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**DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA**

**From Religion to Geopolitics: The Case of Mo  
Johnston and the Shift in Discourse of Supporters of  
the ‘Old Firm’**

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June 2024

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A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping, sharp, angular strokes that form a stylized, abstract shape.

**29 May 2024**

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## **Abstract**

Although a sport such as football can be superficially regarded as a group of twenty-two people chasing after a ball, in countries such as Scotland it has always taken a more important role in being a mirror to the political and religious culture of the supporters of each club. This fact generally ensures that turmoil between sets of fans with opposing views will be bound to happen, and such is the case of the widely studied Glaswegian *Old Firm* derby. The clash between the traditionally catholic Glasgow Celtic Football Club and protestant Glasgow Rangers Football Club has historically been so deeply tied to their own traditions that when Maurice Johnston, open Catholic and ex-Celtic player, signed for Rangers, such was the public outrage that questions regarding each club's identity began to be formulated. The signing of Johnston and the immediate reaction from both sides of Glasgow has been studied and retold several times, along with wide overviews of each sides' history and tradition.

However, this TFG intends to analyse a fact that is seldom explored regarding the modern identities of these two institutions. My intention is to examine the political acts and stances of Celtic Football Club in recent history and interpret the reason why the club's identity developed this way, away from the religious subject and deeper into a globalized political trend. At the same time, I will be delving into their antagonizing relationship with Rangers Football Club and their differences throughout history in order to answer that particular research question. Celtic supporters have made public their support towards several causes that can be associated to "left-wing" ideals, as well as backing convictions of national liberation around the world and showing interest in matters of social justice. Additionally, they have been historically opposed to conservative politics and have had their identity symbols oppressed and censored. To analyse such a case, I will be considering the club's history in the context of Scottish culture and society from their foundation, which will give me enough support to back my thesis statement regarding Celtic's relation to working class people and movements, historical political stances and their composed withdrawal from the religious debate.

**Keywords:** religion, football, Scotland, politics, Old Firm, Mo Johnston.

## **0. Introduction.**

It is undeniable that, for many people around the world, football is the cause for their altered frame of mind during the week. Seeing your favourite team achieve a positive or negative result during their match on the weekend shapes the mood of those who are passionate about it for the upcoming week and leaves them longing for the next match to come while either allowing themselves to joke around co-workers and family members whose teams have not been as fortunate with their performances, or leaving them having to endure through a tough week of insufferable ‘banter’. Thus, independent of one’s opinion on it and being conscious of the toll it takes on a significant part of the population and the wide arrange of emotions it can generate on us, the sport must be considered inherently human (Dyck: 4), and that leads to the necessity of having to study it from a cultural perspective, as this community-oriented side of the sport has led to the construction of subcultures, historical traditions, and diverse identities. Scotland is no particular exception to this side of the popular sport, in fact, this stateless nation has the peculiarity of being at the top of the table for attendance per capita in all European countries with “21.3 attendees per 1,000 people at matches across its top four divisions” (Conroy). This depicts the idea of Scotland being a nation with a significant footballing tradition despite not being an independent state in itself but having their own football association alongside a large number of clubs in its territory, each with their own sets of fans, facilities and, more importantly, cultures. This thesis seeks to deal particularly with the two biggest institutions in the country, Glasgow Celtic Football Club and Glasgow Rangers Football Club, and the specific cultures that surround them. Both teams from Glasgow have had their cultures so deeply entrenched since their creations and throughout their existences that “in terms of the distinct cultural baggage each team carries, there are no similar football clubs in England” (Boyle: 26). Due to the context of their foundations

