

# Rescaling secularisation

Eoin O'Mahony, PhD student at  
NUI Maynooth

## Ireland's Catholic landscape

- 32 counties
- 26 Catholic Dioceses
- ~90% regular Mass attendance in 1990
- ~50% regular Mass attendance in 2008
- 73% of all 2006 marriages were Catholic ceremonies

Ireland was the training ground for the cartographic and imperial ambitions of the British state from the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century with the Civil Survey, the Down Survey and the Book of Survey and Distribution. The colonial power mapped fields, baronies, villages and mountain bogs but was not particularly interested in Catholic parishes. Part of the reason why this is the case is because the British state sought the conversion of the people of Ireland from the Reformation to the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Following independence in 1922, the state's mapping agencies continued to ignore the Catholic parish as a unit of organisation. Since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Irish Catholicism has been marked by a devotionism with an emphasis on the sacraments (confession, communion, marriage) overlain on older pagan rituals (holy wells, rag bushes and mountain pilgrimages).

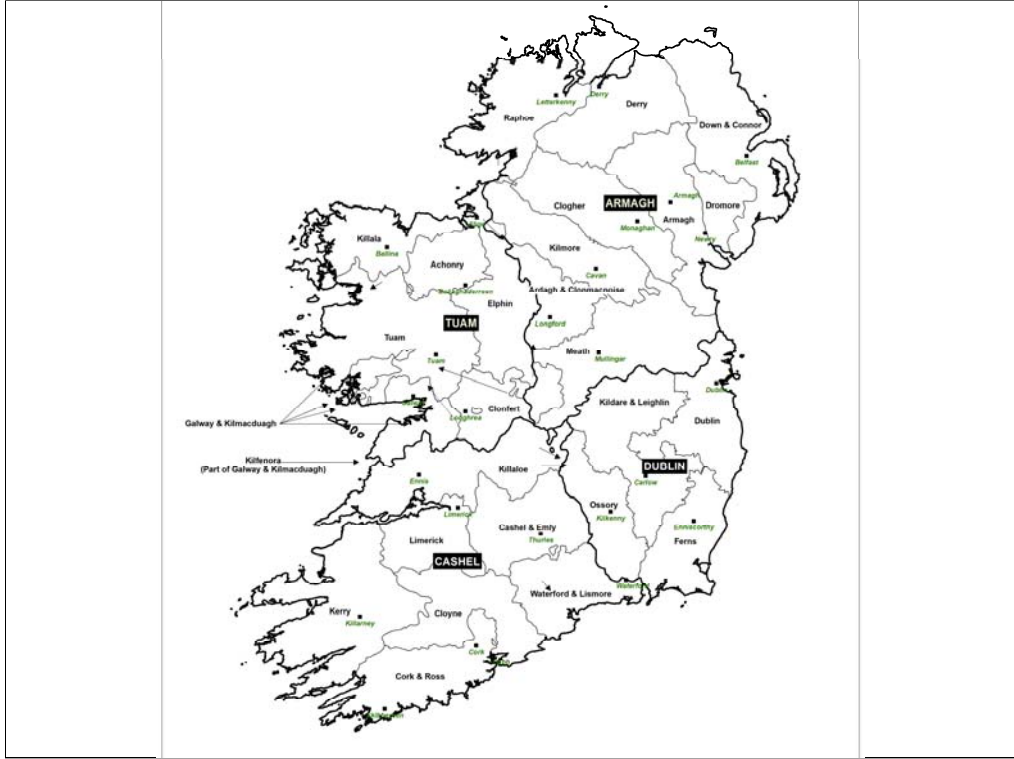
As the self understanding of what it is to be Irish changes again following a three decade period of secularisation, and most recently with the publication of state report on sexual abuse by Catholic clergy and religious orders, questions are being asked about Catholic parishes.

