Abstract
In Ireland there has been much debate among social scientists and media commentators concerning what has been termed the ‘end of Catholic Ireland.’ The transformation in devotional practices since Vatican II, and the revelations of clerical abuse are some of the factors that have combined to diminish the Catholic Church’s political and moral authority in Irish society. However, the Irish Census results from 2011 indicate that over 84% of the population still self-identify as Catholic, and of the 3.86 million strong congregation, 92% are Irish. While the empty pews at weekly masses attest to a marked decline in levels of practice, it is unclear what the ‘end’ of Catholic Ireland really means.

This paper, based on ethnographic fieldwork at a Marian shrine in Mayo and a holy well in Donegal, is primarily concerned with exploring the tensions between adherents of a conservative Church doctrine and more liberal-minded Catholics. The nature of Irish Catholicism is complex and ranges from those who reject outright the Church’s claim to moral authority to those who participate in selective Church rituals, but yet remain grounded in the Church. Then there are others who move between formal church rituals and more magico-religious experiences. Knock Marian Shrine, for instance, remains an important centre of devotion for many Catholics. However, Knock became the centre of a battle between the church hierarchy and the devotees of a visionary and medium who sought to hold prayer meetings at the shrine. The reporting of visions at several locations in Ireland in the past five years serves to illustrate how some Catholics have sought a return to traditional values when confronted with major social changes brought about by the forces of modernity and secularisation. Is it the ‘end’ of Catholic Ireland?

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