and the evolution they experienced throughout Scottish history, it is not possible to deny the fact that there existed (and arguably still exists) an antagonistic debate in religious terms between the Celtic FC institution, who appealed to a Catholic audience, and a traditionally Protestant Rangers FC, which has led to the creation of the most famous ‘Old Firm’ derby between these two sporting powerhouses. However, when one looks at them now and puts special focus on their fans’ displays at their stadiums, their behaviour when travelling to support their team in away games, or their voices in social media, one does not feel the religious debate as alive as it was during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, one could argue that, while the antagonism might live in the imbedded opinions of their supporters (specially in those who are of an advanced age), a geopolitical and social justice stance has become the main focus of the fans’ discourse in recent times, especially when it comes to Celtic FC. It is hard, however, to pinpoint the exact moment in history when the main topic of discourse changed. Nonetheless, a significant step forward towards this ‘secularization’ of the *Old Firm* was made with the signing of Catholic player Maurice ‘Mo’ Johnston for Rangers FC on July 10<sup>th</sup> 1989, thus, breaking their non-written rule of signing no Catholics. This thesis delves into the identities of both institutions and their history in order to explain, justify and research the shift in the dynamics of each club’s political discourse, which will be done through the significant impact of the figure of Mo Johnston along with the institutions’ traditional cultures and the comparison with other cases around the world.

## **1. Celtic and Rangers: A Tale of Two Cultures.**

### **1.1. Catholics and Protestants.**

It is of human nature to seek the feeling of becoming part of a community. We want to belong somewhere, to find our place and our people in the world as we fulfil our role of social creatures. Sports generate that feeling, and nothing demonstrates it on a higher level than thousands of individuals singing the same chant in unison, sharing drinks at a local pub while discussing the team's performance, or frenziedly hugging each other after seeing their team score. These communities created by the nature of sport, however, are not usually able to keep themselves 'apolitical' or free from being manipulated by past (or present) narratives that shape the ideologies of their supporters and can be seen being externally manipulated in order to fulfil a political role. An example of this lies in the use of the influence of different football personalities who were persuaded to give their opinion on Scottish independence in order to sway some votes in view of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, to which one can observe that "football was and continues to be sufficiently perceived to be politically fertile ground for helping to sow the seeds of political ideologies and their associated material realities" (Whigham et al.). Historically, Scotland has had to deal with one of the fiercest rivalries the sport has ever seen since its popularization, and having the two biggest and most decorated clubs in the country located in the same city will inevitably raise some tension in terms of conflicts. Naturally, all rivalries tend to have a cultural background one cannot simply grasp by watching a group of men run around a pitch for ninety minutes as "for many people in Scotland football continues to matter for reasons that have little to do with the game itself" (Boyle: 24), thus, one must acknowledge the importance religious discourse has historically had in the ever-lasting Old Firm derby.

In order to identify religion as the main culprit for the historical division between these two Glaswegian teams, it is imperative to inspect the origin of these differences in order to understand how their identities have grown with the coming of the years. Celtic FC was founded around 1887 in the city of Glasgow by Irish immigrants. Although never officially institutionalizing itself as an exclusively Catholic club, it is undeniable that this particular community has represented “the vast majority of staff, players, and supporters over the course of Celtic’s life” (Bradley, 2008: 99). In fact, the common history states that it was founded so as to “raise money for charities serving the Irish Catholic poor in the city’s East End” (Bradley, 2008: 99), which again speaks volumes for the sense of community a football club can create, topic discussed at the beginning of this section. It is this feeling of brotherhood that unites Celtic FC to its Irish roots what often served as an antagonizing element for the rest of the Scottish media and supporters to create their own narratives against them. At its creation, Celtic was more than just a football institution, it was a refuge for Catholic people of Irish descent who migrated to Scotland to pursue the modern trail of the industrial revolution. This migratory wave faced an antagonistic Scottish protestant society, much more friendly and easy to familiarize themselves with to the minority of Irish protestants that also migrated to West Scotland (Gallagher).

On the other side of the city we find Rangers FC, a football institution whose origin dates back to 1872 and was a result of the most mundane reason to create a sports club: Rangers FC was not created with religious or cultural identity as it was the case of their future fierce rivals, but it was the result of “a boys’ kickabout”, thus, Rangers were as inherently protestant as any other club founded in Scotland at that time was destined to be (Murray, 2003: 33). The capability of matching Celtic FC’s level on a football pitch, combined with a reflection of Scottish society as years went by would determine the fate

of Rangers' identity as a community, categorizing itself as the antagonistic element of a foreign force: The Irish Catholics. In other words, as the Ibrox team cemented themselves as the best non-Catholic team in Scotland, they became *the* Scottish team to look up to for any young protestant at that time (Murray, 2003: 35).

