The Irish Language and Religion Resource.

Dia dhuit: what's behind Irish language's religious roots?

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By Peter Weakliam DCU

Analysis: Gaeilge is deeply intertwined with Ireland's religious history, which explains so many phrases about saints, devils and eternal life

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One of the most common phrases in Irish is Dia duit. This phrase is used in much the same way as the English word ‘hello’, but is more literally translated as ‘God bless you’. The traditional response to this greeting is Dia is Muire duit, meaning ‘God and Mary bless you’. On occasion, Irish speakers take this greeting even further, by adding Pádraig and Bríd two of Ireland’s patron saints, to the list of blessings. Though Irish speakers often take these phrases for granted, they may seem odd to people unfamiliar with the language. Do you really need to invoke God and Mary just to say hello to someone?

The more fluent someone’s Irish becomes, the more they will see that religious ideas are central to the language. Has your friend just sneezed? Well, then it would be polite to say Dia linn (‘God bless us’). Has something terrible or unexpected happened? You’ll probably want to exclaim Dia ár sábháil!, meaning ‘God save us!’.

Phrases like these are often tied to specific situations or contexts, and are like a kind of formula that Irish speakers use when communicating with one another. In certain Gaeltacht areas, for instance, if you come across someone working, it is common courtesy to wish ‘prosperity from God on the work’, using the poetic phrase bail ó Dhia ar an obair.

Interestingly, there are many common phrases in English that are virtually impossible to translate to Irish without reference to God. Comedian Des Bishop was struck by this when he found out that the Irish for 'hopefully' (le cúnamh Dé) literally means ‘with the help of God’. ‘What if you don’t believe in God?’ he asked a group of native speakers from Connemara. ‘Well,’ they replied, ‘then you can’t have any hope!’

The numerous Irish phrases that reference God give us an insight into the Christian worldview held by most Irish speakers in recent centuries. This worldview suggests that it is God who protects humans from evil or natural disaster, and who helps us in times of need.

Another element of this traditional religious belief that is captured by certain Irish phrases is the idea of eternal life. In English, when we wish to communicate our good will towards someone who has died, we often use the phrase 'rest in peace', a somewhat generic expression that does not convey any vivid image of the afterlife.

The nearest equivalents in Irish draw much more overtly on Christian theology regarding eternal life. These include expressions asking God to show mercy to the deceased person, such as go ndéana Dia grásta air. Other phrases focus on the soul, and express the wish that the deceased person's soul be at God's right-hand side ('ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam') or enjoy eternal peace (suaimhneas síoraí dá anam).

In addition to the many Irish phrases that mention God, eternal life or the saints, there are an abundance of expressions that reference the devil. As we might expect, the devil features prominently in curses. If someone has offended you, there is no better way to express your anger than to tell them to go to the devil's house (Téigh i dtigh diabhail!) or to wish that the devil would choke them (Go dtachta an diabhal é!).

The word diabhal on its own serves as a very adaptable expletive. Much as English speakers add 'darn', 'damn' or other swear words to their speech to express strong emotion, diabhal can give a bit of colour to almost any sentence in Irish. The online dictionary focloir.ie provides a nice example of this usage when it translates 'this darned essay' as an diabhal aiste seo.

It is clear that Christian ideas are deeply intertwined with the Irish language as it is spoken and written today. But we also know that Christian belief is fast declining in Ireland, as greater numbers of people identify with other religions or reject religion entirely. In this

context, does the religious nature of common Irish phrases pose a problem? Will phrases like Dia duit soon be replaced by alternatives better suited to our multicultural, secular society?

There has been no organised attempt by Irish speakers to introduce such changes up to now. Most speakers regard these expressions in the same way that English speakers view expressions like ‘for God’s sake’ or ‘oh my God’: they are not to be taken literally, and certainly don’t give you any indication of someone’s religious beliefs.

Many younger speakers prefer to use other greetings, such as haigh, pronounced the same way as the English word 'hi'.

That being said, it is very likely that at least some of these phrases will fall out of use over time. This may happen due to the preference of individual speakers to avoid religious language. But it will probably be caused primarily by other factors, such as the influence of the English language on Irish. The phrase Dia duit is already less common than it once was, as many younger speakers prefer to use other greetings, such as haigh, pronounced the same way as the English word ‘hi’.

Whether religious phrases will live on in the Irish language through future generations remains to be seen. For now, they serve to remind us of a time when the majority of Irish people thought regularly about God and the devil, not to mention Mary, Pádraig, Bríd and the promise of eternal life.

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