

# RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION, SWITCHING AND APOSTASY AMONG PROTESTANTS AND CATHOLICS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

## **Religious Identification, Switching and Apostasy among Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland -- Individual and Cohort Dynamics between two Censuses 2001-11**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Religious identification has historically been salient in Northern Ireland as an ethnic-national identity marker. Thirteen years after the Good Friday Agreement which marked the start of the peace process in the country, the question arises whether religious affiliation in Northern Ireland has become less of an ethno-national identity marker and more of a personal choice. This paper analyses religious switching and apostasy between 2001 and 2011, using data from the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study, a representative sample of approximately 28 percent of the population, linked to the 2001 and 2011 censuses. We found that the vast majority retained their self-reported religious affiliation, a tiny minority switched between Protestantism and Catholicism, and a significant minority, particularly among the young, switched to 'none/not stated' or between Protestant denominations. Religious switching is associated with young age, higher education, but also socio-economic deprivation. Experiences of social frustration appear to drive many to leave their faith.

*Keywords: Religious Switching, Apostasy, Northern Ireland, census*

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*Acknowledgements:* The authors would like to acknowledge the help provided by the staff of the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS) and the NILS Research Support Unit. The NILS is funded by the Health and Social Care Research and Development Division of the Public Health Agency (HSC R&D Division) and NISRA. The NILS-RSU is funded by the ESRC and the Northern Ireland Government. The authors alone are responsible for the interpretation of the data and any views or opinions presented are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of NISRA/NILS.

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## INTRODUCTION

In post-conflict societies with histories of religious and ethnic tensions, religion has often remained salient as a marker of national and/or ethnic identities (Hayes and Dowds 2015; Mitchell 2013; Hayes and McAllister 2009; Muldoon et al. 2007). Northern Ireland has been mentioned in the literature as a prominent example. Throughout Northern Ireland's history (Catholic and Protestant) religious identities have been important markers of exclusive (Irish or British) national identities and have been at the center of the conflict (Barnes 2005; Coakley 2007; R. J. McAllister 2000; Gallagher 1989). Religious and national identities have been intertwined to such an extent that they are often used synonymously (Anderson and Shuttleworth 1998). However, by the Census year 2011, 13 years had passed since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) between Northern Ireland's main political parties and the British and Irish government which marked the beginning of the peace process.<sup>1</sup> After such a long time, it might be expected that religious self-identification in Northern Ireland might have converged towards the general trend of religious decline that has been observed in most Western European countries (Bruce 2002; Voas and Crocket 2005; Pollack et al. 2012; Need and Graaf 1996). A long tradition of research on religious change in Europe found that industrialization, democratization and increasing political stability had brought a trend towards secularization in most countries

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<sup>1</sup> The Good Friday Agreement (GFA, or Belfast Agreement) was an agreement between the British and Irish governments and Northern Ireland's main political parties on 10 April 1998. It set up a power-sharing Assembly to govern Northern Ireland. The agreement is understood as a key event in the Northern Ireland Peace process, which is marked by ceasefire and a cease of most of the violence (the 'Troubles') by the late 1990s.

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(Norris and Inglehart 2004; Need and Graaf 1996; Graaf and Need 2000). Others found cohort change, younger cohorts becoming less religious than their elders (Voas and Doebler 2011; Hout and Fischer 2002). Evidence from the Northern Ireland census and from surveys suggests that religious attendance and religious self-identification in post-conflict Northern Ireland have shown signs of decline (Brewer 2015; Hayes and Dowds 2010).

This study analyses transitions in religious self-identification in post-conflict Northern Ireland over a ten-year period, using representative data from a large population study, which is linked to 2001 and 2011 census returns. Our sample comprises approximately 28 percent of the population of Northern Ireland. This permits a novel analysis which understands how people's religious affiliations changed at successive censuses.

The analysis addresses the following questions: How stable has religious identification in Northern Ireland been over the last census-decade? Do changes in religious identification differ by age cohort? Do people who switched their religious affiliation between 2001 and 2011 have certain socio-demographics and socio-structural traits in common? How do people who switched between Christian denominations and those who switched to 'none/not stated' differ from those whose self-identification remained stable over time?

### **Religious Identification in Northern Ireland -- Stability over time or a Matter of Choice?**

Different theoretical approaches have been applied to understanding religious identification and religious switching: Perhaps the most prominent in the context of conflict societies are social identity theory (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 1979) and rational choice theory (Stark and Glock 1968; Stark and McCann 1993). Both identity and rational choice theory are applicable to religious identification in Northern Ireland at different stages of its recent history, as both make

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different assumptions about how individuals identify as members of a religion. While social identity theory sees religious affiliation as a group identity marker, influenced by a sense of collective belonging, the rational choice approach sees religious affiliation as a choice in a religious marketplace.

Social identity theory is, perhaps, the most common approach in studies on Northern Ireland, where religious affiliation has been salient as an ethno-political identity marker for centuries. Social identity theory (Tajfel 1974; Turner 1975) claims that collective identities are important for people's sense of who they are. According to the theory, individuals develop a sense of collective identity by delimiting their in-group from out-groups they do not endorse. Some research showed religious and ethnic identities to be highly stable over time (Huddy 2001) and responsive only to major life-changes (Cassidy and Trew 2004). Other research on Northern Ireland (Muldoon et al. 2007) found, however, that religious identities can change over relatively short periods of time, if an individual's life-circumstances change. Such changes can occur as life-course events, e.g. in young adolescents when they leave the parental home to enter higher education. Young people entering higher education are at a crucial life-stage of transition of their social relationships (Cassidy and Trew 2004), new friends are made, partners are found, addresses and living environments change and new intellectual influences may transform the young person's outlook. Cassidy and Trew (2004) observed that due to the still highly sectarian school system in Northern Ireland, the majority of Northern Irish students are exposed to much more religious diversity when they start university than at secondary school. Contact theory (Brown and Hewstone 2005; Pettigrew 1998) suggests that individuals become more open-minded towards out-groups the more contact they have with them. Exposure to more diversity, contacts and mixing of friendship networks across religious groups are likely to weaken an

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individual's group identification, potentially motivating individuals to switch to a different denomination. The binding power of social (and religious) identities is thus at least to some extent context dependent. We therefore expect the highly educated and especially young adults moving away from the parental home to be more likely to switch, as religious identities are becoming less salient for this group. We hypothesize for both Catholics and Protestants:

*H1: Individuals who switch from having a religious affiliation to 'none/not stated', or switch between Catholic and Protestant religious denominations in Northern Ireland tend to be the highly educated, young and mobile (movers between geographical areas).*

This reasoning also accords with rational choice explanations. Rational choice theory views diversity and pluralism as crucial stimuli for religious mobility and switching. American sociologists (Finke and Stark 1998; Stark and McCann 1993; Warner 1993) theorized that modern religion in free societies can be compared to a market place, where individuals make religious choices over which denomination they prefer to identify with. The more pluralism and freedom of religion people experience in society, the more likely are they to view religious affiliation as a choice.

