suggest that religious events of the same size as secular events posed a higher public health risk (Storslee 2022). Perhaps lobbying of political elites by social actors such as hoteliers and pub owners worried about the survival of their livelihoods (McQuinn and O’Halloran 2021) – and the attendant economic costs for the tourism industry – prompted political elites to treat secular settings differently from religious ones.

Catholic bishops leaned into religion’s contribution to social well-being as well (Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference 2020c). For example, Catholic leaders pointed to religion’s role in helping adherents deal with death and bereavement (Hilliard and Leahy 2021) and, more generally, with responding to challenges: ‘[W]e encourage people to persevere and not to lose heart. Faith and prayer, in the home and in church can be a huge support in difficult times’ (Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference 2020c).

Another factor that religious groups leveraged was the perceived divergence from the treatment of religious groups in other parts of Europe. For example, the Iona Institute, a Catholic lay lobby group independent of the church hierarchy, drew attention to the lack of fines for clergy for celebrating religious services, and the less draconian approach to religion more generally, in other European countries (Iona Institute 2020c).

This argumentation was echoed in the national parliament, where some politicians brought out the contrasting situation in some other European societies and how the Irish restrictions undermined religion’s role in comforting people during times of crisis (Houses of the Oireachtas 2020). The severity of the restrictions in Ireland, one politician asserted, found parallel only in Saudi Arabia and North Korea (Houses of the Oireachtas 2020), both authoritarian contexts.

Other religious groups pushed back against restrictions by drawing attention to legal ambivalences. For example, an Evangelical Christian group in Cork organised a religious event in February 2021 that took place beyond the then five-kilometre travel restriction. The organisers

claimed that this event – which involved preaching on a street – fell into the category of a religious event, which was permitted under the restrictions. However, a judge fining them for breaching restrictions ruled that this did not constitute a religious event despite the long-standing tradition of street evangelising in Cork (Heylin 2022). This incident raised the issue of who decides what counts as ‘religious’ and with what consequences. In this case, the legal system defined the nature of the religious in a way that appeared to limit minority groups.

Similarly, legal ambivalences regarding what penalties (if any) applied to organisers of indoor public gatherings prompted some Catholic groups to question whether priests could be imprisoned for organising an event such as Mass (*The Journal* 2020). This gave rise to debate in the national parliament (*The Journal* 2020), where the Minister for Health claimed that priests could not be imprisoned on the grounds that religious events did not constitute a ‘relevant event’, defined as ‘an event held, or to be held, for social, recreational, exercise, cultural, entertainment or community reasons, but does not include an event to be held in a private dwelling, a wedding reception, a sporting event, or a training event’ (Irish Statute Book 2020a; *The Journal* 2020). Even so, legal experts argued that the law was ambivalent on this point, as religious events were included as events subject to restrictions in the Health Act 2020 (Irish Statute Book 2020b; *The Journal* 2020).

In light of these ambiguities, it is perhaps not surprising that some lower-level clergy sought to challenge government restrictions. Indeed, some priests defied restrictions by continuing to celebrate the Mass.

For example, County Cavan priest Father P. J. Hughes celebrated Palm Sunday Mass in March 2021, when he criticised them as reflective of growing antagonism toward Catholicism and symbolically linked them to the penal law and Cromwellian eras, claiming: ‘This is sectarianism. This is against our faith. It’s a sectarian act against our Catholic Church encouraged by the Government who don’t believe in God anymore.’ Against attempts by right-wing groups (e.g. the National Party) to mobilise religion to their cause, Father Hughes also called on such groups not to attend (McGreevy 2021).

Similarly, in May 2021 a County Clare priest, Father Willie Cummins, celebrated Mass on Sundays, arguing that the discrepancy between rules applied to secular gatherings and religious ones undermined the restrictions: ‘Go to Lahinch [a seaside town in County Clare] and see the crowds there at the weekend and from Thursday

evening on, every second car going there is a “D” [Dublin] reg.’ He also questioned the transmission risk in churches – ‘There hasn’t been one person who has got COVID from being in there’ (Deegan 2021) – implicitly comparing the risk with secular contexts.

In other situations, clergy challenged restrictions by seeking to perform certain rituals as part of online religious services. For example, a County Mayo priest was the subject of a report to the Gardaí (Irish police) concerning the distribution of Holy Communion to adherents engaged in private prayer after an online Mass. This case was different from the other examples in that the priest appeared to misinterpret the restrictions as allowing this practice (Duggan 2021). In general, state authorities (e.g. the Gardaí) tended to apply legal sanctions against clergy in some cases – similar to other national settings (Pew Research Center 2022) – and to take a less stringent approach in others. For example, in the Father Hughes case, the priest was fined (McGreevy 2021), while in the Father Cummins case the priest reported that the Gardaí were ‘very understanding people’ (Deegan 2021).