“Sectarianism” is the word often used to describe the pathology of the actions of Rangers' and Celtic's supporters when violently dealing with each other on a social level, which immediately makes one think of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. In fact, it is acknowledged that both sets of fans often refer to these events not only at a discourse level but holding the flags of “Protestant Ulster and Nationalist Ireland at Old Firm matches” (Gallagher: 1). Glasgow has seen its fair share of sectarian violence throughout the years which has taken a large number of lives, one of these being the assassination of Mark Scott in 1995 while coming back home from a football match, which prompted the creation of Nil by Mouth, leading charity for anti-sectarianism. In a chilling paragraph on their website Nil by Mouth accurately describe the reasoning behind every crime related to sectarianism in Scotland, just by telling the story of Mark Scott's unfair death:

Mark was killed simply because his attacker viewed the colour of his scarf as symbolising a different religion and culture from his own. [...]. He had never met his killer before the events of that tragic day and during the trial it emerged that the motive for the attack was religious hatred. (Nil by Mouth).

These ‘bigoted’ actions don't have to be, in a way, as obvious as one may think. Prejudices and offensive behaviours can be seen in the ‘little things’, just as homophobia, racism or xenophobia can be identified through unaware usage of inappropriate language. In fact, according to a study made by the NFO Social Research in 2003 after an extensive survey done on a sample of 1,000 adults in Glasgow, sectarianism makes itself more present through jokes and the usage of sectarian terms, although a significant number also

agreed that violence and vandalism related to this conflict is still present (NFO Social Research: 7).

## **1.2. The Groundbreaking Case of Maurice Johnston.**

It is hard to see a century-old tradition change in any context, especially when that tradition possesses the magnitude of a religion, and it is practiced by the whole nation of Scotland. Gallagher affirms so when asserting that “Presbyterianism was not just a state religion but, for more than three centuries, defined the Scots to one another and to the rest of the world” (qtd. in Bradley, 2022: 491). The same case has been seen in the identities of the majority of football institutions in Scotland, where they all share Protestantism as a “conventional part of their make-up” while at the same time losing the cultural battle to secularization as the years go by and society progresses (Bradley, 2022: 492).

Those who agreed with Gallagher’s words and defended Scotland’s identity as being exclusively (or mostly) of Protestant faith may have had to read the sporting newspaper’ headline twice on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 1989, as Rangers FC made official the signing of Maurice Johnston, a striker who not only was openly Catholic, but had played for Celtic in the past, something that had not happened since World War I (Murray, 2003: 30). While there had been other Catholic players who had dressed in Rangers’ colours, none was of such a high profile as Johnston. Ironically enough, the signing was made official two days before the 12<sup>th</sup>, which is the day protestants commemorate the victory of King William of Orange over King James VII, saving the land from the grasps of the Pope’s Catholicism (Murray, 2003: 30). It is a common tale that Rangers had a policy of not signing Catholics which was kept alive during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, although it was never written anywhere nor acknowledged by any official medium, nevertheless, mainstream media ‘embraced’ this policy as Rangers was ‘Scotland’s team’, contrary to Celtic who were left to care for themselves in their own catholic papers (Murray, 2003: 34).

Subsequently, one must imagine the scenes in any Rangers' fans' households when discussing the matter, as years later this move is still being compared to the fall of the Berlin wall (Boyle: 25), some even mention the fact that Rangers' fans first reactions were going to be devastating for the club, and while the foreseeable scarf-burning extremists outside Ibrox were present (Murray, 2009), threats over massive refunds of season tickets were not followed up as there were "only about 30 calls by fans" (Murray, 2003: 44) asking for it. This event was not taken lightly by the other side of Glasgow either. Johnston had everything ready to become a Celtic player, returning as a hero to the club that saw him flourish, but the deal fell through due to economic reasons (Laing; Murray 2003: 44), leaving Rangers the opportunity to one up their rivals and seize their marquee signing.