Stark and Glock (1968) also found that the likelihood of religious switching in the US depended on the person's social status and on levels of conservatism versus liberalism of the denominations switched to. This liberalism-conservatism divide in religious choices has also been highlighted by Hout and Fischer (2002, 2014), who found switching to 'none' in the US to be associated with political disaffection among younger cohorts with the rigid conservatism of their denominations. In Northern Ireland, religiously charged public disputes have taken place

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throughout recent years around abortion and LGBT rights (gay marriage in particular) and this was the case across Catholic and Protestant denominations. This, and the fact that religious identification is still strongly associated with the Northern Ireland conflict, is likely to have frustrated and alienated many young people, especially those with university education. Hayes and Dowds (2015) argue that this may have motivated many to turn their back on organized religion altogether. Indeed, research based on survey data found that church attendance has declined steadily in Northern Ireland since the 1960s (Brewer 2015, 215; Hayes and Dowds 2010, 2). In line with this research and with Hout and Fischer (2014), we thus expect to find switching to 'None/Not stated' to be a phenomenon particularly among the younger, more educated.

Others have emphasized that religious choices can be constrained by outward factors (Loveland 2003; Sherkat 2001; Sherkat and Wilson 1995), especially in societies that do not provide a free religious market. In countries where religious choice is constrained by state intervention, or, as was the case in Northern Ireland throughout much of its history, religiously charged conflict, religious switching is far less common than in free societies. Muldoon et al (2007) and Mitchell (2005) note that due to the Northern Ireland conflict, Protestant and Catholic religious identities have been strongly tied not only to national identities (as either British or Irish), but also to a sense of local communal belonging. Thus, strong mechanisms of social control in Northern Ireland's highly segregated communities may have prevented many from considering switching to 'none' or to a different denomination in the past. This accords with Sherkat and Wilson's (2001, 1995) emphasis on the import of normative constraints to religious choice. However, after the GFA of 1998, the peace process progressed, the threat of political violence of the past decreased since the early 2000s (McKittrick and McVea 2012, 290, 374) and

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Northern Ireland has become a much more politically stable society, thus permitting people to view religious affiliation as a choice. In line with rational choice theory, we may thus expect religious affiliation to have become less of an ethnic identity-marker and more of a personal choice since then, especially for younger cohorts.

This also accords with Norris and Inglehart (2004), who, from a modernization theory perspective, found that societies become more liberal and less religious through cohort replacement, younger less religious cohorts replacing older ones. Similarly, Hout, Greeley and Wilde (2001) found changes in the membership of denominations in the US to be a result of cohort replacement.

For the ten-year period of this study, we thus expect to observe an increase in the number of 'nones' and significant numbers to have switched to a different denomination since 2001, particularly among the young. Cohorts coming of age after the Troubles may well be more likely to switch to 'none' and to switch between religious denominations than older generations who directly experienced the conflict. Research on religion in Northern Ireland using survey data found that attitudes of youths towards religion have indeed become more open-minded (Muldoon et al. 2007) and more secularized (Tonge et al. 2011) and that non-religious identification is becoming more common among the young (Muldoon 2004; Cassidy and Trew 2004).

Both cohort effects (younger cohorts coming of age after the end of the Troubles) and life-course effects (young adolescents being more likely than older individuals to switch because of the life-stage they are at) are likely to play an important part when it comes to religious switching.

Relatedly, we expect to find another life-course effect at older ages. Older people tend to be more conservative and are less likely to switch to a different denomination (Schwadel 2011;

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Voas and McAndrew 2012). We expect the very old and those who experienced a health-decline to be less likely than the healthy and young to switch to 'none/not stated' and more likely to switch from 'none/not stated' to a religion. The reasoning is that the ill and the very old are confronted with their mortality. Thus, the religious promise of an afterlife may offer some comfort (Jong, Halberstadt, and Bluemke 2012). Research repeatedly found people with declining health to become more religious over time (Jong, Halberstadt, and Bluemke 2012; McFarland et al. 2013). Again, these mechanisms should hold across both Catholic and Protestant denominations:

*H2: Individuals belonging to the oldest cohorts and those, who experienced a health-decline between 2001 and 2011 are less likely than the young and those with stable health to switch from having a religious identification to 'none/not stated' and more likely to switch from 'none/not stated' to having a (Catholic or Protestant) religious identification in 2001.*

Another important factor, which likely influences whether individuals see religious affiliation as a choice is social disadvantage. A long tradition of research found social disadvantage to be positively related to religious devoutness and conservatism (Glock 1961; Stark and Glock 1968; Wimberley 1984; Coreno 2002; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Norris and Inglehart 2004). Stark and Glock (1968) and Finke and Stark (1992) found in their research on American denominations that the socio-economically deprived preferred conservative over liberal denominations due to higher otherworldly compensations these denominations are assumed to offer. This link has been confirmed by other studies (Coreno 2002; Pyle 2006). However, in Northern Ireland the main distinction regarding religious choice is between

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Catholicism, Protestantism and non-religion, and not along an axis from liberal to conservative.

Northern Ireland's main denominations within Protestantism, the Presbyterian Church, Church of Ireland and Methodist Church do not seem to differ much with regards to their levels of conservatism, nor is it plausible to assume a difference in levels of conservatism between Catholicism and Protestantism in Northern Ireland. The crucial question is whether individuals switch between denominations at all, whether they switch across the Protestant-Catholic divide and how many leave their faith altogether. In the Northern Irish context, the most conservative religious choice available is to stay put.