Sociological Aspects

In light of pandemic-related restrictions on religion, how did ordinary adherents and religious groups respond?

Regarding devotees, social survey research gives an insight into patterns of religious practice during the pandemic. An April 2020 survey – carried out about two weeks into a full national lockdown – found an uptick in religious behaviours, such as prayer. For example, 18 per cent of respondents reported that they prayed more than before the pandemic, with family ranking the highest (87 per cent) of what they prayed about, compared to 42 per cent for frontline services (Iona Institute 2020a). Also, 27 per cent of respondents reported that they had watched or listened to a religious service since the lockdown (Iona Institute 2020a).

Similarly, in a survey carried out about five months later – when religious service attendance was allowed – 36 per cent of respondents reported that they had begun attending again and 4 per cent reported that they would not attend Mass after coronavirus restrictions (Iona Institute 2020b). This study also shed light on the perceived value of online services compared to in-person ones, as 6 per cent of pre-pandemic adherents reported that their reason for not attending was that

they were happy to watch online services (Iona Institute 2020b). This suggests that only a relatively small number of adherents considered online services to be a valuable alternative to in-person services.

Other research – based on a June 2020 online/telephone survey – found that among regular religious service attenders there were relatively high levels of discomfort with attending religious services with social distancing. For example, about 47 per cent of respondents reported being uncomfortable with socially distanced religious services.⁷ Unsurprisingly, younger respondents exhibited higher levels of comfort than older respondents: about 41 per cent of respondents in the 18–34 age category reported being comfortable,⁸ compared to 33 per cent of respondents aged 70+ (Central Statistics Office 2020).

Another notable change was an erosion of religious giving, which meant that some religious groups had to reconsider financial remuneration for their personnel (Lucey and Brennan 2021; *Catholic Herald* 2020). One study found that more than half of laypeople said their religious giving had reduced during the first lockdown (May/June 2020) (Byrne and Sweetman 2021). Clergy too reported declines in religious giving, though this may have been mitigated by greater online giving (Ganiel 2021b). At the same time, religious groups (e.g. the Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, and the Methodists) received state support during the pandemic under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, which was introduced to cushion the wages of employees from the impact of COVID-19 restrictions (Revenue 2020).

Adherents responded in other ways as well, including through public protests. For example, in 2021 lay Catholics organised street protests against ongoing prohibitions on the celebration of the Mass, with placards declaring ‘Bring Back the Public Mass’ (Kelly 2021b). Such street politics against restrictions placed Ireland at the top of a rank order of their frequency in European countries during the pandemic’s second wave (Kriesi and Oana 2022).

At a collective level, religious groups responded to COVID-19 restrictions by harnessing technologies such as webcams and the internet to communicate religious rituals celebrated by clergy on their own to adherents watching remotely (Ganiel 2021a; Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference 2020d).

For example, pilgrimage sites – such as Knock, County Mayo – reported an uptick in people accessing online rituals (O’Brien 2020). It is worth noting that this allowed devotees to participate in religious

services taking place beyond traditional boundaries of parish and diocese.⁹ Even so, some adherents still pined for offline services rooted in the local that allowed them to participate alongside socially known others (Ganiel 2021b).

Even though online forms of religion were developed during the pandemic, there was also significant variation depending on prior online capacity, degree of centralised authority, and lay involvement (Ganiel 2021b). It is also the case that not all adherents came to online religion with the same level of digital literacy, with the result that some social categories (e.g. elderly people) struggled to engage (Ganiel 2021b). It may be that the stratified nature of online religion is a significant constraining factor regarding its potential.

Within the ranks of the clergy, online religion seemed to have been a mixed blessing. While on the one hand it allowed clergy to reach out in ways not fully embraced before the pandemic (Ganiel 2021b), on the other hand it sometimes led to adherents evaluating the pastoral performance of online ceremonies, leading to a kind of stress-inducing contest between priests (Milmo 2020). Some clergy also experienced loneliness as a result of not being able to carry out their normal run of pastoral activities such as attending meetings (Milmo 2020).