The responsible for such a 'blasphemy' was Rangers FC coach Graeme Souness who brought upon the Scottish football scene what was known as the 'Souness Revolution', signing high-profile English players and competing against a dominating Celtic side. Before signing Johnston, Souness had tried signing other openly Catholic players before, only to find out the constant negative feedback given out by Rangers' fans which made the transfers impossible to succeed. At that time, and as a response to the tireless backlash from the protestant supporters, he famously fabricated a sentence that would unintentionally leave a mark on the future of the religious dialectic between Celtic and Rangers: "Do they want a sectarian team or a successful one?" (in Young qtd. in Murray, 2003: 39). This quote resonated deep in the core structure of both Rangers and Celtic and the whole sectarian scene around them, and the fact that Rangers had overlooked a man's religion for their sporting well-being was widely celebrated by important figures such as representatives of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, the Protestant Church of Scotland and even the SNP's spokesman on sport, who were hopeful

in their wishes of a footballing scene losing its traces of sectarianism and moving on as a society (Laing).

## **2. The Shift from Religion to Geopolitics.**

A disclaimer must be made in order to begin analysing the political identity of such large institutions as Rangers or Celtic can be. It is imperative to mark the distinction between the ‘real’ football club and the institution, the fans and the executives, the popular chants and the press conferences, or the pubs and the VIP lounges. Legendary English coach Bobby Robson’s most famous quote fantastically describes it:

“What is a club in any case? Not the buildings or the directors or the people who are paid to represent it. It’s not the television contracts, get-out clauses, marketing departments or executive boxes. It’s the noise, the passion, the feeling of belonging, the pride in your city. It’s a small boy clambering up stadium steps for the very first time, gripping his father’s hand, gawping at that hallowed stretch of turf beneath and, without being able to do a thing about it, falling in love”. (Robson in Football365).

Consequently, this section of the thesis will revolve around the supporters of each club due to their status of being the most representative face of a sport that, as modernity and capitalism find profit, begins to lose its condition as a game and starts becoming a business addressed for those who on a matchday have replaced the coloured scarves for the debonair suits (Szymanski: 77). In fact, modernity and etiquette is what has separated these two groups, as present times call for the undisturbed, neutral-looking executive who is not to be linked with the more popular (and sometimes vulgar) supporters. However, this was not always the case, as in the past one could constantly see the political intention of both boards in public display, like the Celtic board aligning themselves with the Irish nationalist movement through several acts of symbolism such as the Irish Free State flag waving over the ground, or the Rangers board containing people publicly linked to the Unionist and Masonry movements (Murray, 2003: 33). As time passed and customs

changed, we now deal with chairmen who attempt to “discourage these behaviours” and that find the fans who indulge in them as “unacceptable” (Scotlands Secret Shame).

Even so, it is also mandatory to address the fact that it is highly improbable for one to pool together a whole fanbase inside the same political views, especially when dealing with such a massive number of people, accounting that both Celtic and Rangers regularly fill out their home grounds with capacities of 60,000 and 50,000 respectively. Therefore, it is important to remark that the analyses carried out on political stances and other type of ideological manifestations will be attributed to the known perpetrators of said actions, that is, if there is someone who claims to be the author of them. That being so, there are several groups or organizations which tend to be the most radicalized and vocal around their own fanbase and will consequently be dealt with as this thesis develops.

A quick glance is all it takes for any football supporter in the world when they attend a Celtic FC game to realize it is not a regular club like any other. Whoever was tuned in for the game at Celtic Park against Atlético de Madrid on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023, can attest so. Far from their notoriety in terms of footballing skills, which at best are ‘not bad’ comparing them to some of the most popular leagues in the world, one was initially captivated by the display of a large amount of Palestinian flags held up high in the north curve of the stadium, where the famous left-wing political fans group Green Brigade are traditionally located, as the players came out of the tunnel (Bonar). Knowing the deeply religious identities these two clubs have had practically since their inception, one is bound to question how did this club (and, in their own way, their rival club) change their public discourse so radically throughout the years.