We expect the socio-economically deprived to be less likely to switch than people who are not deprived. The reasoning behind this is that the socially disadvantaged have fewer choices in the material realm and are therefore also less likely to be aware of having choices in the immaterial, religious realm. This accords with Norris and Inglehart's theory that social and material insecurity encourage religious devoutness and discourage switching, particularly to 'none' (Norris and Inglehart 20014: 243).

*H3: People who are unemployed, those who live in socially rented housing and those living in income-deprived residential areas are less likely than those in employment, homeowners and those living in non-deprived areas to switch their religious identification.*

Lastly, we examine, whether living in religiously segregated residential areas affects people's propensity to switch to a different religious identification. Religiously segregated areas are areas where one religious denomination dominates with little to no religious diversity. Including the extent of segregation into the analysis is important because Northern Ireland is (still) a highly

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religiously segregated society and living in highly religiously homogenous communities is likely to influence an individual's choice of religious identification (Mitchell 2005).

Because religious segregation is a strong historical context in Northern Ireland, which was found to create and reinforce contesting religious identities (Mitchell 2005; Mitchell 2013; Muldoon et al. 2007), we expect religious switching and apostasy to be less prevalent in more religiously segregated communities:

*H4: Individuals are less likely to switch to a different denomination or to switch to 'none/not stated', the more religiously segregated their area of residence is.*

### DATA AND METHODS

The analysis is based on data from the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS). The NILS is a representative sample of the population of Northern Ireland; sampling is based on 104 (out of 365 possible) birthdates and on records from the Northern Ireland Health Card Registration system (NIHCR) (O'Reilly et al. 2011; Johnston, Rosato, and Catney 2010, 5–6). Every inhabitant of Northern Ireland who has a health card registration and is born on one of the 104 NILS-dates, is a NILS member. The NILS comprises approximately 28 percent of the population of Northern Ireland, approximately 450,000 people out of a total population of 1.8 million. All individuals living in Northern Ireland, who were present in the Northern Ireland Health Card registration system in 2001 and 2011, and who have a 2001 and 2011 census record, are members of our sample (O'Reilly et al. 2011; Johnston, Rosato, and Catney 2010). Nearly all of Northern Ireland residents have health cards, since having registered for a health card is a legal requirement to be able to access the National Health Service (NHS). The proportion of the NILS population linked to the 2001 and 2011 Censuses exceeded 95 percent (NISRA 2015). The

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NILS sample is thus representative of the NI population since the census aims to cover 100 percent of the population.

The analysis focuses on individual-level change of religious identifications between the two censuses 2001 and 2011 and its predictors using multinomial logit modeling in STATA 14. The research interest is in individuals who were adults by 2011 and can thus be assumed to be capable of making informed decisions over their religious choices. We therefore include only the sub-set of NILS members aged 10 years or older in 2001 (and subsequently 20 years or older in 2011) and who were enumerated in both the 2001 and the 2011 censuses. The full sample of NILS respondents aged 10 years and older in 2001 is N=389,445. Of those respondents, 80,303 were not enumerated in the 2011 Census due to either death or out-migration out of the country, and 4,996 were reported on the household questionnaire as ‘non-resident students’ and we therefore do not have their religious identification.

### **Dependent Variable**

*Religious identification* was asked in the 2001 census with a filter “Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?” (1=yes; 0=no). Individuals who responded ‘yes’ to the first question were asked a second question, “what religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?”. The 2001 census variable measuring *religious identification* had 193 categories, many of which have sample sizes far too small for meaningful comparisons.<sup>2</sup> For the

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<sup>2</sup> The Census question on religious self-identification was in an open format, the respondents wrote their religion on the form. The answers were then coded by the Northern Ireland Statistics Agency (NISRA) into the census variable containing 193 categories.

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purpose of this study, the two variables were recoded into a new variable capturing the 7 main religious groups that exist in Northern Ireland (*1= Roman Catholic, 2=Presbyterian Church of Ireland, 3=Church of Ireland, 4=Methodist Church in Ireland, 5=Protestant other, 6=other non-Christian, 7=no religion*).

In 2011, the census questions were unfortunately asked slightly differently than in 2001. The first question on religion in 2011 was “what religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?” Respondents, who did not report a religious affiliation, were then asked what religion they were brought up in. This second question was used by the census Office to impute non-responses to the first question. Our analysis includes only the original answers to the first question with no imputed values. This is important because we are interested in change of religious self-identification from 2001 to 2011, not in the religion respondents retrospectively said they had in childhood, or values that have been imputed to them. The fact that the Census question on religious identification was asked differently between the two Censuses is a potential source of bias. The wording of the 2011 question can be seen as leading, thus potentially inflating the numbers of religious and under-estimating the number of non-religious people in 2011. This is a limitation to our study but is arguably outweighed by the population-level coverage of the NILS.

Like the 2001 census variable on *religious identification*, the 2011 census variable was coded into 7 categories: *1= Roman Catholic, 2=Presbyterian Church of Ireland, 3=Church of Ireland, 4=Methodist Church in Ireland, 5=Protestant other, 6=other non-Christian, 7=no religion*.

The analysis first examines percentage change in religious identifications across the seven categories between the two censuses. For the multinomial model of religious identities and

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switching, we recoded *religious identification* into the three categories Protestant, Catholic and ‘none/not stated’ for both census years, and performed multinomial logit models of the respondents *religious identification* in 2011 regressed on the respondent’s *religious identification* in 2001.<sup>3</sup> This was done in separate models *for Catholics, Protestants and ‘none/not stated’* (in 2001). The reference category for the Catholic and Protestant models was ‘*remained Catholic/remained Protestant in both census years*’, the reference category for the ‘none/not stated’ model was ‘*Protestant in 2011*’.

