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IS RELIGION IN NORTHERN IRELAND POLITICALLY SIGNIFICANT?

Claire Mitchell

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Institute for British-Irish Studies
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Reducing religion to theological fundamentalism has stifled the debate about its political significance in Northern Ireland. This paper develops an integrated theoretical conception of religion as the key to illuminating the multi-dimensional role it plays in social relationships. Based on analysis of interviews conducted in 2000, it finds four main ways in which religion is socially and politically significant in Northern Ireland—as a communal marker, as a community-builder, as ideology and as theology. These roles differ amongst believers and non-believers, churchgoers and non-churchgoers and amongst Catholics and Protestants. Through exploration of religion as a fluid dimension of personal and group identity, the paper concludes that religion does not simply mark out the communal boundary, but often gives it meaning as well.
Claire Mitchell is the Guinness Newman Fellow in British-Irish Studies in University College Dublin. She gained her PhD from the Department of Politics in University College Dublin in 2002, specialising in religion and politics in contemporary Northern Ireland. She is currently engaged in post-doctoral research in the Institute for British-Irish Studies on evangelicalism and political change in Britain and Ireland.
INTRODUCTION

Whilst nearly nine out of ten people in contemporary Northern Ireland select a Protestant or Catholic identification, common sense, as well as the literature, tells us that conflict has not primarily been about religion. Divisions, for most people, do not revolve around doctrinal disputes and people rarely cite theology as the basis of their political analyses. Thus it has become the dominant intellectual view that religion plays a negligible role in structuring social relationships. Often, religion is said to function merely as a badge of difference, except for a small group of Protestant fundamentalists (see McGarry and O'Leary, 1995). However, religion still provides the main signifier of communal membership in Northern Ireland, to a greater extent than nationalism or economic position. It is therefore important to ask what meaning this has.

Northern Ireland provides an excellent case study for examining the intricate relationships between religion and politics. Religion has overlapped with ethnonational, economic and cultural differences since the seventeenth century, providing institutional support, language, values and often leadership to Catholic and Protestant groups. Moreover, the role of churches in structuring social as well as religious life has led to high levels of physical and ideological segregation between communities. Whilst the churches have often spoken out against violence, their main interest through conflict was to locate themselves in the political mainstream of their respective communities. In this context, it is unsurprising that the population of Northern Ireland rank extremely high along most indicators of religiosity. Nearly 90% are affiliates and 57% are regular churchgoers.¹ Three quarters believe in God and in heaven, 70% pray at least once a month, 62% cent believe in hell and 53% in miracles.²

Existing statistical analyses show that, with the exception of the fundamentalists, religious beliefs and participation are only tenuously linked to political attitudes (Rose, 1971; McAllister, 1982; Boal, Keane and Livingstone, 1997). However, it is possible that high overall rates of religiosity mask the specific social roles of religion. Moreover, moderate views are always over-emphasised in surveys in Northern Ireland (Whyte, 1990). But there is an even more compelling reason why it is premature to dismiss religion on the basis of such findings: the definitional issue. Reducing the question to a straightforward link between doctrine or church attendance

¹ Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2001). "Regular" consists of respondents who attend weekly and two or three times a month. All data comes from this survey, unless otherwise stated.

that it often gives meaning to the boundary as well.

TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED CONCEPTION OF RELIGION

Any analysis of religion must begin with definition and address questions about its social significance. This section briefly examines classic theorists in order to raise questions about religion and politics in contemporary Northern Ireland. Religion is very often reduced simply to its social functions or to the relationship between individuals and the supernatural. This reductionism has led to empirical analyses that fail to capture the multiple roles religion plays for individuals and communities. What follows is not a concrete definition of religion, but an exploration of what forms it may take and what social roles it might play. Following Wittgenstein’s idea of family resemblance, we do not outline the essence of religion, but rather some of the family characteristics by which it can be recognised and understood. This kind of integrated conception is the key to illuminating the variety of social roles that religion plays in Northern Ireland.

Many theorists focus on the individual dimensions of religion, usually understood as a means of relating man to God and answering “ultimate questions” (see Glock and Stark, 1965). It can be seen as “pertaining only to those activities that make some explicit reference to a supernatural source of values” (Wilson, 1979: 4). This emphasis on the personal and spiritual is close to many theologians’ approach to religion. Tillich (1963: 6), for example, defines religion as the “state of being grasped by an ultimate concern” about the meaning of life. Thus religion can be defined as spiritual feelings, beliefs and behaviour. When seeking to evaluate religion in this way, commentators generally look to “measurable” indicators of personal religiosity such as belief in the supernatural. Applied to Northern Ireland, this generally leads to a focus on Protestant fundamentalists for whom the strength of religious beliefs is most immediately observable.

There are, however, problems with this approach. Whilst it may apply to the most committed religious individuals, it ignores those with a nominal affiliation. It also excludes religions with a more ritual or ethical thrust. Moreover, commentators can inaccurately theorise theology as something fixed, and which functions as the basis for action. Hickey (1984: 63), for example, argues that in Northern Ireland “doctrine can, in fact, account for sociological reality”. By the same token, others argue that as beliefs in the supernatural decline, religion loses its social significance (McAllister, 1982). Whilst individual spirituality is central to any understanding of what religion means, it is crucial to locate it in the context of the social. For example, Lenski (1961) distinguishes between religion as a form of belief or orientation and as a
form of group membership. Religion is conceived in terms of an individual’s “inner-life”, but in the context of the socialisation process.