Studies of religious groups' responses during the pandemic suggested that they functioned as more than mere physical places for adherents to gather. By this is meant that the pandemic seemed to bring forth greater awareness than before of the embeddedness of churches in wider contexts (Ganiel 2021b). For example, Ganiel's study found that the pandemic led to a heightened awareness of reaching out, both in online contexts and to needy groups and lay members (Ganiel 2021b). It also highlighted 'reaching in' aspects, including the challenges faced by clergy in exercising these roles.

Not all adaptation related to online religion, as religious groups also organised religious ceremonies outside, such as 'drive-in' religious services, where adherents drove to outdoor locations to participate in a religious service, as well as outdoor Masses. For example, one County Kerry priest celebrated Mass as adherents sat outdoors in their cars (Lucey and Brennan 2021).

Outdoor religious activity that did not involve collective rituals *per se* also took place, as in some clergy in small-scale communities participating in the door-to-door blessing of people's homes (Quinn 2020).

More significantly, though, the church found during the pandemic that it had a new moral economy rival in responding to people's social needs during a collective crisis: the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) (Inglis 2022), the national organisation for Gaelic sports. For example, GAA members provided assistance to marginal groups in small communities during the pandemic, including supplying medicine and food (Crosson and Free 2021; Lawlor 2022; Hoganstand 2020). Also, numerous GAA clubs functioned as vaccination centres¹⁰ during the pandemic.

Religious groups did not just innovate regarding religious rituals; they also lent their support for the role of science during the pandemic. One way this was expressed was via the advocacy of prayers for the development of vaccines. For example, the Catholic primate called for prayers for the development of a vaccine by the scientific community: 'I ask for your prayers in particular for our brave and selfless health workers and for the medical scientists who are searching for a vaccine and better treatments' (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference 2020e). Another expression of this was the fact that Catholic bishops encouraged devotees to avail of vaccines when they became available, even while acknowledging some concerns about the use of foetal cell lines in the manufacture of some of them (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. 2020c). Interestingly, the title of the bishops' statement on vaccines, 'Welcoming vaccines for the Common Good' (Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. 2020c), drew on the notion of 'the common good' – a key idea in the church's social teaching (Palacios 2007) – to legitimise vaccine take-up.

Likewise, the Muslim leadership – in line with Muslim leaders in other contexts (Trepanowski and Drażkowski 2022) – also lent its support to vaccines, arguing that they conformed with Islamic teachings (Kelleher 2021). Additionally, some religious groups (e.g. the Church of Ireland, Muslims) offered church settings to health authorities as vaccination centres (Iona Institute 2021; Kelleher 2021).

Survey-based research suggested relatively high levels of approval among laypeople of these kinds of responses, with 59 per cent reporting that churches at local level reacted well to the pandemic (Byrne and Sweetman 2021).

Regarding church–state interactions, the pandemic seemed to both reinforce and undermine 'benevolent secularism' (Buckley 2016, 2), whereby church and state elites mutually accommodate each other's

preferences and interests amid formal church–state separation. On the one hand, the pandemic seemed to prompt greater levels of interaction than before (Ganiel 2021b). For example, the Taoiseach’s (prime minister’s) office hosted regular meetings with church leaders regarding restrictions and their impacts on religious groups (O’Keefe 2021). On the other hand, the pandemic experience brought out direct criticism of state actions from religious elites. As noted in other contexts (e.g. Cremer 2021), the presence of an official forum for church–state interactions helps explain why church leaders were publicly vocal. Lacking backroom modes of influence characteristic of earlier eras of church–state interactions (Grzymała-Busse 2015), religious elites instead had to rely on speaking out publicly against political elites.

As mentioned in the earlier section, the early stages of the pandemic were characterised by support for restrictions, with the Catholic bishops urging devotees ‘to continue to follow the guidance of the public health authorities north and south’ (Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference 2020a). However, as restrictions were eased from June 2020 onwards (Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference 2020f), this began to give way to more direct criticism by religious elites of state responses (e.g. Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference 2021b) on the grounds detailed earlier.

At the same time, this discontent also extended to the lower clergy. For example, during Masses communicated via Facebook, a County Kerry priest, Father Gearóid Walsh, compared the upending brought about by the restrictions to the role of the infamous ‘Black and Tans’, the shock troops of the British government during the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921), while also calling for empirical evidence demonstrating the transmission risks of religious settings (O’Rourke 2020). Another priest, in County Monaghan, drew attention in an online Mass to a perceived secular turn in Irish society away from its historic religious attachments: ‘We now live in the most anti-Christian atheistic country in Europe. The land of saints and scholars is long since gone and has been replaced with a land of apostates and non-believers’ (O’Rourke 2020).

