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## **Press Watch - A Catholic farewell: A funeral in Northern Ireland recalls religion's power to divide and unite**

**With statesmen like Bill Clinton looking on, ancient supplications for the dead were offered on March 23rd over the coffin of Martin McGuinness, the Northern Irish paramilitary turned politician. In the annals of a city with a rich and chequered religious history, this was a most unusual Catholic funeral, The Economist comments.**

Arlene Foster, the Protestant leader with whom he had awkwardly shared power, risked the ire of her own community by attending the obsequies. She drew a cheer from mourners as she arrived at her pew. Mrs Foster and Mr McGuinness had a complex relationship. Until power-sharing broke down a few months ago, she was Northern Ireland's first minister and he had almost co-equal position as her deputy. Then roll

the clock back to the 1980s: as a policeman's daughter growing up near the Irish border, her childhood memories include narrow escapes from the Irish Republican Army, of which Mr McGuinness was a proud veteran. So her decision to attend the funeral was not a simple one, and when she returns to her local Protestant church in Fermanagh she cannot be sure of getting such a warm reception.

The funeral had some other unusual features. In a gesture that would have been unthinkable when the Northern Irish troubles were at their height, some prominent Protestant clergy were invited to take part in the proceedings, offering prayers and reminiscences.

With all its human and diplomatic difficulties, the ceremony highlights one of the enigmas of Northern Ireland's deep intercommunal division. Many people have asked themselves whether this really is a standoff between followers of two different forms of Christianity, Protestant and Catholic. And pundits still cannot agree on whether religious difference really is an independent factor in the conflict, or merely a convenient and slightly misleading label.

Those labels, Catholic and Protestant, certainly do reflect a sociological reality. But they also

oversimplify it. Even if the conflict is recast in secular terms, as one pitting supporters of Irish unity against people who cherish Northern Ireland's link with Britain, a hard-ish fact remains. It is still broadly true that most people in the first camp are of Catholic heritage and most people in the second adhere to some form of Protestantism (Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and so on).

Religious observance may have fallen in Northern Ireland, as in most parts of the Western world, but it remains vastly higher than in Great Britain. According to the 2011 census, 82% of Northern Irelanders self-identify as Christian, compared with 59% of those in England. And the differences within Christianity have blurred a little but they are not seen as trivial. Especially in rural parts of the province, education and social life is organised on denominational lines; so different religious communities form distinct social groups, although they are not hermetically sealed from each other.

In decades past, sectarian differences certainly did fuel inter-communal mistrust. Ian Paisley, the firebrand preacher and leader of the Protestant community who finally made peace with Mr McGuinness, built his early career on using old-

fashioned anti-Papist rhetoric of the kind not heard elsewhere in Europe for centuries.

Among pious Northern Irish Catholics, there was less name-calling but a deep sense of difference. Mr McGuinness grew up in an intensely Catholic household, where saying the rosary prayers was a daily practice. He was given the middle name of Pacelli after Pope Pius XII.

And yet, divisive as it has often been, religion also gives people in Northern Ireland a language in which they speak to one another across barriers which might otherwise be unbridgeable. A little hint of that was offered this week by Eileen Paisley, the preacher-politician's widow. As Lady Paisley disclosed, she and her late husband had spiritual conversations with Mr McGuinness. And in the days leading up to his death, she sent him text messages assuring him of her prayers.

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