Durkheim (1915) takes this point further. He stresses the communal, expressive functions of religion, particularly in the reinforcement of group identity and the direction of action. In his study of totemism, he argues that religious practices and rituals invoke a sense of the sacred in order to hold the organisation of society together. Central to his thesis are those rituals and practices that are separate from the routine aspects of existence that foster a sense of community and solidarity. Durkheim does not believe that there is actually anything sacred about the totem or ritual, rather that in revering the totem society is actually upholding its own values and customs.

The work of Durkheim gives us important clues as to what roles religion might be playing in the present, but also provokes further questions that he does not himself answer. For example, Durkheim over-emphasises social unity, when in fact social division is just as common in modern society. Even where religion is used to define a social boundary, the idea that within the boundary groups are coherent and have some kind of collective consciousness must be treated with caution—especially in large modern societies. Moreover, contemporary research that shows the British trend of “believing without belonging” (Davie, 1994) challenges the idea that modern religion is necessarily performative. However, despite these concerns, Durkheim’s emphasis on the community-building role of religion through ritual calls for serious examination.

In addition to theological beliefs and community building, it is important to pay attention to how the content of religion relates to social action. Weber focuses on the substance of religion, its ideological implications and relations to other spheres of life. His exploration of ascetic Protestantism and the rise of rational capitalism is most instructive for this work (Weber, 1930). He argues that hard work and enterprise came to define a morally upright character as Calvinists, anxious about their pre-destined fate, strove to find signs that they had been elected by God for salvation. In this way people’s ideal as well as material interests, that are the bases for social action, can be informed by religious ideas.

There are of course limitations in Weber’s work. Whilst stressing that rational capitalism was not the sole product of Calvinism, he tends to over-emphasise religious causality (Parkin, 1988). Moreover, over-reliant on elite Calvinist sources, he does not provide evidence of salvation anxiety for the masses. However, valuable insights can be gained from his work. First, religion and social and political values are often entangled with each other—religion, whilst seeming to focus on the relationship between God and man, does other important work in making sense of the world. Thus, it is often difficult to make a distinction between what is religious and what is secular. Second, religion is not static. New beliefs emerge and develop over time: they contribute and are responsive to wider processes of social change. Third, Weber’s work highlights the importance of exploring the meanings and values of a particular religion to fully appreciate its wider functions.
In terms of Northern Ireland, Wright (1973) expertly weaves analysis of religious content with responses to social and political conditions. Speaking about “extreme” Protestantism, he argues that ideologies structure their adherents’ ideas about the actual condition of Catholics and Catholicism, that they provide a source of values which give legitimacy to the “Protestant” cause in conflict, and that they may at times be an ostensible expression of conflicts of a more material character (1973: 216). Wright calls this Protestant “ideology” and argues that it can be woven into common-sense understandings of social life. Whilst the presence of the other is a constant preoccupation, what is unknown is enormous, and this gap is bridged by a “vast body of ideas, theories and mythologies” (1973: 218). He concludes that because religious ideas become entangled with deeper socio-economic and political meanings, they take on extra significance and become the ideological expression of a multi-determined conflict (1973: 229).

A further related dimension of religion is its relationship with power, both through social control and as a response to external constraints of power. Marx pays little attention to the actual stuff of religion, arguing that it is self-alienation—a response to an intolerable social structure. Particularly in his earlier work, he argues that human beings project values and ideas onto gods, coupling a resigned acceptance of their fate in the real world with hopes of rewards in an after-life. The cause of man’s problems is bad politics; religion is the symptom. An integrated conception of religion must take into account how it is utilised by the powerless to cope with a political situation they feel they cannot change.

Marx does not just focus on the bottom-up functions of religion, but also argues that it is utilised as a dominant ideology of the state. Turner (1991: 71-8) suggests that to understand this, it is necessary to look at the influence of Engels, who argues that class relations were “clothed” in the language of religion. Through the monopolisation of education, or “mental production”, the dominant class are able to protect their material interests by ensuring that the subordinate classes experienced the world through the formers’ own categories. In England for example, Engels (1907) argues that the bourgeoisie supported religious revivalism because it kept the people in order by moral means.

The dominant ideology thesis, however, fails to explain the very class conflict that Marx and Engels highlight. Although Marx states that religious ideas could be taken up by the subordinate classes to argue against their rulers, more often he argues that religion had a narcotic effect, suppressing revolutionary ideas. Moreover, this approach exaggerates the degree to which the dominant ideology is actually adhered to by subordinate classes. It overstates the power of ideas as opposed to force as a form of control. Some of these criticisms are relevant to Fulton’s (1991) application of a Gramscian analysis of the power of the churches in Northern Ireland. He underestimates individual agency when he argues that people are pawns in a religio-political power struggle between hegemonising churches. Although in his later work, Fulton (2002) talks about “relational beliefs”, his analysis continues to focus heavily on institutional power and bloc solidarity. However, Fulton is right to point out that churches are by no means impartial bodies in their provision of structure to social and political life. That we must see what religion can mean in a
world of conflict and politics (Fulton, 1991: 16) is a point often lost in accounts that emphasise religious theology over social structure.