The reason for this modeling choice is firstly that the main religious divisions in Northern Ireland have been between *Protestant, Catholic* and ‘*none/not stated*’, rather than between denominations within Protestantism; secondly the three-category approach ensures better model stability. We performed the same model of religious switching across all seven religious categories, but this suffers from small numbers in some of the categories (e.g. switching from ‘Catholic’ to ‘Presbyterian’ or ‘Methodist’), thus affecting the stability of the model.

For the multinomial model of religious switching ‘none’ and ‘not stated’ were collapsed into one category to gain a sufficient number of observations for the model to be able to converge.

The period of analysis, 2001 to 2011, was chosen based on the availability of reliable census data on religious affiliations for Northern Ireland. Furthermore, in 2001, the Peace Process had seen considerable progress and the years after 2001 saw the stabilization of the

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<sup>3</sup> We also performed the same model of religious switching across all seven religious categories, but this suffers from small numbers in some of the categories (e.g. switching from ‘Catholic’ to ‘Presbyterian’ or ‘Methodist’), thus affecting the stability of the model.

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Northern Ireland Assembly. The data thus allow us to study changes in religious identifications after the end of the most violent phase of the Troubles.

## **Independent Variables**

The models include *age* coded as 10-year cohorts, *education*, changes in the respondents' *self-reported health* between 2001 and 2011, the respondents' *employment status*, *tenure (social housing, privately rented housing vs home-ownership)*. On the level of residential super-output areas (SOAs), we include the extent of *Catholic and Protestant religious segregation*.

Our measure of religious segregation is based *on the percentage of Catholics and Protestants in each respondent's SOA of residence* in 2001 and 2011. One SOA comprises approximately 700 to 1000 households and there are 890 SOAs in Northern Ireland (NISRA 2015). The models include the square-rooted proportion of Catholics per SOA centered around the mean proportion of Catholics over all SOAs based on the 2011-Census. In addition, we also ran models including separately the percentages of Protestants and Catholics per SOA.

## **Controls**

Our models also control for *marital status*, because it may impact on religious identification. Getting married or divorced is a major transition in an individual's circumstances. Individuals who marry, especially when they marry across the Protestant – Catholic divide, may consider switching to their partner's denomination. Those who experienced a divorce, on the other hand, may be more likely to switch from having a religious identity to 'none', or to switch back to the denomination they had before marrying. This concurs with research on the link between marriage and religious choice (Musick and Wilson 1995; O'Leary 2001; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy,

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and Waite 1995; Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010). Our sample does not contain information on what religion the respondent's spouse belongs to, but research based on the census and on the UK Household Longitudinal Study (McAloney 2014) show that only between five and seven percent of marriages in Northern Ireland crossed the Protestant-Catholic divide in 2011.

### FINDINGS

Overall, the *Catholic to Protestant* ratio of our sample remained largely the same between 2001 and 2011 and changed only with regard to 'other Protestant' and 'none/not stated'. In 2011, 38 percent were Catholic, 48 percent were Protestant, and 14 percent were 'none/not stated'. The Catholic group decreased by two percent (the vast majority who left the Catholic Church switched to 'none/not stated'), while the Protestant group decreased by one percent.

In 2011, a large majority of the respondents, 74 percent had retained the same religious identification they had in 2001, eight percent had switched from a religious identification to 'none/not stated', five percent were 'none' or 'not stated' both in 2001 and in 2011, six percent had switched between different denominations (mostly within Protestantism) and seven percent of the respondents had switched from 'none/not stated' in 2001 to a religious denomination in 2011. The vast majority of religious switching in Northern Ireland took place to 'none/not stated' and between denominations within Protestantism. Only 753 out of 304,146 respondents switched from Catholicism to Protestantism and 572 respondents switched from a Protestant denomination to Catholicism. However, seven percent of Catholics and 12 percent of Protestants switched to 'none/not stated'. We observe some significant churn within Protestantism: 11 percent of Protestants had switched to a different Protestant denomination by 2011. Table 1 shows the

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numbers of respondents belonging to each religious group in 2001 and 2011 and contains the N and percentages for all possibilities of religious switching.

[Table 1 about here]

We see from Table 1 that the majority of switching within Protestantism took place from the *Church of Ireland* and ‘*Protestant other*’ to the *Presbyterian Church* and we also observe some switching from Presbyterianism to the Church of Ireland and to ‘Protestant other’.

Table 2 shows the switching patterns by ten-year age cohorts. Both apostasy and switching are more prevalent among the younger cohorts.

[Table 2 about here]

To test the hypotheses outlined earlier, we fitted a multinomial logit model of religious switching on *age, sex, education, the respondent’s socio-economic and marital status, and area-level religious segregation and income deprivation* and ran this model separately for Catholics, Protestants and ‘none/not stated’. The dependent variable is the respondents’ *religious identification in 2011*, coded as three categories: *Catholic, Protestant, ‘none/not stated’*. Those who reported the same religious (Catholic or Protestant) identification in 2001 and 2011 were left out as the reference category.<sup>4</sup> In the model for those who were ‘none/not stated’ in 2001, ‘Catholic in 2011’ is the reference category.

The model was fitted in several steps: First, each variable of interest was included on its own, then the full model was run in a separate step controlling for the other variables. For

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<sup>4</sup> In the Protestant model, the reference category is ‘Protestant in 2011’. In the Catholic model, the reference category is ‘Catholic in 2011’.

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reasons of space, we present only the coefficients of the final model. Tables 2 and 3 contain the full model with *age* included as *ten-year cohorts*.

[Table 3 about here]

[Table 4 about here]

We hypothesized in *H1* that those who switch to a different religious affiliation tend to be the highly educated, young and movers between SOAs. The model coefficients (relative risk ratios) in Table 2 yield interesting results: Having a degree and intermediate education (as opposed to having low to no education) is statistically significantly positively related to switching to ‘none/not stated’ only for Protestants, but not for Catholics. Among Protestants, the odds of switching to ‘none/not stated’ are 12 percent higher for someone with a University degree and eight percent higher for someone with intermediate level education, compared to someone with lower education. However, education is unrelated to Protestant switching to Catholic. For Catholics, education levels are unrelated to all forms of religious switching. For those who were ‘none/not stated’ in 2001, higher education is strongly linked to remaining ‘none/not stated’ in both years 2001 and 2011, as opposed to switching (back) into a religious affiliation. We already observed that there is some significant churn within Protestantism and that the vast majority of switching took place to ‘none/not stated’ (apostasy). Our multivariate results show that both are strongly linked to education for Protestants.

