

QUEEN'S POLICY ENGAGEMENT

A series of Policy Briefing Papers
from Queen's University Belfast

RELIGIONS DURING A PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY: LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

July 2026

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic was a public health emergency that impacted on all aspects of life on the island of Ireland. Religious leaders and institutions were strategically positioned to promote public health measures, including hard to reach groups like ethnic and religious minorities; as well as to promote positive mental health and resilience among their members.

Religions also provided emotional support (especially around death and grieving), practical assistance, and social connections. Clergy/religious leaders were designated as ‘key workers’ in recognition of their important social roles. Despite strict restrictions on their practice, religious leaders and institutions largely compromised on issues related to religious freedom, and actively supported public health guidelines.

Religions, North and South

Most religious institutions are organised on an all-island basis. Religious leaders and institutions therefore interacted with governments and policymakers in two jurisdictions.

Religious practice in both jurisdictions remains higher than in other European nations, especially in Northern Ireland¹. Christianity continues to have a significant public role, especially through its contributions to education and cultural practices important to the life cycle (baptisms, communions, weddings, funerals).

1. Monthly or more religious attendance in the Republic is 35% (European Social Survey, 2023-24); while in Northern Ireland monthly or more attendance is about 45% among Protestants and 41% among Catholics (Northern Ireland Life and Times, 2025). In contrast, in 2018 the Pew Research Center found that in Western Europe, a median of 22% attend services monthly or more.

The Covid-19 pandemic highlights lessons for policymakers – north and south – when considering relationships between religions and the state; and the public role of religion during (and after) a public health emergency.

Protect Religious Freedoms

Religious leaders in Northern Ireland presented a more positive perception of their interactions with policymakers, noting that they were consulted through the Faith Forum established by the Northern Ireland Executive, in partnership with the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). Humanists were included in this forum and valued it. Religious leaders in the Republic of Ireland felt that consultation was cursory.

“[Policymakers] had a more meaningful exchange with the representatives from the Northern Ireland jurisdiction than the south. ... Here [in the Republic] they said, ‘well, that’s the way the rules are’ [without consultation].”

Protestant leader, Republic of Ireland, male

Official representatives of religious institutions did not criticize governments for violations of religious freedom. But among some religious leaders and members, there was discontent, especially in the Republic, and a feeling that religious groups were subjected to stricter restrictions than other societal institutions. This

view was also expressed in publications like the Irish Catholic. Some representatives of minority (non-Christian) religious groups felt their specific concerns were overlooked.

Policymakers should:

- Ensure that restrictions do not impact religious practice disproportionately, especially compared to other civic groups or sectors of the economy

Collaborate with Religions

Religious leaders and institutions remain influential in many communities and served as important educators around public health measures such as social distancing, mask wearing, and receiving vaccinations. Religious leaders are especially important and trusted leaders among immigrants, asylum seekers/refugees, ethnic minority groups, and socially isolated (often older) people. For some elderly people, religious practices are their main sources of social connection. On the island of Ireland and other contexts, some religious groups were criticised (sometimes erroneously) for not respecting public health guidelines or for promoting anti-vaccination views. But the island's religious leaders openly and overwhelmingly supported vaccination campaigns.

Policymakers should:

- Engage with religious leaders and institutions at the earliest stages to ensure that public health guidelines are realistic while respecting the specifics of religious practices
- Provide religious leaders and institutions with appropriate resources and support to convey public health messages, especially around vaccination campaigns

- Ensure that religious leaders and institutions in marginalised communities receive extra support to reach their members, including through developing digital/online resources
- Use discourses that help support stigmatised religious groups, helping to reduce stigmatisation through engagement and consultation.

Promote Inter-Faith Collaboration

During the Covid-19 pandemic, religious leaders and institutions at an all-island level collaborated more frequently and deeply than at any other time in the island's history, through dedicated high-level institutions such as the Irish Council of Churches/Inter-Church Meeting. Collaboration was not as great at grassroots (parish, congregational, etc.) levels; or between Christians and smaller non-Christian groups. Numerically smaller (non-Christian) groups often felt excluded.

“We’re small numerically, but we’re all equal citizens. We should have an equal say. ... There’s no understanding that we have different needs [than Christian groups]. ... I felt some [Christian] leaders felt they had more right to be there [with policymakers] than us. -

Female leader from a minority religion

Policymakers should:

- Support inter-church and inter-faith collaboration at the high levels, through dedicated Faith Forums or joint meetings/ consultations (both during and after public health emergencies)
- Pay particular attention to the unique needs of numerically smaller, non-Christian groups
- Support religious leaders and institutions to foster greater collaboration at grassroots levels, though funding or support for initiatives at these levels

What Can Policymakers Do Now?

Policymakers can support the contributions of religious leaders and institutions now and prepare for future crises by:

- Establishing/continuing inter-faith consultation with high-level religious representatives through faith forums
- Establishing/supporting existing networks of religious leadership (at sub-national level) to facilitate shared learning and peer support
- Supporting collaboration among religions at grassroots levels, prioritising funding for projects that:
 - meet immediate practical needs
 - support mental/spiritual health and resilience
 - produce digital resources and promote digital skills

About the Research

This report is based on research conducted by Gladys Ganiel and Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill (2022-2025) as part of the Trans-Atlantic Platform/AHRC funded project, 'Religion in Societies Emerging from Covid-19' (project code AH/X001369/1). The research focused on the Catholic Church,

Church of Ireland, Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, Irish Council of Churches, Muslims, and Humanists. Methods included content analysis of 385 public documents produced by these groups during the pandemic as well as religious media sources (the Irish Catholic, Church of Ireland Gazette, Presbyterian Herald, Methodist Newsletter, and comparable web-based sources produced by Muslims and Humanists); 562 responses to online questionnaires of leaders and members, and interviews with 80 participants.

Further Reading

1. Ganiel, Gladys, Solange Lefebvre and Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, eds. 2026. Special Issue: Religion and Covid-19, *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 19(1-2)
2. Ganiel, Gladys. 2026. Religious Discourses about COVID-19 Vaccination in Canada, Germany, Ireland/Northern Ireland, and Poland, *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 19(1-2): 148-175, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18748929-bja10146>
3. Ganiel, Gladys and Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill. 2024. Religion on the Island of Ireland during the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Religion, State and Society*, 53(1): 4-24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2024.2369381>
4. Ní Dhónaill, Caoimhe. 2026. Faith and Fellowship: Religions and the Pandemic in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 19(1-2): 69-93, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18748929-bja10149>
5. Radde-Antweiler, Kerstin, Solange Lefebvre and Gladys Ganiel. 2026. The Changing Role of Religion in Societies Emerging from COVID-19: Research Project Methodology, Bremen: ZeMKI Working Paper No. 55, ISSN 2510-9855

About the Authors

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She is author of six books and her articles have appeared in Religion, State and Society; Sociology Compass; The Review of Faith and International Affairs; and Sociology of Religion. She is co-editor, with Andrew J. Holmes, of The Oxford Handbook of Religion in Modern Ireland (2024). She has two forthcoming books, An Island of Faith? Religions and Change in Ireland, North and South (with Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill, Oxford University Press) and Christianity and Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland (Cambridge Elements).

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Dr Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill is an Independent Researcher and a former lecturer in the School of Social Sciences, Education, and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast.

Caoimhe's research interests lie in the field of Identity and Social Identity Theory. She has applied this to diverse topics, including Environmental Awareness and Public Behaviour, Sex Work, Ageing and Disability. Regarding sustainability, she has a particular interest in considering why people act in particularly environmentally responsible (or indeed irresponsible) ways.

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