Another way in which religion can be connected with the social in the modern world is when it overlaps with ethnicity. Bruce (1996) differentiates between religion per se and "ethnic religion". He states that when religion overlaps with a period of cultural defence or cultural transition it takes on wider meanings: it becomes a badge of identity denoting belonging to a specific ethnic group. He cites Afrikaners in South Africa and Ulster Protestants as examples. He maintains that "what matters is not any individual's religiosity, but the individual's incorporation in an ethnic group defined by a particular religion" (Bruce, 1996: 122). So for Bruce, a secularisation theorist, the actual religious content of religion is eroded as it becomes a symbolic resource for group identification. Indeed, this forms the basis of McGarry and O'Leary’s (1995) analysis of the causes of conflict in Northern Ireland. In what has become the dominant school of thought on religion and politics, McGarry and O'Leary criticise other commentators for mistaking the markers of conflict for its real basis—ethnonationalism.

Others conceptualise this trend not as religion masking ethnicity, but as exemplifying a different kind of religion. Similar to Bellah’s (1970) idea of “civil religion”, Demerath (2001) proposes a theory of “cultural religion”, which he defines as “an identification with a religious heritage without any religious participation or a sense of personal involvement per se” (2001: 59). Whilst there is little traditional religious content in these religious identifications, Demerath says that there is a sacralization of the ethnic group. In Northern Ireland and elsewhere he argues that this qualifies as a distinct type of religion—theologically weak but socially important. Indeed, this brings us back to the start of the discussion about problems of definition of religion. What should one rule in and out?

Indeed, most problems arise from an over-clear distinction between what religion is and what it does. The substantive dimensions of religion (beliefs, feelings, practices) often overlap with functional dimensions (providing social or political values, creating insiders and outsiders, easing existential anxieties). They can reinforce each other in a complex two-way relationship. Our analysis of religion in Northern Ireland then must take on board the blurring between religious substance and function. Moreover, it is important that we do not simplify the relationship between individual religion and its communal, institutional and societal dimensions. This will allow us to capture the fluid overlapping of religious beliefs and practices with social and political roles in a way that does not force a choice between the two, but rather opens up wider possibilities of how they can give each other meaning.

**ANALYSING RELIGION, POLITICS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY**

The forms that Protestantism and Catholicism have taken in Northern Ireland, then, may include many, or all, of these dimensions—but all may not be relevant to each individual. Furthermore, it is more likely that the dimensions overlap and mutually reinforce each other. Having suggested that an integrated conception of religion is
the most appropriate for capturing its social and political significance in contemporary Northern Ireland, the problem then becomes one of measurement. The question is how one might capture the variety of ways in which religious ideas and structures help people make sense of the world. We need analytical tools that will help us to access processes of construction of meaning, and of how people understand themselves, others and their place in society.

Religion is conceptualised here as a dimension of personal identification, similar to gender, class or national identifications. To analyse identifications one can look at how the world is interpreted, understood, experienced and (re)produced: in other words how reality is constructed by different actors. The aim here is to examine the subjective meanings given to self, other and place in Northern Ireland by reasoning, acting individuals—but as individuals acting within the context of the social, the context of culture and with regard to political agencies and relations of power. The article turns now to a discussion of the methodological approach used to access these meanings.

An analysis of interview data collected in 2000 from 32 individuals—16 Catholics and 16 Protestants—is presented below. The denominational labels were self-selected at the beginning of the interviews by the participants, and their specific meanings were thereafter probed to draw out nuances of belief and practice. Sampling was not random or statistical, but aimed to select participants from a diversity of backgrounds. Initial contacts were made with community leaders across Northern Ireland and using these leads, a snowballing technique was used to elicit further participants according to criteria of churchgoing, age and religious identification. Being or not being a churchgoer was deemed important in order to explore the impact of religious practice. Age was taken into account because there has been some generational secularisation in Northern Ireland (Boal, Keane and Livingstone, 1997). Concern was also taken to represent a wide variety of social backgrounds and political preferences. Taking these into account, it was none the less a priority not to handpick participants to gratify the researcher’s prejudices. Thus, other than fulfilling these criteria, little or nothing of participants’ religious or political attitudes was known.

The sample included eight Protestant churchgoers and eight non-churchgoers. Of the Catholics, nine attended mass, seven did not. In total, 18 interviewees were under 45, 14 were over 45. The youngest was 18 and the oldest was 73. Ten were women. Both the Protestant and Catholic samples reflected a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, from the unemployed through to higher professional. The entire spectrum of political attitudes and party preferences was represented. The interviews were conducted in 2000 with disputes over Orange Order marches and the loyalist feuds in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 as a backdrop. They were conducted by me, a female interviewer with a Protestant background in Northern Ireland. As the subject matter was politically sensitive, in all cases, the priority was that someone was happy to participate, and that there was a degree of trust as a result of the avenues through which they had been contacted. As such, richer data could be generated.
The interviews lasted between one and three and a half hours. The form of interview was episodic, which is a mixture of narrative and semi-structured forms of interviewing. Participants are invited to recount situations, episodes or experiences. These are followed with more pointed questions, to draw out interviewees’ subjective meanings (Flick, 1998). The narrative aspect is designed to give the interviewee the freedom to develop their stories without intrusion by the researcher. Subsequent questions pick up elements in interviewees’ own stories, and by asking them to expand, or accept or reject positions, tease out their subjective definitions of faith, and of the role that it plays in their lives and in their political ideas.