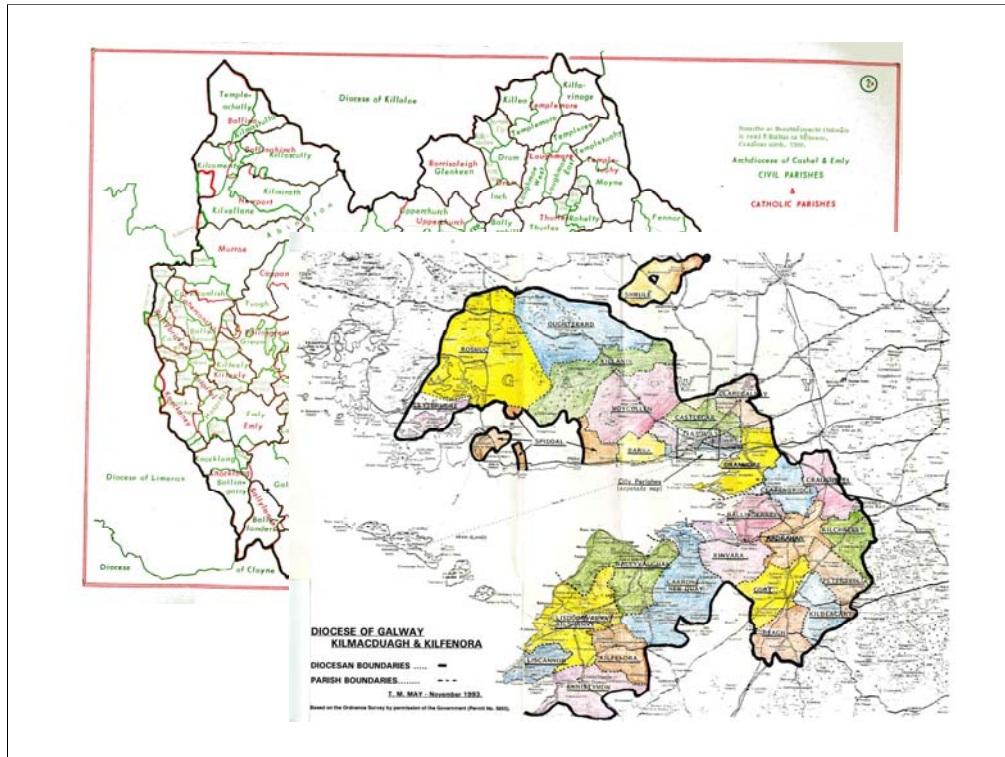
## 2008 Diocesan mapping project

- 1,360 parishes nested in 26 Dioceses across an international boundary
- 'Top down' approach
- 'Bottom up' approach
- Parishes of 3 Dioceses

This was an eight week project which verified the boundaries, digitised them using standard GIS and represented them for the website of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. It also involved digitising the parish boundaries of selected numbers of these Dioceses. This was a much more difficult part of the project with considerable divergence where parishes begin and end. A combination of oral narrative and detailed paper maps produced digitised parish boundaries for three Dioceses. Organisationally, the Catholic Bishops require Diocesan boundaries more than they do parish boundaries. Why would this be the case given the centrality of parish to Irish ecclesial life?

When we went to do this, a number of problems arose. The question still remained though: why had it not been done before? Last week, the state mapping agency agreed to conduct a pilot of digitising the Catholic boundaries for parishes. In the near future, their boundaries will become more important as a proportion of Catholic schools are changed to become state schools. Where should these schools be? Who should attend these schools? These are geographical questions.





## Diocesan held maps

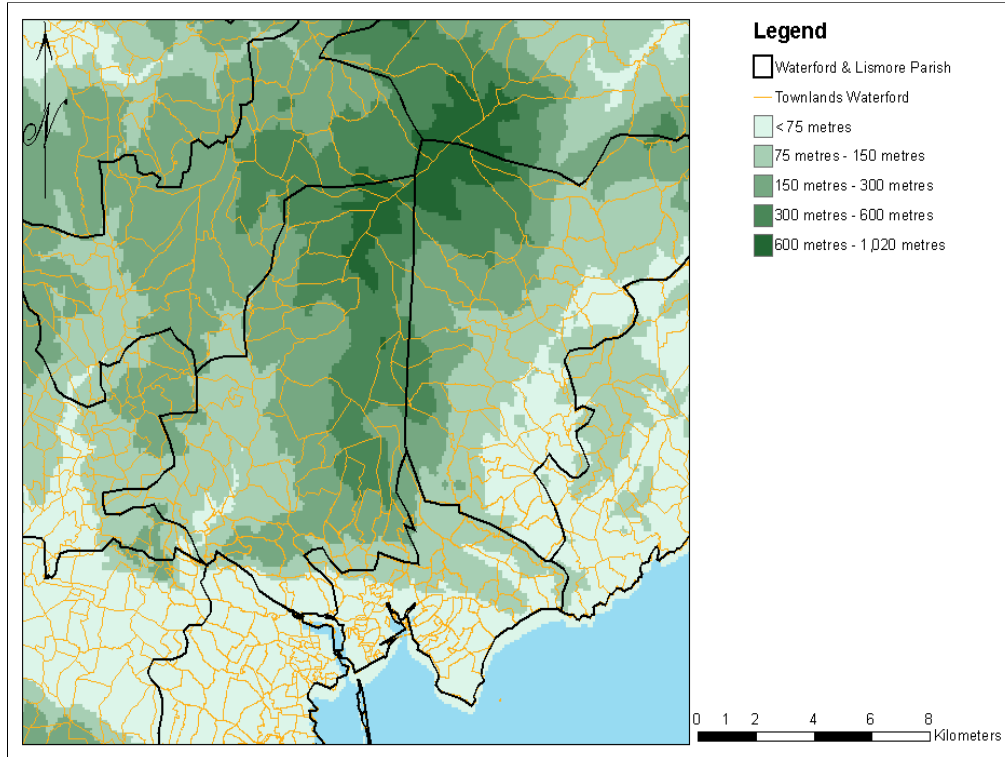
Heterogeneous & disparate, created at different times, mainly using townland index maps

