

# The Irish nones

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [July 10, 2013](#) issue



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Not for the first time in its history, Ireland is going to extremes. After centuries in which the island was synonymous with staunch Catholic piety, the republic seems to be undergoing a process of secularization as rapid as any in recorded history. If the Catholic Church's worst fears are realized, Ireland could soon be one of Europe's least religious countries.

Clergy abuse scandals have done much to drive religious change. Over the past two decades, repeated investigations have revealed extensive and systematic sexual abuse in the church as a whole and in particular dioceses, such as in Tuam, Cloyne and Dublin itself. The diocese of Ferns, the subject of a scathing 2005 report, earned the media label of "the devil's diocese." In 2009 the national Child Abuse Commission exposed decades of molestation and violence in Catholic-run schools and institutions.

Most of the sexual abuse story will be quite familiar to Americans: serial predators were ignored or transferred to new parishes. One such priest, Father Brendan Smyth, became the public face of clerical villainy. When Irish authorities were slow to extradite him in the 1990s, popular outrage actually toppled the government of the day.

The chronology of the Irish cases made that country's scandals in some ways worse than the counterparts in the United States. Most of the American cases involved behavior in the 1960s and 1970s, when child sexual abuse was poorly understood or

trivialized. In Ireland the pattern of concealment and denial continued until very recent years, long after all competent authorities should have known better.

Aggravating the Irish situation was the very tight alliance between secular and religious authorities. The Irish church operated largely free of state intervention or restraint. Scarcely less damaging than the sexual abuse revelations were the stories about the Magdalene Asylums, church-run institutions used to confine troubled girls and young women in harsh conditions. The story formed the basis of the poignant 2002 film *The Magdalene Sisters*, but similar documentaries have been a mainstay of Irish television for many years.

Horrendous as they were, the church's scandals would not have had the impact they did had they not coincided with wider social trends that reshaped the Irish laity. Without those trends, neither official agencies nor the media would have dared to publicize those abuses in the first place.

Starting in the 1970s, Ireland moved swiftly from a near-Third World economy to its status as the "Celtic Tiger." Levels of education rose sharply, and women entered the workforce in large numbers, creating a more confident and better-informed public. Attitudes to gender, sexuality and family were transformed. Ireland's total fertility rate fell from four children per woman in the 1960s to just two today—which is lower than the rate in the United States.

Shifting popular attitudes caused increasing tensions with the Catholic Church and its political allies. A 1995 referendum legalized divorce, albeit by the narrowest of margins, and contraception became easily available.

In themselves, these changes need not have affected religious practice, but even before the scandals broke, a steep drop in vocations indicated a steady drift away from traditional piety. Already in the 1990s, Irish dioceses were meeting their need for priests by importing men from Nigeria and other distant sources.

Partly due to the abuse scandals, the rate of change in religious attitudes has accelerated over the past decade. Generations that had grown up listening to the stern moral strictures of Catholic bishops and cardinals now found that those same leaders had been astonishingly tolerant of gross misconduct in their own ranks, undermining the church's right to influence later debates.

In terms of social policy, Ireland is liberalizing fast. Same-sex couples can already register for civil unions, and support for full gay marriage rights now runs at about two-thirds of the electorate. In the near future, a popular referendum will probably grant acceptance to a legal change that was not even on the agenda of most liberals just a decade ago.

Only a foolhardy soul would contemplate writing the obituary for Irish Catholicism. Although rates for mass attendance and religious participation have fallen, they are still high by European standards, and pilgrimage sites like Knock, Station Island and Croagh Patrick continue to draw a faithful following. The church also retains a major role in public education. But after all the revolutionary change in just a decade or so, it is hard to imagine the church retaining its power and numerical strength much longer.

Last year, a WIN-Gallup survey gave an eye-opening view of contemporary Ireland: 44 percent of Irish people declared themselves “not religious,” with 10 percent opting for the atheist label. Just between 2005 and 2011, Ireland’s combined atheist/nonreligious population almost doubled, from 28 to 54 percent, leaving the self-described “religious” as a minority. In a very few years, the country’s religious scene has changed dramatically.