The analysis examines how people talk about themselves and other people. These presentations are used to examine how people construct meaning, what is important to them and how they feel they fit into society. Through this lens, access is gained to a wide range of cultural knowledge as to what it is like to be a Catholic or Protestant in Northern Ireland. The analysis examines how stories mark out identities; how identities mark out differences; how differences define the “other”; and how the “other” helps structure the moral life of culture, group and individual (Plummer, 1995). Whilst limitations in context of the production of information are acknowledged, the analysis nevertheless refrains from going outside the boundaries of what people have said themselves. It does not try to say what people “really mean”. So too, this data does not allow observation of how people interact and what they do. What follows then is a contextualised analysis of how people construct reality—and the social roles of these constructions.

As space is too limited below to allow room for more, small representative quotations have been used to demonstrate the frequency with which an idea is articulated. Speakers have been chosen in so far as they illustrate a common theme from the empirical data, rather than being selected to prove the point at hand. All names have been replaced, and occupations changed to similar ones.

Four socially and politically significant dimensions of religion emerged from the data. Of course, with a small sample such as this, it is impossible to quantify these trends. Rather, this paper seeks to suggest new ways in which the link between religion and politics in Northern Ireland can operate. Its aim is to introduce new questions into the debate and to open the door for further empirical research that will probe for the meanings behind the religious labels.

RELIGION AS A COMMUNAL MARKER

The most contentious dimension of religious significance in Northern Ireland is the communal marker argument proposed by Bruce (1994; 1996), McGarry and O’Leary (1995) and Fawcett (2000). This is where religion is used to mark out other more secular identifications.

Religion acts as a communal marker amongst those who claim a religious affiliation, but who neither practice nor believe. Niamh is a young professional from a large Catholic town. She says “I am a Catholic, but I don’t believe in all that stuff”.

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She says that she does not believe in God, does not attend mass and maintains that she is not interested in any aspect of the church. However, she says that she would have her children christened in the Catholic church in order to get them into a Catholic school, claiming that this is for cultural rather than religious reasons. She does not want her children to be a minority in a state (and predominantly Protestant) school, but rather to learn Irish, play Gaelic sport and have a “confident identity”. Niamh associates Catholic identity with confidence in post-agreement Northern Ireland, and whilst she mentions language and sport, it seems that this identity can be best handed down in a Catholic institutional context, not in integrated schools, nor through language clubs nor in the home. In this case, religion is marking out communal identity. Apart from the institutional support of the Catholic church, which we turn to in the next section, religion has little import in and of itself.

Often, a religious identification is held in a more reluctant way. Whilst Niamh is enthusiastic about the merits of Catholic identity, others continue to affiliate because they feel they have no choice. Joe is a banker in his 30s from Belfast. Whilst he identifies as Catholic, he has no links with the church. He presents himself as a religious agnostic and says he dislikes religious people, religious structures and the type of “extreme” Catholicism in which he was raised. In fact, Joe attends a self-help group, which he refers to as his church. He is also politically agnostic and maintains he is not interested in voting and does not identify with either nationalism or unionism.

However, despite his lack of interest in communal politics, Joe maintains a Catholic identification. He describes how having the label of Catholic has made a difference to his life because of the structure of Northern Ireland and that this has “angered him to the core”. He describes being beaten up, not getting job interviews, losing a job and a subsequent court battle. The point for Joe is that, “unfortunately my life has been influenced by the fact that I am a Catholic, of course it has, without a question or a doubt”. He goes on to explain that others will “seek out what [he is]” anyway. As such, he wonders if it is even possible to change one’s religion and asks if it can be done by deed poll. The idea of changing religion seems unthinkable because communal membership has been interwoven with his experiences in life and that of Protestants. It has been thrust upon him. He has a sense of belonging to the Catholic community, but any religious dimensions of this are entirely absent.

It is more accurate to say that a religious identification marks out a communal identification than a political affiliation. One can feel that one belongs to the Protestant or Catholic community without the accompanying ethnic politics. Simon is an interesting, if atypical, example. For him, a Protestant identification is little more than an empty label that delineates communal belonging. A Belfast company manager, non-churchgoer and a member of a nationalist political party, the SDLP, he says he feels Irish and is “probably a Protestant”. Although he very occasionally attends the local Anglican church, he imagines that going to the Catholic church would be no more or less meaningful. However, he also says that if he went to the local Catholic church, “I would be making some kind of conscious decision to change who I was”. During his student years he was on the fringes of the civil rights movement, but was
not sure how far he was accepted by his Catholic counterparts. Throughout his narrative, Simon talks of his attempts to find a political cause, which have confused him because although he “would really like to contribute to nationalism” he does not think he is welcomed. This is a weak, even reluctant, form of communal identity. Although Simon is a rebellious community member, a Protestant identification is still meaningful in that it has for him associations of acceptance/non-acceptance and inclusion/exclusion.

