

Chapter 9: Language, Religion, and Culture

Introduction

The period from 1922 to 1949 saw significant developments in Irish identity, with **language, religion, and culture** playing crucial roles in shaping both the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. This chapter explores the efforts to revive the Irish language, the influence of the Catholic Church, the cultural divisions between North and South, and the role of literature, music, and sport in defining Irish identity.

1. The Irish Language Revival

Language Policy in the Irish Free State

- **Fianna Fáil and Cumann na nGaedheal** governments promoted Irish as a central part of national identity.
- **Irish was made compulsory in schools**, leading to increased literacy but also resistance from students and parents.
- The **Gaeltacht areas (Irish-speaking regions)** were protected, but their population declined due to emigration and economic hardship.
- The government created institutions such as:
 - **The Irish Folklore Commission (1935)**: Collected oral traditions and stories.
 - **Radio Éireann (1926)**: Broadcasted Irish-language programs.

Challenges to Revival Efforts

- Many viewed Irish as impractical for employment, leading to **low enthusiasm for learning the language**.
- The dominance of **English in business and media** limited Irish usage in daily life.
- While compulsory in education, it failed to become the primary spoken language outside Gaeltacht regions.

2. The Role of Religion in Society

Catholicism in the Irish Free State

- The Catholic Church played a **dominant role in government and society**.
- The **1937 Constitution (Bunreacht na hÉireann)** gave Catholicism a “special position.”
- Catholic doctrine influenced laws on **divorce, censorship, and education**.
- Religious orders controlled **schools, hospitals, and charities**.

Protestant Minority in the Free State

- Protestants made up a **small percentage of the population**.
- While legally protected, many faced **social and economic isolation**.
- The Protestant population **declined due to emigration and intermarriage**.

Religion in Northern Ireland

- **Protestant Unionists** dominated government and public institutions.
- **Catholics faced discrimination** in employment, housing, and political representation.
- The **Orange Order**, a Protestant fraternal group, had significant influence on government policies.
- Religious identity was deeply tied to **sectarian politics and cultural division**.

3. Irish Literature, Music, and the Arts

The Rise of Irish Literature

- The early 20th century saw a revival of Irish literature, heavily influenced by nationalism.
- Key writers included:
 - **Seán Ó Faoláin and Frank O'Connor**: Focused on social realism and modern Irish life.
 - **Patrick Kavanagh**: Wrote about rural hardships.
 - **Peig Sayers**: Preserved oral traditions in her autobiography.
- **Censorship Laws (1929)**: Restricted books seen as immoral or anti-Catholic.

Music and Cultural Identity

- Traditional Irish folk music remained popular, with institutions such as **Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (founded in 1951)** preserving it.
- **Sean-nós singing** (old-style Irish singing) was promoted in Gaeltacht areas.
- Irish musicians blended folk with modern influences, leading to the later folk revival.

4. Sport and National Identity

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)

- The **GAA promoted Gaelic football and hurling**, linking them to national pride.
- The **Ban on Foreign Games (Rule 27)** discouraged participation in soccer, rugby, and cricket (seen as 'British games').
- GAA clubs became **centres of community life**, particularly in rural Ireland.

Sport in Northern Ireland

- Soccer was popular, particularly among Unionists.

- The GAA existed but faced challenges due to Unionist opposition.
- Sectarian divides meant **Protestants and Catholics often played different sports.**

5. Censorship and Cultural Conservatism

State Control of Media and Expression

- The Irish government implemented **strict censorship laws** to protect Catholic values.
- **The Censorship of Publications Act (1929):**
 - Banned books considered immoral (e.g., works by James Joyce and John McGahern).
 - Restricted foreign newspapers and films.
- **Film Censorship:** Hollywood movies were often heavily edited to remove ‘immoral’ content.
- **Theatre and Art:** Many plays and artworks were subject to censorship if they challenged Catholic social norms.

Conclusion

- **Language, religion, and culture were central to Irish identity** in both the Free State and Northern Ireland.
- Efforts to revive Irish had mixed success, with **policy pushing education but failing in daily use.**
- **Catholicism dominated the Free State, while Protestantism remained central in Northern Ireland’s governance.**
- The **GAA, literature, and music played key roles in national identity**, but censorship limited creative expression.

Key Terms

- **Gaeltacht:** Irish-speaking regions designated for language preservation.
- **Bunreacht na hÉireann (1937):** Irish Constitution, recognising Catholicism’s role.
- **Orange Order:** Protestant fraternal group with influence in Northern Ireland.
- **Seán-nós:** Traditional unaccompanied Irish singing style.
- **Censorship of Publications Act (1929):** Restricted books and media considered immoral.
- **GAA Ban (Rule 27):** Prohibited GAA members from playing foreign sports like soccer and rugby.