### Advantages

- Often the map used on a 'day to day' basis in the Diocese
- Diocese is the authority on its own boundaries
- Build up of store of maps that existed in isolation previously

### Disadvantages

- Often created as a piece of art rather than a map
- Created for variety of reasons and never digitally available
- History or accuracy of map often unknown



Imposing Catholic parish boundaries on spaces not understood as homogeneously Catholic. Are all of the people in these boundaries Catholic? Of course not. Is it not a colonial project to impose these kinds of boundaries unproblematically? Furthermore, many of these are not boundaries that need to draw – because they already exist in people’s relational understanding of what the parish is.

## Avoiding the colonial

The manifold articulations between religion and conceptualizations of landscapes and place, and the contribution of religion in sustaining distinctive material cultures. (Brace et al., 2006: 29)

Understandings of secularisation that insist on an area becoming secular draw on such a colonial distinction. Just who is doing the colonising and who the colonised are remains contentious at this stage though.

Brace et al.'s work on Methodism in Cornwall has shown that it is not the detail of the Church practice that is in focus but the ways in which Methodist practice informed the construction and reproduction of a sense of community and self-identification. This allows us to see religious behaviour as not being confined solely to the chapel or the church but to a more critical analysis of "how aspects of religion inter-twine with the construction and performance of everyday dynamic and hybrid place-based identities." Seen in this fashion, religion is thus continuing and not re-emerging.

## Sustaining distinctive material cultures



This is a picture of a Marian shrine in Stillorgan Dublin, the site of Ireland's first shopping centre. In fact, this shrine is directly across from the shopping centre. It is positioned at the south west corner of a green area adjacent to St Laurence's Park and between a bus shelter and the motor factor shop, which you can see at the right of this shot. As you can see, the trees behind it are cut regularly, the railings are painted and the flowers next to the statue are maintained. In some senses, this shrine is better maintained than the forlorn looking bench in the foreground. But to say that the railings are painted, abstracts the intention of the person who does this. The shrine does not look after itself, so who does?

As part of my research I am hoping to talk with people about this maintenance. In doing so, I am trying to understand how that person creates and recreates their world in a specific space. This is constitutive of a religious action in a specific space, an action intended toward a religious object, which is next to a motor factors shop.

## Parish and community



Thinking of places like this, and about 30 others that I have photographed around the Dublin area, we could ask questions about sacred space and secular space. I might draw on Kong's appeal to begin to study the geographies of religion outside of the church grounds. Questions arising from the differentiation between this place being secular and this place being sacred imply a politics of secularisation. Part of this politics draws distinctions between the theological understanding of the world and a philosophical understanding of that same world. Another outcome of this politics of secularisation is the bracketing of particular types of action as being constitutive as religious. If the world is a series of unrelated stimuli, certain actions could be secular, others religious. Are religious people, othered in the eyes of secularisation, the colonised? Would digitally mapping parishes not maintain that colonisation?