There are, then, individuals for whom religion acts merely as a communal marker. They tend to be found amongst non-practising Catholics and Protestants and amongst those who are atheist, agnostic or non-committal in terms of religious beliefs. Reasons for this kind of identification include desires to integrate oneself into a community and to express belonging. They can also be thrust upon people as they observe their experiences in life being mediated through group membership. However, these identifications do not involve any form of personal religious belief, ritual practice or institutional input. In these cases, religion is indeed simply marking out deeper communal identities.

**RELIGION AS A COMMUNITY BUILDER**

Religious identifications begin to become more politically meaningful in Northern Ireland where churches are used to help structure daily life. In these cases, religion does not just flag identity, but is actively harnessed to construct a sense of communal belonging. When people attend church services and use the church for other social activities, group identity is reinforced. As Durkheim suggests, ritual and participation help to hold the organisation of society together. Moreover, any discussion of the relationship between people and churches must take into account ideas of religion as a form of social control. In twenty-first century Northern Ireland, churches do not have as much influence over “mental production” as in the past. However, they continue to be powerful actors seeking to maximise their ideological control.

Invariably, when one discusses religion and structure, the focus shifts to the Catholic church. This is because Catholics make more use of the church, first in attending religious services, and second in organising daily life, for example through education. Although there are many alternative political and cultural focal points for communities today, the church continues to play a community-building role. Churchgoing amongst Catholics is much higher than amongst Protestants, with 73% of the former compared to 47% the latter attending regularly. Despite a little decline over the last ten years, this remains amongst the highest in Europe. As Crilly (1998: 41) points out, “the sense of church is at the core of experience of Catholic community […] Religion is not just a private affair, but is rooted in experience of a faith community”. For example, amongst Catholic churchgoers, attendance continues to be

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3 For an account of the varied roles both Catholic and Protestant churches play in structuring the social lives of communities see Morrow et al (1991).
based mainly around the local unit of the parish. Boal, Keane and Livingstone (1997) found that Catholics were much more likely to walk to mass, whereas Protestants tended to travel by car—so for them church going is a much more sociable occasion.

Barry is a trainee solicitor from a predominantly Catholic town in Northern Ireland. He describes attending mass as a habit which is “more social than anything”, and when asked if he did any church-related activities, he replies “going to the pub!”. Vinny, a young Catholic in the entertainment industry, says that attending mass is “like smoking a cigarette or having a pint—it’s the same kind of repetitive action”. Moreover he attends because it “clears [his] head” and,

because we usually go for a drink on a Sunday, straight after mass, me and my da, and meet my brother and leave my ma to cook the dinner. But we go to mass, and my brother-in-law, we would meet him every Sunday at the bottom of the corner before we go into mass, to get the gossip and all from home.

Vinny describes the facets of his personal faith: he feels that he does not have to go to mass to have faith, he can also pray to God when he is driving to work, for example. He describes how he did not attend mass when he spent a summer in America: once he went because of a personal crisis, but left in the middle as the sermon was too long. So we can see that although Vinny says faith plays a big role in his life, going to mass is not principally how he expresses this. Yet he still goes every week. This leads us to suggest that, as he indicates himself, going to mass plays a more significant social role than a spiritual one. These Sunday rituals are a vital aspect of communal life, for they provide a meeting point and act as a community-maintaining exercise. They also function to exclude Protestants, if only by default.

Eamon is in his 40s and is a regular mass-going Catholic teacher from a Protestant town. He feels that going to mass is a routine that does not play a significant enough role in his life. Like Vinny, he articulates his spirituality as private, but continues to actively practice his faith. In fact, for years Eamon has helped out in church on Sundays, ushering and doing readings, saying that he feels a sense of duty towards it. So his is a private faith with public duties. This idea is reinforced when he describes clergy as “social workers”, helping parishioners with their problems, which he says is a “lovely role”. The analogy of clergy as social workers is extremely important. It mirrors other interviewees’ presentation of the Catholic church as a “community centre”. These create a positive association of the church with public service. It is not so much called upon for spiritual sustenance as it is utilised as a communal resource.

A young Catholic couple from a Protestant town, David and Karen, highlight the socio-structural significance of religion extremely well as they discuss their decision to marry in the Catholic church and later, to prepare their children for the sacrament of Holy Communion. These have not been easy choices for them, because although they say that faith is very important to them, neither attends mass nor adheres to traditional Catholic theology. In fact they describe their personal belief system as
“Murphyism”, in Karen’s words, “based on our experiences and our questions”. However, Karen feels that they chose to get married in the Catholic church because to do otherwise would have been to make a political statement. On the topic of the children’s christening and communion, David expresses the importance of religious group, as distinguished from personal beliefs. He argues that it is important, especially in Northern Ireland, for people to understand where they belong. Karen says that she will go to mass more with her daughter so she knows what being a Catholic is all about. For them, Catholic structures are needed in order to be a full member of the Catholic community.