Regarding age and spatial mobility, the model coefficients are as expected. For both Catholics and Protestants youth is strongly related to a higher likelihood of switching to ‘none/not stated’. This holds especially for the youngest cohort of 10 to 17 year olds in 2001. Young Catholics in this cohort are 43 percent more likely than Catholics aged 40 to 49 to switch to ‘Non/not stated’, and Protestants in this youngest cohort are 88 percent more likely to switch

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to 'none/not stated' and 82 percent more likely to switch to Catholic than 40 to 49-year-old Protestants. Note, that switching to Catholic is extremely rare among Northern Irish Protestants overall.

Regarding those who reported no religious affiliation in 2001, remaining 'none' at both time-points occurred only among the middle-aged, as both the younger cohorts, and those aged 60 to 69 are less likely than those aged 40 to 49 to be 'none' or 'not stated' at both time-points. The finding is not surprising, as the 10 to 17 year olds are, in 2001 still under age and largely affiliated with their parents' religion. Among the youngest cohort, only 11 per cent were 'none/not stated' in 2001 and only five percent of the youngest cohort were 'none/not stated at both time-points'. In life-course terms, the middle-aged cohorts simply had more adult time to reconsider their religious choices. The 2021 census will be of great interest to follow up on this youngest cohort. Our two-time-point sample does not enable us to test to what extent the effect of age can be attributed to a life-course-effect, or might be a cohort-effect, but the evidence in the literature so far suggests that both likely play a part. The older the cohort, the less likely are respondents to engage in all forms of switching, and the less likely they are to have no religious affiliation.

With regard to *residential mobility*, we find that those, who moved between SOAs are much more likely than non-movers to engage in all forms of religious switching. This indicates that the young and mobile are more flexible when it comes to religious identification. One plausible interpretation, in line with contact theory is that the geographically mobile have more contact opportunities with people from other religious backgrounds and this may change their outlook.

We can summarize that H1 is only partially confirmed by our models, as its assumptions regarding education only hold for Protestants but not for Catholics. For both Catholics and

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Protestants, apostates (switchers to 'none/not stated') and switchers between Catholicism and Protestantism tend to be the young and geographically mobile.

In *H2* we hypothesized that the oldest cohorts and those who experienced a health-decline are less likely than younger and healthier individuals to switch from having a religious affiliation to 'none' and more likely to switch from 'none' to having a religious affiliation in 2011. The reasoning behind this was a life-course effect, the very old and those suffering from ill health are more confronted with their mortality than the young and healthy.

The coefficients in Tables 2 and 3 indicate partial support for this hypothesis, but, again, only for Protestants. For them, old age and declining health are indeed negatively related to non-religious self-identification and to switching. For Catholics, old age is unrelated to changes in their religious identification, and health decline is only associated with a lower likelihood of switching to Protestant, but unrelated to switching to 'none/not stated'. For the non-religious (in 2001), neither old age, nor declining health are related to switching to a Protestant (or Catholic) identification by 2011.

The analysis now moves on to the relationship between *socio-economic deprivation* and *religious identification*. In *H3*, we hypothesized that the unemployed and those living in socially rented housing and in income-deprived areas are less likely than those in employment, homeowners, and those living in less deprived areas to switch their religious identification. For both Catholics and Protestants, our models show that the unemployed are *more* likely than the employed to switch to 'none'. Among Catholics, the unemployed are also slightly more likely to switch to Protestantism, but unemployed Protestants are no more likely than employed Protestants to switch to Catholicism. When looking at tenure, we again find for both Catholics and Protestants that those living in socially rented and privately rented housing are considerably

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more likely to switch to 'none/not stated' and to switch between Catholic and Protestant denominations than homeowners. *H3* is thus unsupported by the analysis. Socio-economic deprivation on the individual level is related to more religious switching (especially to 'none/not stated'), not less.

The picture is different when looking at *deprivation as a context at the level of residential areas*. Interestingly, Protestants living in an income-deprived areas are statistically less likely to switch to 'none/not stated' than Protestants who live in wealthier areas. Similarly, 'nones' living in deprived areas are less likely than those in non-deprived areas to remain 'none/not stated' in 2011. For Catholics, living in deprived areas has no statistically significant effect on future religious identification.

The findings on *Religious area-segregation* largely support *H4*. Catholics in more Catholic segregated areas are less likely to switch to Protestant or to 'none', and Protestants living in highly segregated Protestant areas are significantly less likely than those living in less segregated areas to switch to 'none'. *H4* is therefore supported by the analysis. Unsurprisingly, an individual's likelihood of religious switching depends on the majority-denomination of their area of residence. The models show that Protestants living in highly segregated Catholic areas are slightly more likely to switch to Catholic, and Catholics living in highly segregated Protestant areas (model not shown here) are slightly more likely to switch to Protestant, although these effects are only small.

Of the individual-level controls, individuals who are single, and those who experienced marital disruption and bereavement are more likely to switch (to 'none/ not stated') than the married. Also, the widowed are more likely than the married to switch to 'none'. This is surprising, as the widowed tend to be in the older cohorts who are less likely to switch on

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average. In the absence of survey questions asking the widowed about their reasons for switching, this finding is difficult to interpret. It may be the case that some turned their back on religion after experiencing the loss of a partner, but this interpretation remains speculative.

### DISCUSSION

Northern Ireland is still a society with exceptionally high levels of religious identification. The vast majority, 86 percent identified with a religious denomination in 2011 and over two thirds retained the same religious affiliation they had in 2001. The numbers of those who switched between Protestantism and Catholicism and vice versa are tiny (less than one percent for both main denominations). Overall, religious switching is mostly to 'none/not stated', followed by switching within Protestantism. 11 percent of the Protestant population have switched to 'none/not stated' and six percent had switched to a different Protestant denomination between 2001 and 2011. Among Catholics, religious switching is far less prevalent than it is among Protestants and those who do switch, switch to 'none/not stated', rather than into Protestantism. This finding is not exclusive to Northern Ireland. It concurs with similar findings on Catholicism in the US and the Netherlands (Finke and Stark 1992; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Need and Graaf 1996). Other survey research, more specifically on Northern Ireland (Goetze-Morey et al. 2014) found similarly that socio-economically deprived Protestants tend to have a weaker sense of religious identity, while Catholic self-identification tends to be more stable.

