Media Representations of Clerical Child Sex Abuse: Understanding Secularisation in 1990s Ireland

Susie Donnelly
IRCHSS Scholar,
School of Sociology, University College Dublin

Image: The Irish Times, 27th October 2005:16
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Introduction

- Central research questions:
  (i) What can media coverage of CCSA tell us about the relationship between the Catholic Church and the media in Ireland?
  (ii) How have transformations of power between these institutions shaped the secularisation process in Ireland during the 1990s?
Theoretical Framework

- Conceptualising secularisation as the decline in the authority of religious institutions (Dobbeleare, 1987)
  - Macro-level: over other social institutions
  - Micro-level: over religious belief and practice
- Applying Bourdieu’s Habitus and Social Fields (1990, 1993)
  - Habitus as ways of being within a social field and shaped by dominant institutional players in the field
  - How does the Church structure the Irish Catholic habitus?
Clerical Sex Scandals in the Media
Overview

- Demise of the social capital of the priest
  - The individual authority of the priest has been challenged as a result of a number of types of “sex scandals” cases

- Disclosure of cases
  - Within a relatively short period of time
  - Church response
  - Media as voice of victims
Fr Sean Fortune and the Ferns Diocese

- Ferns as a microcosm
  - 1990: Defiant public reaction to the conviction of Fr James Doyle on charges of CSA
  - 1995: Investigation into complaints of CSA against Fr Sean Fortune
  - 1999: Fr Sean Fortune commits suicide before he could face sixty-six charges of abuse against nine boys.
  - 2005: The Ferns Report
Regional Press, 1999

- Local Story vs. National Story
- Individual Abuser vs. Culture of Abuse

The Wexford People, 17th March 1999
The Wexford People, 24th March 1999
National Tabloid Press, 2005

- Challenge to religious and moral authority of institutional Church

*The Irish Sun, 26th Oct 2005*
Trends in Religiosity
Operationalisation

- Data from the European Values Study (EVS)
- Comparative analysis: Ireland, Italy, Malta, Spain
- Personal Religiosity
  - Spirituality index: Do you believe in God, life after death, heaven, hell, sin?
- Institutional Religiosity
  - Church Attendance: 0=Never, 1=Once a year or less, 2= More than once a year, 3=Once a month, 4=Once a week, 5=More than once a week
  - Trust in the Church: 0=None at all, 1=Not very much, 2=Quite a lot, 3=a great deal
- Analysis based on mean score of respondents (ANOVAs)
Personal Religiosity
Trends in Spirituality

Graph 1: Spirituality for Ireland, Italy, Malta and Spain (1981-1999)
Institutional Religiosity
Trends in Church Attendance

Graph 2: Church Attendance for Ireland, Italy, Malta and Spain (1981-1999)
Institutional Religiosity
Trends in Trust in the Church

Graph 3: Trust in the Church for Ireland, Italy, Malta and Spain (1981-1999)
Conclusions

- Coinciding with a period in which clerical sex scandals were the focus of widespread media attention in Ireland, we find the following trends:
  - Personal religiosity has remained relatively stable in Ireland over time
  - Institutional religiosity has significantly declined over time, particularly between 1990 and 1999
Discussion

- Understanding Secularisation
  - Secularisation on a micro-level
    - Personal and institutional religiosity should be distinguished
  - Secularisation on a macro-level
    - The role of the media and its relationship with dominant religious institutions should be considered
    - Increased social awareness of phenomena in the religious field, such as CCSA, should be considered.
Further study

- Changes in the relationship between the media and the church in Ireland
  - Relations of power between these formative social institutions from a socio-historical perspective.
  - Church dominance in the media field (and vice-versa) - Evident in coverage of clerical sex scandals.

- What does this mean for Irish society?
  - Future trends in religiosity.
  - The institutional vs. spiritual secularisation of Catholic Ireland.
Contact

The accompanying paper for this presentation was co-authored with Prof. Dr Tom Inglis, School of Sociology University College Dublin.

For further information, please contact: susiedonnelly@gmail.com