Moreover, the Catholic church is a powerful agency in society, not just a friendly facilitator of cultural identity for anyone who wants it. It is an organisation with beliefs, goals and strategies. It has clear ideas on the difference between right and wrong, and the meaning of the good life. Its purpose is to influence people. Currently in a conservative phase, it is an organisation with a mission, and those who come into contact with it, or seek to utilise its structures, do so within the bounded space of official church discourse and meaning. Although people are sophisticated enough not to agree with everything the church may say, context is never insignificant, and we must ask in what ways the religious institutional setting of social life has an impact upon the meaning of Catholic identification in Northern Ireland.

Religious practice in Northern Ireland is more than a means of marking communal boundaries. When churches provide a meeting place, organise social life and activities or provide a public service, they function as social actors. This not only keeps communities separate in a practical sense, but also continues to invest this difference with meaning. For Catholics it keeps salient ideas of difference with Protestant practices of faith (and thus Protestants), and it delimits a “we” (and vice versa). This process is intensified where religion overlaps with other dimensions of conflict; for example with inequality where the Catholic church has administered employment schemes or where prayers have been said on behalf of the unemployed (Burton, 1978). It also overlaps with political and national differences, where churches speak up for their communities and articulate political positions (even if these are only weakly unionist or nationalist). Moreover, in times of crisis, more structural support for identities is often sought. For example, during the hunger strikes in 1980-81 and in the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 religious ritual, imagery and personnel played important social roles in focusing and organising Catholic and Protestant communities respectively.

These structural roles of religion are particularly salient for the still-high numbers of those who practice, thereby ritualising practice and acting out belonging. They are also particularly significant for Catholics, amongst whom there is more religious participation and more institutional religious involvement in daily life. Finally, the structural roles of religion can ebb and flow in relation to political context, extra involvement being most demanded, and supplied, in times of crisis.
Religion acts as ideology where understandings of self, other and place are structured into a system of ideas or concepts, from which identities are formed and social action is conceived. This draws on Weber’s idea of the content of religion being woven into interpretations of the changing social world. It is also informed by Wright’s excellent analysis of “Protestant ideology”. Whilst Weber and Wright both apply these ideas to Protestants with strong religious beliefs, ideology is different from theology. It is used here to refer to a system of concepts, informed by religious ideas but which are not concerned with answering “ultimate questions”. In such a way religion can be socially significant for those who have had a religious socialisation but do not have strong religious beliefs or practice.

Consider Victoria, a young Protestant mother from a deprived part of Belfast. Victoria was sent to Sunday school as a child, but does not now attend church. She rejects a lot of her traditional Presbyterian upbringing, has no time for “fire and brimstone preachers” and was once married to a Catholic from Germany. Victoria, whilst secular and radical in her views (she votes for the Workers’ Party or the Women’s Coalition), has rather fixed ideas about the consequences of religion for people’s lives. She feels that she has more social freedom as a result of her religion, especially as a woman. For her, Protestantism is “a way of life” and “a personal choice”. Constant in her self-presentation is her independence, and her right to choose and to think for herself. She talks about the power of the Catholic church and sees her Catholic friends as having a lot more pressure and guilt about their religion. She speaks of their “strictness” and the brutality and indoctrination of Catholic schools. So Victoria, although she sees herself as non-religious, presents her Protestant culture as a source of freedom, as opposed to her Catholic contemporaries, who she feels are still “driven” in some way by the Catholic church. This forms part of a common-sense understanding of “what Catholics are like”. It also has social consequences, for example when Victoria describes her knee-jerk reaction not to let her son be baptised into the Catholic church.

Religion infuses the ideas of other non-churchgoing Protestants. Phillip is in his 20s and comes from a suburban Protestant town. Whilst he had a very religious upbringing, he no longer attends church and says he has no religion. Phillip says that Catholics seem to “have such fear about things” and attributes this to the role of priests. This is juxtaposed with his self-presentation of independent reasoning. When asked “what do you associate with being a Protestant?”, non-churchgoing Robert says, “well, I think you are much freer”. These ideas of liberty have clear religious roots in Protestant teaching of freedom of thought and in its perception of the authoritarianism of the Catholic church. Yet they are used by people without any active religious involvement or commitment to understand social relationships. This position is not argued theologically, but derives from Protestants’ observations of the ways in which Catholics seem different to them. In their strong form, there is a clear relationship between religious ideology and politics, where Catholics are seen as unfree and politically duped. In their weaker form, as with Victoria, they are more compartmentalised—affecting some social relationships but not her overall political analysis.
Jim’s story illuminates the dynamics of religion as ideology. Jim is a young loyalist from Belfast. His father was a Pentecostalist and whilst he flirted with Protestant religion as a teenager, says he was a troublemaker and never made a serious commitment. He does not go to church and describes himself as more religiously moderate and open-minded than he used to be. Politically too, he describes himself as moderating, having moved from support of the DUP to secular loyalism. However, Protestant ideology continues to permeate Jim’s ideas of self, others and place.

Given his background, Jim did not meet many Catholics as he was growing up and says that it is only now in his job that he has contact. He says that he has always had problems with Jesuits, suspecting that they had political motivations, but now works with Jesuit priests and has been surprised because he has found them to be very amenable. He even considers some as friends. However, negative perceptions of the political situation for Protestants in Northern Ireland draw him back into opposition. Whilst he thinks there is a need for political compromise, he feels that with the Good Friday agreement Protestants are losing more than they expected to. He sees the Catholic community as united and rising in strength, and the Protestant community as fragmented and lost.