The multivariate analysis yielded some common and some differential patterns for Protestants and Catholics. As expected, among both Protestants and Catholics, the young and geographically mobile are more likely to switch to 'none'. H1 is thus partially confirmed.

Among Protestants, the youngest cohorts are also more likely to switch between (Protestant)

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denominations than older cohorts, people who are less mobile and those suffering from illness.

We proposed a life-course explanation: Young people who leave the parental nest start developing their own identities, are inspired by more religious diversity they experience at University or in the workplace, and are thus more likely to switch, whereas to older people and those suffering from illness, religion may offer comfort and may help reconcile the individual with the human fact of mortality (Jong, Halberstadt, and Bluemke 2012). However, this explanation holds only for Protestants and only to an extent. While for Protestants, we found a significant relationship between cohort and switching to other (Protestant) denominations, for Catholics a cohort effect was found only with regards to apostasy (switching to ‘none/not stated’). The religious diversity argument of contact theories that we discussed earlier does not hold. Given that for both Catholics and Protestants the numbers of those who entered the Northern Irish higher education sector were very similar in the 2001 Census (Osborne and Shuttleworth 2004), one could have expected to find the same life-course/diversity and education effects in both our Protestant and Catholic models. But our results show that this is not true for Catholics. It has to be noted that in Northern Ireland, due to the country’s history, crossing the Catholic-Protestant divide comes at a higher cultural barrier and at higher opportunity costs than switching between Protestant denominations. Even for the youngest cohorts of both denominations, religious switching does not significantly bridge the historical Protestant-Catholic divide in Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, the finding that 12 percent of the 10 to 17 year olds and 10 percent of the 18 to 29 year olds had switched to ‘none/not stated’ between 2001 and 2011 (compared to eight percent of those aged over 30) exhibits a modest cohort change among the young who came of age after most of the political violence had ceased (McKittrick and McVea 2012). This cohort

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change may at least to some extent reflect a successful peace process that has slowly built a more politically stable environment, in which religious identification is, at least for the young, increasingly becoming a matter of personal choice, rather than purely an ethno-political identity marker, albeit for many this means choosing non-religion.

One could argue that the peace process in Northern Ireland is a period effect that affects all cohorts equally. However, other research (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Inglehart and Welzel 2005) suggests that large-scale societal changes towards political stability and freedom tend to affect primarily the young, whose political socialization is influenced by the newfound changes to a greater extent than older cohorts. Our data clearly show marked cohort differences in apostasy and religious switching. The next Northern Ireland census in 2021 will offer more insights into this; We expect to find a continuation of this cohort-effect in the next census. Our analysis based on 2011 data shows clearly that thus far, the newfound religious choice among the young is largely a choice against organized religion. In the 2011 Census, thirteen years after the Good-Friday agreement, we observe a significant increase in religious 'nones'.

The increase in 'nones' could be an expression of socio-political frustration - especially among young, university educated and geographically mobile Protestants, who may be dissatisfied with rigid religious institutions that promote strict conservative values (e.g. on the rights of homosexuals and abortion) and have often been criticized for not having played a more active role in the peace process (Hayes and McAllister 2009; Mitchell 2005). Our models found that switching to 'none/ not stated' is prevalent particularly among educated and the geographically mobile Protestants. To summarize, both H1 and H2 are only partially supported, and more for Protestants than Catholics.

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Our models also showed that some of the switching to 'none/not stated' is explained not by the (subjective) frustration of elites, but also by real socio-economic disadvantage of the worse off. Moreover, the statistical effect of socio-economic disadvantage follows the same patterns among Protestants and Catholics. For both denominations, the unemployed, economically inactive, and those living in socially rented housing are more likely to switch to 'none' and also slightly more likely to switch to the other large denomination.

Socio-economic frustration seems to motivate significant numbers among both Protestants and Catholics to turn their back on organized religion. H3 is thus unsupported by our analysis. Interestingly, for Protestants, the relationship between social (dis)-advantage and switching to 'none' appears to be u-shaped, as both the socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged and the highly educated youths and the better off show an increased likelihood of seceding from church. For Catholics, education does not make a significant difference to religious identification. For Catholics it is clearly the worse off, not the better off, who switch. Note, however, that the numbers of switchers between denominations are very small.

These findings are unique to Northern Ireland and are not replicated in other parts of the UK (Voas and McAndrew 2012; Mitchell 2004), but they do concur with similar findings on political frustration effects and seceding from church among young people in the US. Research in the rational choice tradition in the US (Glock 1961; 1968; Finke and Stark 1992) found that Protestant switching (to more conservative denominations) in the US occurred especially among the socially disadvantaged who seek compensation for this-worldly deprivation through promises of other-worldly rewards. Other research found similarly that switching occurred among younger, liberal Americans out of frustration with their churches' conservative values (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Baker and -Smith 2009; Sherkat and Wilson 1995). We found clear evidence

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for a religious mobility dynamic away from organized religion among the young in Northern Ireland, which is likely driven by similar motives. Our interpretation that socio-economic and political frustration may have encouraged religious change in Northern Ireland also concurs with other literature on religious change in Northern Ireland (Brewer 2015, 121; I. McAllister 2005), e.g. McAllister (2005) found, using survey data, strong associations between declining church attendance and political dissatisfaction across denominations and a cohort effect similar to our findings. Younger generations in Northern Ireland appear to want to move away from the historical tensions of the past, towards a society where religious identification is a choice, not a collective identity-marker. Our interpretation must remain cautious, as the NLS and the Census do not contain questions on political attitudes, or ask respondents, what motivated them to switch or to become apostates.

