

This is an electronic version of an article published in National Identities, Volume 11, Issue 1 March 2009, pages 87 - 99.  
National Identities is available online at: <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~db=all~content=t713439360>

**Does being Protestant matter? Protestants, minorities and the re-making of ethno-religious identity after the Good Friday Agreement.<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Does being Protestant matter? Protestants, minorities and the re-making of ethno-religious identity after the Good Friday Agreement.**

The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 gave an opportunity to remake not just political institutions but ethno-religious distinction in Northern Ireland. This paper looks at the how individuals reconstruct their way of being Protestant in Ireland and Northern Ireland in the context of social and political change. It shows individuals renegotiating their ways of being Protestant, attempting sometimes successfully to change its socio-cultural salience, blurring ethnic boundaries, distinguishing religious and ethno-national narratives, drawing universalistic political norms from their particular religious tradition. It argues that these renegotiations are highly sensitive to the macro-political context. Changes in this context affect individuals through their changing cognitive understandings and strategic interests which, at least in this case, are as important to identification as are social solidarities.

Key words: Protestant, minority, ethno-religious identity, identity change, symbolic boundaries, Northern Ireland

## **Does being Protestant matter? Protestants, minorities and the re-making of ethno-religious identity after the Good Friday Agreement.**

### ***Introduction***

The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 signalled the beginning of a new political order in Northern Ireland: a peaceful and democratic order, in which republicans would play an important political role. It intensified the process of equalisation between Catholics and Protestants in the economy and in the public culture. The union with Britain remained, while a majority so wished, but British sovereignty no longer carried with it advantage for the Protestant population. The Agreement faced major political crises of implementation. It also posed new questions for ordinary Protestants in Northern Ireland, casting in doubt older assumptions, requiring of them new modes of practice and interaction. It had effects too in the Southern border counties which had suffered directly from the years of conflict in Northern Ireland. This was a conjuncture which invited and allowed a redefinition of the Protestant place in Northern Ireland, and perhaps also in Ireland as a whole.

Traditionally, being a Protestant, or a member of the Protestant minority, in Ireland has carried with it presumptions of British identity and loyalty, and of distinction from Catholics not simply in terms of belief but by virtue of a different history on the island of Ireland and different ethnic origins. British identity is a diffuse, quasi-political identification, with a fluidity of meaning. Recent research shows that, despite a persistence of the British category of identification among Northern Protestants, the meanings of Britishness and Irishness are changing quite radically (Coakley, 2007; Todd et al, 2006a, Mitchell and Todd, 2007). Protestantism is a more immediate identification, rooted in family, locality, daily and weekly practices. This is reflected in the ease with which most of our respondents spoke of their Protestantism, and in their willingness to volunteer this category of identification. Yet being Protestant has also been associated with a sense of ethno-history and with a clarity of ethnic boundaries (see also McLaughlin et al, 2006; Donnan, 2005). This ethno-religious distinction from Catholics persisted in the Irish state for some eighty years since independence (Ruane and Butler, 2007, Butler and Ruane, this volume; Lysaght, this volume). The present conjuncture in Northern Ireland gives an opportunity to re-negotiate this identification, separating the religious and ethnic aspects of

Protestantism and renegotiating boundaries (see Ruane and Todd, 1996, 307-8, 313-4). As we indicate below, however, not all the attempts at renegotiation may be successful and not all of the potential of the present may be fulfilled.

Our discussion is based on research and indepth interviews which show extensive redefinitions and renegotiations of identity by individual Protestants. It focuses on how individual choices and interactional changes can change the meanings of categories and the boundaries of groups, sometimes with wide social consequences (McAdam et al, 2000; Jenkins, 1996, 2008). In such periods of social and political change, when large sections of the public are impelled to rethink their priorities, categorical oppositions can fall into disuse, or they can be highlighted with new meanings.

Three aspects of Protestant identity are focussed upon in this article:

- i. *Communal identification.* Being Protestant matters because, like ethnicity, it involves belonging, community and descent. The question is how widely individuals cast the boundaries of Protestantism, whether or not understandings of being Protestant in Ireland are rooted in Irish Protestant (plantation) origin myths.
- ii. *Cognitive and normative content of identity* Being Protestant matters because of the values and principles with which it is associated. These may be conceived in purely religious terms or in a wider socio-cultural or even political sense, as oppositional to Catholic values, or as potentially universalisable, overcoming social and cultural divisions. The definitions of these symbolic boundaries help create the social boundaries of the group (Lamont and Molnar, 2002, pp. 168-9; Pachucki et al, 2008). In this paper we will be looking for patterns or trajectories of reported change in these definitions (Todd, 2005).
- iii. *Power resources, power relations and institutional context.* Being Protestant matters because the social context makes it matter. Power

relations make collective categories important (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 86-9), and particularly so in Northern Ireland, past and present. They constitute populations in whose interest it is to assert their minority-identity or to sustain a majority-consciousness and give motivations.

Each has been evident in the formation of opposing communities in Ireland, where communal differentiation is of long and traumatic provenance, where cultural and moral differentiation on the basis of religion has been intense, and where power relations have been radically unequal, and are only now being evened up. The three aspects can, however, be differentially interrelated. Ruane and Todd (1996, pp. 290-3; 2004, pp. 224-6; 2007, pp. 448-450) have argued that it was the tight systemic interrelations of group-identifications, cultural distinctions and power relations that made conflict in Northern Ireland so intractable in the past and that the (partial) loosening of these interrelations paved the way for settlement. Is this borne out at the individual level? This article looks at ordinary people's own reasons for taking Protestantism as something that does or does not matter to them and identifies broader patterns in their choices.

