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Vorschau: The Virtue of Constructive Ambiguity

 *The Minority Mind: Jews and Protestants in Catholic Ireland, 1912–1968*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2026

 **Eugenio F. Biagini** ist Fellow am Sidney Sussex College und Professor für Modern and Contemporary History an der Universität Cambridge. Zu seinen Werken gehören *The Minority Mind: Jews and Protestants in Catholic Ireland, 1912–1968* (Cambridge University Press, 2026) und (als Herausgeber) *The Cultural History of Democracy* (Bloomsbury, 6 Bände, 2021).

For much of the twentieth century, in an age when organised diversity was regarded as subversive or suspect, religious dissent was the main source of minority identities, giving them cohesion and informing their political behaviour. In more or less hostile contexts, religion often became a substitute for politics, and politics was ultimately about resistance. The latter often reflected the tension between an aspiration to social integration and the reality of non-assimilable heterogeneity. Generally “dormant” for as long as they were contained within multi-ethnic polities, minorities became a major “question” when regions formerly included in dynastic empires and parliamentary unions asserted their national rights and demanded devolution or independence. Ireland did so successfully between 1912 and 1922.

In 1922, most of Ireland ceased to be part of the United Kingdom and became the Irish Free State, encompassing twenty-six of the island’s thirty-two counties. The new jurisdiction included the provinces of Leinster, Munster and Connacht and the three Ulster border counties of Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan. The remaining six Ulster counties, each of which had a Protestant majority, unwilling to become part of a predominantly Catholic state, demanded partition, and elected to stay closely associated with Britain as the self-governing province of Northern Ireland.

The explosive nature of the Irish minority question was rooted in the political significance of religion and the association between the latter and national feeling. While in the United Kingdom as a whole Protestantism had always been the key ingredient of collective political identities, Ireland was a hybrid, a “fron-





tier” region where religious traditions were historically associated with divergent political allegiances.

The partitionist assumption – that a democratic nation-state required religious homogeneity and that minorities would be victimised because inherently “disloyal” – was rooted in historical experience and reflected contemporary political practice, which became general especially after 1919. Partition was ultimately about one question: religious minorities and their oppression – real or imagined, anticipated or remembered. By detaching the north-east from the rest, Ulster unionists were eager to create a safe haven for Protestants, but this came at the cost of leaving a substantial minority of co-religionists in what was about to become an overwhelmingly Catholic polity. Southern Irish Jews, who had traditionally sided with unionism, became collateral damage.

However gloomy the situation appeared to southern minorities at the time, the Free State turned out to combine the ingredients of a successful social experiment. This book argues that political and cultural developments which resulted in the rooting of liberal democracy in the Twenty-Six Counties were facilitated by the clash between majoritarian ambitions and minority rights: an overbearing majority was forced to coexist with uncompressible minorities. Dragged into a process of nation building about which they had serious reservations, and with an oppositional cultural vocation which attracted discrimination, Jews and Protestants in Catholic Ireland helped to shape a more pluralist society. They did not achieve this by some heroic liberal deeds, but just by *being* there, a stubborn but non-threatening presence whose diversity challenged political and community leaders, as well as ‘ordinary’ citizens, to re-examine their assumptions about their country and its identity.

Based on a wide range of primary sources, including recently discovered personal diaries, the author’s holistic account of the minority experience explains the role of entrenched diversity in shaping attitudes to civil rights and national identity. The ‘minority question’ disrupted twentieth-century Europe, but in Catholic Ireland it contributed to the making of a stable, more pluralist society.