In summary, we conclude that at the individual level three different mechanisms appear to be at work. Firstly, we observed a cohort effect of younger people across denominations being more likely to switch to 'none/not stated'. Secondly, social frustration seems to drive the socially disadvantaged to leave old religious identifications behind and to seek new ones, or to turn away from religion altogether. Thirdly, many socially advantaged, mobile and educated Protestants, on the other hand, may turn their back on religion, because they are seeking more modern, liberal and secular identities - a process that has also been observed in other non-conflict Western European societies (Graaf and Need 2000; Bruce 2002; Crockett and Voas 2006; Pickel 2009; Pollack et al. 2012). An exception to this is the absence of an education effect for Catholics. We found Catholic identification to be more stable overall than Protestant identification, regardless of education, but social disadvantage, i.e. unemployment and housing deprivation do promote both switching and apostasy for Catholics and Protestants alike.

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Overall, religious identification in Northern Ireland appears to be transitioning from being a politically assigned label, to being a matter of personal choice. As discussed, this new choice appears to be largely a choice for non-religion. Our findings seem to indicate a slow process of secularization, but at this stage, it is too early to tell.

With regard to area-level religious segregation, our models showed the expected results. Living in a strongly segregated area of one's own religion is linked to a lower likelihood of both switching and seceding (switching to 'none'). Living in a strongly segregated area of the other (Protestant or Catholic) religion leads to a slightly higher likelihood of switching to the other large denomination, perhaps through inter-marriage. These area-level findings concur with social identity theory (Leonardelli and Brewer 2001; Brewer 1993; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Sachdev and Bourhis 1991) which has long theorized an identity-strengthening effect of being surrounded by others who share the same group identity – in particular, as is the case for many neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland, when living in close geographical proximity to communities representing out-groups. The future will tell, whether the segregation effect will become less salient over time.

Given the recent political concerns that Britain's departure from the European Union could pose a threat to the Northern Ireland Peace process, as it may lead to a closing of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, we might speculate that religious identification might gain in salience as an identity marker again in the future. The 2021 census will likely give new answers as to how religious identification dynamics in Northern Ireland will unfold.

Last but not least, we would like to acknowledge some limitations to this study: Firstly, religious self-identification is not the same as religiosity, nor is it the same as 'identity'. The

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NILS does not contain measures of religious practice or intensity of religious identification and beliefs and it does not expressly question people's identities. Thus, we do not know how many of those who identify with a religion actively practice it, consider themselves religious, or view affiliation as an integral part of a collective identity. Future studies combining our findings with survey evidence could add important new insights into the landscape of religious change in Northern Ireland and its attitudinal motivations. Secondly, the fact that the census question on religious affiliation has changed in the 2011 census may have biased our religion measure. We expect that the 2011 census question will have underestimated the number of 'nones' for both Protestants and Catholics. Despite this likely bias, we found clear patterns of relationships between age, education, socio-economic status and religious secession and switching. Thirdly, in order to allow for meaningful analyses of 'nones' and 'not stated', the two categories were collapsed to avoid convergence issues with too small group sizes. This may have caused some loss of information, as other research found that there are individuals among the 'not stated' who are more religious than those who expressly identify as 'none' (Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010; Kosmin, Keysar, and Navarro-Rivera, 2009; Hout and Fischer 2002; Vernon 1968). Fourthly, our data cover only two time-points with a ten-year interval. Thus, we cannot capture whether someone switched multiple times during the ten-year interval. However, we have no reason to assume that large numbers switched multiple times between the two censuses, given that the vast majority reported the same religious affiliation at both time-points and given that most switches were to 'none'. Lastly, because we do not have reliable longitudinal data covering the whole period of the 'Troubles', it is not possible to distinguish empirically how much of the hypothesized relationship between religious switching and age may be due to

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period, cohort, or life-cycle effects, but based on theory and on our knowledge of the recent history of Northern Ireland, it is very plausible that all three play significant parts.

### CONCLUSION

The analyses of this paper tried to shed new light on the landscape of religious identification and switching among Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Based on an exceptionally large sample representative of the population of Northern Ireland, we find that patterns of religious switching are related to age, education, socio-economic disadvantage and area-level religious segregation. Our findings indicate that a slow process of religious change seems to be at work for a minority among both the young, educationally advantaged and mobile, and the socio-economically disadvantaged. Religious switching in Northern Ireland is far more likely to occur among Protestants than Catholics and it still only very rarely bridges the Protestant - Catholic divide. The vast amount of switching observed in this study was either to 'none/not stated', or remained within Protestantism. Our data indicate some early support for a beginning process of secularization in Northern Ireland. Future studies of religious identities in Northern Ireland using the Census could yield important new results regarding the beginning cohort change we observed, and studies using survey questions on reasons for religious switching could add important additional insights to a still understudied field.

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Tables and Figures

**Table 1: Religious Switching among the Adult NILS Population, 2001 to 2011, Row Percent**

<b>Religion in 2011:</b>	Catholic Church	Presbyterian Church	Church of Ireland	Methodist Church	Other	None/not stated	Row Percent	N Row Totals (N)
<b>Religion in 2001:</b>								
Roman Catholic, Percent	91.96	.15	.20	.03	.26	7.41	100	119,383
Presbyterian Church, Percent	.25	80.48	4.85	1.17	3.07	10.18	100	67,960
Church of Ireland, Percent	.42	8.00	78.38	1.15	2.19	9.86	100	49,308
Methodist Church, Percent	.32	9.06	5.12	68.84	3.98	12.67	100	11,418
Other (Protestant), Percent	.81	12.55	5.22	2.40	64.15	14.87	100	19,675
None/Not stated, Percent	16.12	15.84	11.94	2.87	7.9	45.32	100	36,402
Total, Percent	38.21	22.38	15.83	3.54	6.39	13.65	100	100
Total (N)	116,226	68,083	48,139	10,774	19,423	41,501	100	304,146

Note: The column Totals do not add to 100% because the frequencies of switchers from ‘other non-Christian religions’ could not be shown, due to a data protection policy of the data provider. Non-Christian religions were a very small group in Northern Ireland in 2001 (N of our sample=556).