However as Merleau-Ponty has pointed to: there is no flight from the world that is not in the world. Treating the social world as an external object to the body in space denies the very real social relations within which religious beliefs, like many others, arise in the first instance. A divorce from the social conditions of religious faith reinforces a Cartesian dualism that persists: that between mind and body. From the base of the statue, clearly not. It was erected by the People of Stillorgan in 1986. The politics arising from this way of understanding action in space should now be clearer. In Brace et al.'s terms,

“institutional organization and personal experience, are central not only to the spiritual life of society but also to the constitution and reconstitution of that society.”

How are we to make sense of this reconstitution of society if we insist on denominating specific places as secular as others as sacred? Furthermore, the People of Stillorgan implies a politics of the present day that is rarely researched in an Irish context. Why is that?

## Rescaling secularisation

Keeping the gaze on 'postsecularization' as a global shift may thus be misleading; it is not a discourse that can be universally and evenly applied unproblematically without more careful consideration of what secularization means and how rigorously evidence for such has been collected. (Kong, 2010: 764-5)

Lily Kong's work on the contested nature of informal spaces of identity formation as well as her reviews of the geographies of religion in *Progress in Human Geography* represent the most coherent research agendas for this still-emergent field. Kong argues that research agendas in the geographies of religion arise from a recognition that "religion as neither spatially nor temporally confined to 'reservations'" and that religion is not only practiced in officially assigned spaces at allocated times. Reviewing the field of geographies of religion since the early part of the century, she can see a shift away from the examination of officially sacred sites to seeing the ways in which religion is sited across scales, times and political spaces. She is critical in her assessment of postsecularisation theses which argue that the 're-engagement' of religion in the public sphere erases spatial differences in public rhetorics about multiculturalism and homogenises political secularism via a European model. It tends to foreclose research prospects on informally sacred places.

Seeing a re-emergence of religious discourses and practices in the public realm gives a sense that they had to re-emerge from somewhere. Secularisation processes are often conceived of as operating out of gross occurrences of scale jumping. What occurred at national levels must be a reflection of the local. The local is thus brought into political relations with larger addresses to power. To me, this jump to the postsecular is premature.

## Identity, political action and geographies of religion



These photographs are from Our Lady's Island in August 2010. About 3,000 people gather annually to venerate Mary as an expression of religious devotion and to call attention to the grace of Mary in her intercession with God. It is attended by young and old, men and women, people who live locally and people who come from further afield. There is a spatiality to the activity as it occurs which is both structurally determined (within the tenets of what it means to venerate Mary, with respect) and locally negotiated. Any examination of the occurrence of this devotion is also an examination of bodily practice in specific spaces. As can be seen from these photos people walk around the pilgrimage site, accommodating to the conditions in which they find themselves. I am sure there are many occasions where the day is not quite so warm and sunny, for example.

This is a practice facilitated by an institutional Church but locally understood and mediated by particular understandings of faith. The meaning from the place is derived by the practice of the people as it exists now. There is no reference here to Diocesan structures although which parish people come from is of conversational importance. Of course, in seeking the grace of Mary, they are recalling an understanding of events that took place perhaps two millennia ago, not to mention the countless official and unofficial tracts of Mariology since the middle ages nor the personal relationship each has with Mary. They would not be there otherwise. In Brace et al.'s terms, they are sustaining a distinctive material culture.

## Identity, political action and geographies of religion



So how do we draw the micropolitical back onto the larger canvas, as Kong suggests? One of the ways is to think about this is the throwtogetherness of places, as Massey has outlined. This would imply that we see both a spatial and a temporal significance to places which are never moments of arrival or completion. If political secularism forecloses the religious to its own domain, in what ways are these sites deconsecrated from the landscape? How have the politics of secularism, here conceived of as open-ended and continuing, deconsecrated this particular landscape. Their significance is both temporal *and* spatial but for a smaller number of people, despite their size on the landscape not changing. What has changed over time is their scalar effect. I'm not sure that scalar effect is the right phrase though.

In researching children's 'lived experience', Holloway and Valentine (2000) demonstrated that 'children's worlds of meaning are at one and the same time global and local, made through 'local' cultures which are in part shaped by their interconnections with the wider world'. Ansell demonstrates how this material spatial ontology might be helpful in outlining geographies of childhood, could the same be done for geographies of religion? Julian Holloway's work is particularly relevant to the way in which we might need to go beyond the micropolitical trap of seeing religion only as a local practice. Jumps to higher scales thus have a broader context within which to be conceptualised and theorised. What might inform such research agendas though is that sense of the relational between the devotional actions of some and how they are analytically represented in accounts of secularisation.