It is in this context of political nervousness that he describes himself as still having, in his words, the “triggers of anti-Catholicism”. Even though he is not a practising Protestant and despite his new-found relationships with Catholics, political fears cause him to rebound back into religious ideas about the other. In this context, he finds himself reverting to suspecting that the Catholic church has sinister motives, that it is acting as a political agency and promoting Catholic strength. He describes his continuing struggle in building personal relationships with Catholics, not least his Jesuit colleagues, and his confusion about their intentions. In short, Jim is actively renegotiating his religious identity, struggling to separate individual relationships from a wider analysis of political structures and group power. However, the seemingly zero-sum structure of communal politics in Northern Ireland makes Jim backtrack on some of his openness. The ideological formulation of anti-Catholicism is then triggered when it seems to make sense of structural conditions.

The cases cited here concern Protestants; however, there is evidence that similar dynamics are at work amongst Catholics too. In Millar’s (1999) work for example, republican interviewees question whether Protestants have a conscience, and speak of their “ingrained wickedness”. This is opposed to Catholics, whom they say have been brought up with a moral theology and know what sin is (1999: 202-4, 303). Overall though, because of the stronger emphasis on personal theology (as opposed to liturgy or practice) within Protestantism, religion as ideology is more likely to be found amongst Protestants than Catholics. Interestingly, most practising Catholic interviewees distanced themselves from the religious fervour they associated with Protestants. This might be characterised as anti-Protestant ideology, comparable to the anti-Catholicism that Jim articulates. The difference is that it is framed in opposition to religious ideas; the religio-political dimension of Protestantism acts as the key concept against which Catholic identity and “normality” can be defined.
Religion can manifest itself as ideology in Northern Ireland. This is where religious concepts are mediated through experiences and relationships in the present, are used to imagine what Protestants and Catholics are like, inform identity and mediate social and political action. This trend is most pronounced amongst those familiar with religious concepts. This can be gained from childhood socialisation and can persist at the level of common-sense knowledge, independent of religious practice or belief in the present. Over time, though, ideology unsupported by religious structure and participation will become less coherent. However, as Northern Ireland is still a rather religious society, as indicated by its high levels of affiliation, practice and belief, it is unlikely that this dimension of division will disappear any time soon. Furthermore, we find the religious dimensions of ideology ebbing and flowing in relation to socio-economic structural conditions. In times of communal difficulty or crisis, ideology can be more intense.

RELIGION AS THEOLOGY

One of the most obvious ways in which religion is entangled with politics is theology. This has been left to last because although it can be the most dramatic manifestation, it is not actually the most pervasive role of religion in Northern Ireland. Generally, theology is thought to be politically salient only for a minority of Protestant fundamentalists (Rose, 1971; Hickey, 1984; Bruce, 1994). This author agrees with that analysis, but is at pains to point out some unexpected expressions of this.

First, we need to be careful when we speak of the theological dimensions of conflict in Northern Ireland. Too often, commentators theorise theology as something fixed which functions as the basis for action. Moreover, it is imperative to avoid the assumption that theology produces action without social corroboration. Of course there is a strong relationship between beliefs and action. But theology is open to interpretation. More significantly, individuals mediate theological beliefs through their own experiences. Just as we see the religious dimensions of communal identity, community-building and ideology respond to individuals’ experiences in life and of politics, so too, interpretations of theology are works in progress.

The specific inter-relations of Protestant theology and unionist politics in Northern Ireland have been well documented, and do not need reiteration here (Hickey, 1984; Bruce, 1986, 1994; Todd, 1987; Akenson, 1992; Brewer, 1998). Briefly, these include the belief that Northern Ireland is a special land set apart by God; that Ulster Protestants are a “chosen people” akin to the Israelites; that the Catholic church is an authoritarian political agency, antithetical to freedom; that Protestantism represents salvation and light in opposition to the damnation and darkness of Catholicism. Politically these can translate into opposition to a “priest-ridden” united Ireland, lack of trust in Catholics’ political integrity and an exclusive focus on the “Protestant people”. It is estimated that about one quarter of the Protestant popula-
tion of Northern Ireland may subscribe to this kind of political theology.\textsuperscript{4} Having said this, it is more important to explore the dynamics by which theology and political attitudes are entangled than to simply reproduce a caricature of this religio-political position.