The case of Celtic is truly a special one. It is safe to assume that their focus on different national struggles around the globe and the support they show is reflected on

their own story as descendants of Irish people who fought against British tyranny. The Green Brigade criticized their own club's board when they missed the opportunity to be vocal in favour of the Catalan independence movement when the Spanish government made public the punishment for those who were politically involved (Niall J). Additionally, they have also been active in several antiracist and left-wing movements, such as them swapping the names of several streets named off slave owners and tobacco lords for those of remarkable black people in history (Morrow) or showing an offensive banner aimed at a Conservative party politician (Donaghy). The latter political manifestation can be analysed if one tracks back to the Irish Catholics' identification with the Labour party (Hayes, 2006: 8), as their condition of marginalized immigrants when they first populated Scotland played a massive role when choosing a political side, especially if they wanted to opt for beneficial reforms for the working class (Gallagher: 350). Additionally, this lean towards political ideas that defend the oppressed can be justified by the repression Irish Catholics had felt throughout history since their arrival to Scotland. As Bradley (2008: 97) defends, Celtic FC and its supporters seek to keep the proof alive that the dominant view of Scotland being a nation of 'one' united culture has been artificially created through the oppression of the Irish Catholic community and the marginalization of their identity. This could be noticed in such cases as the forced disbanding of several Irish Catholic clubs in Scotland (Bradley, 2008: 99), the prohibition to fly the Irish flag over Celtic Park imposed by the Scottish Federation in 1952 (101) or the difficulties for Irish Catholics in finding skilled jobs due to the systematic exclusion by protestant Scots (Gallagher: 250-251). More remarkably, Celtic's stance against the British crown has always been clear in demonstrations such as the display of banners with offensive messages (O'Donoghue) or their infamous chant 'if you hate the royal family clap your hands' which saw every non-Celtic fan in the stadium follow along, as it was

cleverly sung during the minute's applause in memory of the passing of Queen Elizabeth (PA Media). This feeling of disdain towards the British Royal Family needs no introduction as it can be clearly deduced from Celtic's political ties with Irish nationalism, which was strongly anti-British, and it takes a much more extreme form in several chants coming from the Green Brigade which can be described as 'pro-IRA' (in Bradley 1995, qtd. in Hayes). In short, the best way the most vocal part of the Celtic FC supporters has ever been described had been written in the second issue of *Tiocfaidh Ar La*, a now extinct 'ultra' Celtic fanzine, where they claimed to be "pro-Celtic, pro-Republican, anti-racist, anti-fascist, anti-sectarian, but most of all, anti-Rangers!" (in TAL Issue 2, qtd. in Hayes). What stands out in this particular self-description is that we find the term 'anti-sectarian' in a fanzine issue dated back to the late 90s, showing there was already a trace of desire to leave the religious dialectics behind and march towards a more political discourse.

Celtic FC has had its identity clearly reformed around the mentioned left-winged ideas throughout the years, but if one thing is clear is that there can't be a Celtic without a Rangers, so much so that Rangers' identity evolved at the same time as their neighbours', only to a different direction. Bradley (2022: 493) quickly summarizes Rangers' ideologies in a range of words: "British Unionism, Protestantism, Free Masonry and pride in empire [...] including Orangeism". This sense of pride of being Scottish *and* British violently collides with the nationalistic desires of Celtic supporters, and this dialectical opposition has its place in the numerous references to historical events "fundamental to British imperialism" that can be heard and seen in a wide range of flags, fanzines or songs (Bradley, 2022: 493). An example of this is the now banned but popular chant sung in the terraces of Ibrox commonly called 'The Billy Boys', which commemorates a violent protestant street gang with ties to British fascism (McKay), and gloats about being 'up to their knees with Fenian blood' (Scotlands Secret Shame). Of course, this