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**Table 2: Religious Switching by Ten Year Age Cohort, 2001 to 2011, Column Percent**

Religious Transitions 2001 – 2011:	10-Year Age Cohorts:								
	10-17	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80plus	Total
Switched to none (%)	12.2	10.4	8.1	6.7	6.1	5.8	6.5	7.6	8.2
Remained the same religious identification (%)	70.5	68.6	71.7	74.2	77.0	80.1	80.3	77.1	73.5
Remained the same non-religious identification (%)	5.0	6.1	6.5	6.5	5.2	3.2	2.3	1.5	5.4
Switched between religious identifications (%)	6.3	7.4	6.7	5.7	5.7	5.4	6.0	8.5	6.3
From 'None/ not stated to religious (%)	6.0	7.5	7.1	6.9	6.2	5.5	4.9	5.3	6.5
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

**Table 3: Multinomial Logit Model of Religious Switching, Catholic and Protestant**

	Model 1						Model 2					
	Catholic to Protestant			Catholic to 'None/N.S.'			Protestant to Catholic			Protestant to 'None/N.S.'		
	RRR	Lower CI	Upper CI	RRR	Lower CI	Upper CI	RRR	Lower CI	Upper CI	RRR	Lower CI	Upper CI
Age: 10 - 17	1.351	[.963	1.895]	1.431*	[1.293	1.584]	1.823*	[1.220	2.723]	1.884*	[1.743	2.037]
Age: 18 - 29	1.126	[.843	1.505]	1.065	[.971	1.168]	1.097	[.782	1.538]	1.436*	[1.340	1.539]
Age: 30 - 39	1.193	[.944	1.507]	1.099*	[1.017	1.187]	1.154	[.888	1.501]	1.212*	[1.143	1.285]
Age 40 - 49 (refcat)	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.
Age: 50 - 59	.846	[.636	1.125]	.941	[.861	1.029]	.645*	[.474	0.877]	.848*	[.795	.905]
Age: 60 - 69	.811	[.542	1.214]	1.002	[.889	1.129]	.363*	[.223	0.591]	.757*	[.696	.825]
Age: 70 - 79	.790	[.447	1.397]	.958	[.814	1.127]	.171*	[.085	0.345]	.759*	[.679	.849]
Age: 80 plus	.534	[.163	1.742]	1.008	[.824	1.463]	.286*	[.100	0.820]	.711*	[.591	.855]
Degree	1.048	[.835	1.316]	1.012	[.937	1.093]	1.001	[.757	1.323]	1.118*	[1.057	1.182]
A-levels (High-school level)	.900	[.662	1.225]	.970	[.881	1.068]	.820	[.562	1.196]	1.063	[.991	1.141]
Intermediate Education (GCSE)	.956	[.765	1.195]	1.016	[.948	1.089]	.792	[.602	1.041]	1.082*	[1.028	1.139]
Health decline	.937*	[.980	.829]	.984	[.959	1.042]	.937	[.966	1.178]	.928*	[.947	.909]
Gender (female)	1.223*	[1.047	1.427]	.770*	[.735	.806]	1.363*	[1.135	1.637]	.774*	[.747	.801]

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**Table 4: Multinomial Logit Model of Religious Switching: ‘None/Not Stated in 2001’**

	None/Not Stated to Protestant			None/Not Stated to None/Not Stated		
	RRR	CI	CI	RRR	CI	CI
Age: 10 - 17	0.937	[0.796	1.103]	1.033	[0.885	1.206]
Age: 18 - 29	0.974	[0.850	1.117]	0.765*	[0.672	0.872]
Age: 30 - 39	0.943	[0.842	1.057]	0.887*	[0.796	0.988]
Age 40 - 49 (refcat)	.	.	.	.	.	.
Age: 50 - 59	1.116	[0.983	1.268]	1.038	[0.918	1.172]
Age: 60 - 69	1.099	[0.918	1.315]	0.836*	[0.700	0.998]
Age: 70 - 79	1.149	[0.891	1.481]	0.790	[0.611	1.021]
Age: 80 plus	2.110*	[1.281	3.475]	0.737	[0.426	1.276]
Degree	0.901	[0.807	1.006]	1.894*	[1.709	2.098]
A-levels (High-school level)	1.030	[0.896	1.184]	1.559*	[1.366	1.778]
Intermediate Education (GCSE)	0.988	[0.887	1.100]	1.356*	[1.223	1.503]
Health decline	1.024	[0.984	1.065]	0.982	[0.946	1.021]
Gender (female)	0.859*	[0.799	0.925]	0.739*	[0.689	0.792]
Self-employed	1.177*	[1.009	1.372]	1.328*	[1.148	1.538]
unemployed	0.962	[0.801	1.155]	1.057	[0.891	1.254]
occupationally inactive	0.971	[0.877	1.076]	0.936	[0.848	1.033]
Retired	1.174	[0.942	1.464]	0.968	[0.774	1.210]
Single	0.816*	[0.735	0.905]	0.933	[0.845	1.030]
Divorced	0.893	[0.788	1.013]	0.998	[0.884	1.126]
Widowed	0.813*	[0.662	0.999]	0.822	[0.669	1.010]
Social Renter	0.931	[0.839	1.032]	0.828*	[0.750	0.915]
Private Renter	1.048	[0.919	1.197]	1.177*	[1.040	1.331]

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**Table 4 Continued**

	None/Not Stated to Protestant			None/Not Stated to None/Not Stated		
	RRR	CI	CI	RRR	CI	CI
Urban Area	0.807*	[0.735	0.887]	1.383*	[1.264	1.514]
Intermediate Settlement	0.802*	[0.728	0.884]	1.048	[0.954	1.151]
moved between areas	0.990	[0.917	1.069]	1.071	[0.995	1.153]
Income deprivation of SOA (25% most deprived)	0.920	[0.686	1.235]	0.518*	[0.393	0.682]
Percent Catholic per SOA	0.955*	[0.953	0.956]	0.966*	[0.965	0.968]
Constant	21.881	[18.67]	25.64]	14.269	[12.25	16.61]
None/not stated Model fit	N		Log Likelihood	Df	AIC	BIC
	36,246		-32115.8	56	64343	64819

Note: Column 'RRR' are relative risk ratios (multinomial odds ratios), reference category: Catholic in 2001; confidence intervals in square brackets, \*P<0.010