Particular rituals (i.e. first communions and confirmations) became a focus of church discontent. In August 2021, Catholic leaders pushed back against restrictions impacting these sacraments (Reuters 2021), partially motivated by the nature of the state’s decision-making processes. For example, Bishop Alan McGuckian of Raphoe lamented the state’s apparent haste: ‘The government, at very short notice, has

declared that Confirmations and First Holy Communions “are off” ... This sudden decision will be a cause of deep disappointment to all those involved’ (Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference 2021c). Similarly, Archbishop Eamon Martin of Armagh criticised the perceived neglect of the church’s representations by political elites (Hilliard and Leahy 2021; Kelly 2021a), which he argued undermined trust between church and state authorities (Kelly 2021a). For their part, political elites expressed their disapproval of the church leaders’ response (Reuters 2021).

Even so, there was also internal diversity within the church on this issue, with groups representing clergy (e.g. the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP)) criticising the stance of bishops (Reuters 2021). Individual clergy also sometimes took a stand. For example, one priest from the Archdiocese of Tuam celebrated Mass at a Mass rock dating to penal times on Achill Island, which was also partially an act of protest against restrictions on the celebration of the Mass (*The Irish Catholic* 2021).

Apart from shaping church–state interactions, the pandemic also fostered interreligious exchange around its ongoing impacts. For example, through the Dublin City Interfaith Forum, religious elites across different groups in Dublin – Baha’i, Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh – came together online to honour the healing role of health care staff (Dublin City Interfaith Forum 2020). This forum also emphasised the important role of religion as a source of comfort, noting that with religion ‘we don’t need to fear anything’ (Dublin City Interfaith Forum 2020). Finally, one study claimed that interreligious union was ‘frequent and united – perhaps more so than at any other time in Irish church history’ (Ganiel 2021b, 32).

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to investigate the legal and sociological aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic’s influence in Ireland. What does this analysis teach us about the place of religion in society more broadly?

Perhaps the key takeaway from the Irish case is how the COVID-19 pandemic may have both bolstered and eroded ‘benevolent secularism’ (Buckley 2016, 2) by fostering church–state union on managing the pandemic as well as bringing religious elites into conflict with political

ones, in a relatively rare public airing of such disagreements. Religious elites sought to cooperate with state authorities in implementing restrictions and engaged with them through formal consultation processes. Even so, as perceived anomalies and lack of consultation began to emerge, Catholic leaders challenged the legitimacy of political elites' actions.

While this was a relatively short-term dynamic, it may well lead to laboured cooperation in the future between church and state on other issues not related to COVID-19. Public disagreement with the state contrasted with other Catholic-majority countries such as Poland, where religious elites did not publicly challenge state actors (Stanisz et al. 2022), likely owing to the relatively strong church–state union in this country's contemporary political arrangements.

Notes

- 1 Although this chapter focuses on Ireland (also known as the Republic of Ireland), it is worth noting that religious groups in this context (e.g. the Catholic Church) are organised on an all-island basis (i.e. encompassing both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the latter being part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).
- 2 For a timeline of early public policy responses, see Kennelly et al. (2020).
- 3 It is worth mentioning that the religion question changed slightly between 2016 and 2022, from 'What is your religion?' to 'What is your religion, if any?' Also, the response options were different, with 'no religion' as the first in the 2022 census (compared to the last in the 2016 census). Thus, some of the reported change regarding religious self-identification between the two censuses may be an artefact of the question changes rather than reflecting a real change in religious self-identification among the general populace. For more detail, see <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/backgroundnotes/> (accessed 22 January 2023).
- 4 For more detail, see <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/migrationanddiversity/> (accessed 22 January 2023).
- 5 For a listing of pandemic-related statutory instruments, see <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-COVID-19-pandemic/> (accessed 23 January 2023).
- 6 For more detail, see https://www.courts.ie/acc/alfresco/9b095448-95f2-4a82-b5f9-4689c03c75ec/2021_IEHC_822.pdf/pdf#view=fitH (accessed 27 January 2023).
- 7 This figure combines the 'very uncomfortable' (18.1 per cent) and the 'uncomfortable' (29.5 per cent) categories (Central Statistics Office 2020).

- 8 This figure combines the ‘comfortable’ and the ‘very comfortable’ categories (Central Statistics Office 2020).
- 9 I owe this insight to sociologist Grace Davie (EUREL correspondents’ meeting, Paris, France, 22 September 2022).
- 10 For a listing of vaccination centres, see https://merriionstreet.ie/minister_for_health_confirms_locations_for_irelands_vaccination_centres.167088.short-cut.html (accessed 1 February 2023).

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