extremism of ideas can be compared to those with those pro-IRA of some Celtic supporters, but there are also much more moderate demonstrations of political ideas such as the massive waving of United Kingdom flags at games or the occasional Protestant Ulster flag. As a whole, Rangers fans do not tend to fall into the extreme politics game as often as Celtic fans do, and most of their political demonstrations from the stands tend to be in contradictory response to Celtic's, with the odd, typically right-winged display such as the exhibition of a fascist symbol in a fans' flag (Delaney) or criticizing their own players on social media for taking the knee in favour of the Black Lives Matter movement (Pattullo). All things considered, Rangers have had to bear the responsibility of being 'Scotland's team', as they are the most famous and decorated non-Irish Catholic team in the country, so one must understand their fans' desire to keep themselves and their political opinion as neutral as possible, especially when showing sobriety and neutrality can keep you from being looked down upon by society as Celtic usually are for being 'too vocal' on things that are not related to the sport (Bradley, 2008: 101).

After all this, is there any way one could defend the idea that religious debate is alive in a manner outside of offensive slang and traditional chants? The focus of both sets of supporters has definitely changed throughout the years and religion has fallen down the 'importance' list as society continues to secularize itself. This process of secularization has combined well with several factors such as the introduction of laws against sectarian behaviour around 2012, though revoked in 2018 for not dealing with the matter correctly (Millar: 1), or the rise of more urgent problems for the people: "It's not as if we haven't got other things to get worked up about - as the decade which gave us double-digit unemployment, the poll tax and a three-term government supported by less than one Scottish voter in four draws to an unlamented close" (Gallagher et al.: 31). Despite all this, there are scholars who believe the sectarian topic has not faded away yet,

despite all the evidence given. Boyle (26) argues that, while Scotland is not precisely “riven with sectarian conflict”, ignoring the fact that it’s still an active issue is irresponsible and wrong as remnants of this sectarian society still exist, especially when talking about verbal abuse or ‘humour’ (NFO Social Research: 57), and are much more frequent in ordinary places such as pubs or housing schemes (Boyle: 26). This assumption is completely valid and it goes to show that, despite the change of tone that both sets of supporters have had along the years, there is still place for old behaviours to arise, and just as the historical identities of both clubs have had impact on the present ideologies of their supporters, religion will continue to be a topic to be discussed in this matter, though on a much more lesser scale than politics.

### **3. Conclusion.**

As illustrated by the reasoning above, several factors become effective with the purpose of creating a secularization effect on the discourse of the general Celtic and Rangers fans. Aspects such as the creation of anti-sectarian charities, the development of laws and punishment to those who partake in such actions or modern times raising problems more important than religion are a few factors that helped in this loss of concern towards religious division. This cultural transformation became palpable when the signing of Mo Johnston became a reality, challenging the seemingly unbreakable tradition of Rangers playing no Catholics, and proving the Scottish society that “the world continued to turn on its normal axis” after such event (Murray, 2003: 48). Thus, as ‘Catholicism’ and ‘Protestantism’ started to become less of a doctrine and more like tribal symbolism (Gallagher: 1) for the common ticket holder, they started adopting other identities which had not enjoyed protagonism up to that moment. In the case of Celtic, their deeply rooted Irish Catholic origins combined with the historical difficulties of initially fitting in in a

thoroughly protestant country, their primal allegiance to the Labour party and their support to several Irish liberation symbols and movements shaped their ideologies in order to become the vocal, active mass of supporters with left-winged ideals, supportive of national liberation and freedom from oppression movements around the world. Whereas in the case of Rangers, the fact that since the beginning they had been chosen as the representatives of the stereotypical ideal of a Unionist, British and Protestant Scot made it easy for them to shape their ideology around that, while being less noisy than their neighbours. It is important to note that this topic has yet to reach a conclusive state and is, in fact, prompt to be subject of study again soon. In March 2024, the Scottish Professional Football League announced that away fans will be allowed back in the grounds starting the following season, as the previous four matches had only home supporters attending (Jaidka). With this, in addition to the new hate crime law Police Scotland is enforcing (Campbell) which could lead to a massive reduction in anti-sectarian behaviour (or not!), the future of these two sets of supporters and their clubs is enigmatic as the world will continue to change and they will remain adapting to their surroundings and defending their ideals, one Union Jack or Tricolour flag at a time.

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