Helen is in her early 40s, works in the public sector and lives in a predominantly Protestant town. She used to be a nominal Presbyterian but says she was more of a “party animal” and not very committed. Recently, however, she has become a born-again Christian and regularly attends a small fundamentalist church. Politically too, her position has shifted—from being a member of the moderate unionist UUP to supporting the hard-line unionist DUP. She is vehemently opposed to the Good Friday Agreement and concentrates on Protestant loss in contemporary Northern Ireland. Fears emanate from her perceptions of the growing strength of the Catholic community, their high levels of mass attendance and “aggressive Irish nationalism”. Her perception of Protestant loss confirms for Helen that these are the “end times”. As such, she trusts God to save her, saying,

\begin{quote}
the thing that always sticks in my mind is what the Lord says, “the truth is mine, and I will repay”, and I really do hold on to that because I do believe that ultimately he will stop it this time. Not just the agreement just generally [immoral] society.
\end{quote}

The biblical Book of Revelation speaks of the final days of the world and the trials that the faithful will be subjected to, but ends with judgement and salvation. Those Protestant interviewees who believed biblical inerrancy and who perceived wider moral decay as indications that the end of the world is near described the Agreement as another “sign of the times”. One religiously conservative Protestant man says the only thing that can salvage the political situation after the Agreement is “divine intervention”. What this might represent is religion functioning as social opium in the way that Marx suggested. Whilst articulated as theological truth, religion is being used by these individuals to explain, and provide reassurance in, a political situation they feel powerless to change. It is not capitalism, but a coalition of the Catholic community, the Catholic church and even the British government that represent the oppressor.

Not all those with strong religious beliefs, however, are politically oppositional. In some instances, beliefs can be held in a way that allows for political inclusion. This is still marginal within the wider community. Amongst inclusive evangelical Protestants we find theology compelling individuals to be politically integrationist and socially active. James is an Anglican minister in his 30s, working in a predominantly Protestant town. He is a pro-Agreement unionist, describes himself as a bridge-builder and, when talking about religion, uses language like integration, inclusion and accommodation. He was not always an integrationist, but attributes his theological and political change to forming good personal relationships with Catholics.

\textsuperscript{4} Boal et al (1997) found that half of Belfast’s Protestant churchgoers were theologically conservative and based on this, estimate that 25\% of the overall Protestant population subscribes to these ideas. Bruce (1986) puts this figure at around 30\%, ECONI (1995) at 33\%. 
during theological training away from the social constraints of Northern Ireland. Jordan (2001) and Ganiel (2002) find similar trends of Protestants with strong religious beliefs becoming more inclusive and offering theological arguments of heavenly rather than earthly citizenship as a means of transcending political division in Northern Ireland.

Theology is likely to be politically salient only for believers, particularly Protestants, in Northern Ireland. There is little evidence that theological beliefs are related to political attitudes for Catholics, amongst whom, as we have seen, other dimensions of religion are more significant. It is of vital importance to note, however, that people’s theologies do not represent a fixed way of looking at the world. They can respond to social and political experiences. There is a dynamic two-way relationship between religion and politics in terms of how theology is used to make sense of the world.

CONCLUSION

Religion plays a multidimensional role in contemporary Northern Ireland. It is socially and politically significant for different people in different ways—namely, marking out communal identities, providing a community-building dynamic, helping constitute ideology and values and offering theological interpretations of social and political relationships. These four main inter-relations of religion and politics often overlap with and reinforce one other. So too, these modes of religion can overlap with other dimensions of difference in conflict, be they political, national, economic or cultural. Whilst more research needs to be done to quantify these trends, it is clear that religion is tied into conflict in Northern Ireland in a variety of complex ways.

Conflict in Northern Ireland can be seen as a system of relationships that interlock with and mutually reinforce each other (Ruane and Todd, 1996). It takes place at the level of both identity conflict and structural relationships, the former being embedded in the latter. Communal divisions are based around constructs of self and other—whether “Protestant/Catholic” or “Irish/British”—but these constructs are given meaning by individuals’ actual experiences rooted in social and structural relationships (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 5-6). In other words, conflict revolves around issues of identity and ideology in relation to the dynamics of the political, economic and cultural power struggles that have evolved over centuries in Northern Ireland. In this way, religion has become a dimension of both culture and structure. It has not only demarcated difference, but has played a vital ideological and institutional role in structures of dominance, dependence and inequality, more often reinforcing than restraining tendencies towards communal division.

Because differences in Northern Ireland are overlapping and mutually reinforcing, conflict needs to be tackled along all its dimensions in order to achieve any resolution. Consider those Protestants whose religiously based fears of Catholics have intensified after the perceived political loss in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. So too, those Catholics who want to instil a positive sense of communal belonging
in a changing polity by utilising the structures of the Catholic church. In such ways, politics is responsible for religion, as well as religion for politics, in Northern Ireland. So whilst the conflict in is not a religious one, religion cannot be omitted from analyses of social relationships. Moreover, it must be seen as an interactive, processual dynamic of divisions. As conflict ebbs and flows, so too can its religious dimensions.

Therefore, singling out a group of Protestant fundamentalists for whom religion is politically important, and discounting its role for everyone else, makes little sense. It is more helpful to recognise first that religion is socially and politically meaningful in a variety of ways. Second, these dimensions are different for believers and non-believers, different for those who practise and those who do not, and importantly, different for Catholics and Protestants. Third, these roles of religion are contextual and situational. In order to capture these dynamics, researchers must be willing to tackle the question from the bottom up, untangling individuals' subjective understandings of religion to broaden out our understanding of its meaning and function. Such an approach helps put religion in its place within the debate on the causes of conflict in Northern Ireland. It avoids clichés of holy warriors and totalising institutional churches, whilst attributing to religion a much more meaningful role than just an empty label.

REFERENCES