Unlike the other articles in this volume, not all of the groups whom we discuss are 'minorities'. The partition settlement of 1920 divided the island of Ireland, creating a clear Protestant (and unionist) majority in Northern Ireland. By the same token, it left Protestants in the new Irish Free State a small minority, even those in the border counties that historically had been at the margins of a much denser Protestant settlement pattern and where considerable numbers of Protestants remained (Bowen, 1983). Continuing nationalist aspirations on both sides of the border, highlighted in unionist rhetoric, left Protestants in Northern Ireland conscious of their minority status on the island. For them, as for residents in the Southern border counties, the border had a certain sensed contingency, which made for fluidity in minority/majority self-assignment. For this reason, their varying modes of identification can usefully be compared and contrasted with those of the other Protestant minorities discussed in this volume.

### ***Methodology***

This paper focuses on over 50 in-depth interviews with Protestants, divided almost evenly between Northern Ireland and the Irish state, which formed part of two larger research projects conducted by the authors – one in the border counties of Northern Ireland and the Irish state, the other in middle sized towns in Eastern Ireland and Eastern Northern Ireland, with additional interviews in Dublin.<sup>2</sup> Most of the local areas in which we interviewed were majority Catholic, although each had a sizeable minority of Protestants who were over-represented in our final sample; some of the Northern Ireland interviews were conducted in mixed religion areas, although particular housing estates were predominantly (or sometimes totally) Protestant or Catholic. Each of the research projects was designed to map identity and identity change and if the interviewee did not volunteer discussion about their religion – and most Protestants did - they were asked about it and its significance for them. The aim was to elicit episodic personal narratives which would focus on issues surrounding ethnicity, nationality and religion and allow us to identify repertoires and patterns of identification and self-perceived identity change.<sup>3</sup>

The initial analysis of the interviews took place while the projects were still underway (2003-6) with frequent discussion among the project teams. For this paper, the authors contributed commentaries on their own interviews, addressing the same set of questions: does being Protestant matter, why does being Protestant matter, does it matter because of values, because of solidarity or descent, for strategic reasons, for other reasons? Todd read all the interviews and analysed the information and interpretations. There were no clear patterns either by interviewer, by geographical area, or by conceptual category (emphasis on moral values, emphasis on group solidarity, emphasis on interests and power). In charting the manner in which interviewees talked about values, interests and sense of community, however, it became clear that the interviews clustered into 4 groups outlined below.<sup>4</sup> The quotations and examples are chosen because they express with clarity repertoires and responses common in our interviews. Names of respondents and some details are changed to preserve anonymity.<sup>5</sup>

***Being Protestant does not matter. Doing Protestant (religiously) without being Protestant (socio-culturally) .***

*...Well... I'd say I'm Irish, you know... I'm... I guess I'd say I'm Irish and religion... humm... I'd have to say Protestant, though not your typical Protestant maybe... if you ask me how I'd define myself, I'd say first as a mother... that's what I'd say... that's what I'd put first... being a mother... hopefully a good one [Laughs].*

Joan, interviewed by Rougier, works in the service sector in a predominantly Catholic Northern Irish border town. Her children were brought up as Protestant and sent to local Protestant schools – *'like I said I'm not into religion much but we raised our children in [my husband's] faith which is Presbyterian and, that was important to him and I respect that'*. She lives much of her life easily in a predominantly Catholic mixed-religion environment, moving at times (for children's schooling and religious upbringing) to a predominantly Protestant environment. Despite 'living' Protestant in these respects, her Protestant identification is weak, it is not a collective category that she affirms and the Protestant/Catholic distinction is not important to her, personally, socially or professionally. She attributes this to her unusual family background, Protestant but relatively detached from organised Protestantism.

Tom, a middle aged, middle class man, grew up and still lives in an East coast town with a small Protestant minority in the Irish state. He is a regular churchgoer in the Church of Ireland. Tom spoke freely to O'Keefe about national identity and secularisation – he felt that young Irish people were losing their moral standards with their religion and that it was not a good thing - but he appeared to have little to say about Protestantism either theologically or socially. When O'Keefe tried to get him to talk about Protestant-Catholic relations as he had experienced them growing up, he recounted playing football as a boy (where religion did not matter) and the conversation turned to an animated discussion of football. Finally, asked by O'Keefe *'And what about being a protestant, is that important to you, or do you think of yourself in those terms, at all?'* he replied *'No... It doesn't mean much, no, no, no, no, as I say it's a, once you're happy in your community, that really doesn't come into it.'*

These are two individuals for whom being Protestant does not matter socially or culturally. They might in some respects 'do Protestant' (in the sense of attending a

Protestant church, living in a Protestant family, sending their children to predominantly Protestant schools) but they do not define themselves socially as Protestant, nor do they see their nominal (ascribed) Protestantism as important beyond the defined and differentiated spheres of church and school. Their Protestant networks coexist with mixed religion and with predominantly Catholic networks; their Protestant fields of activity coexist with others (football, work) where religion is irrelevant; their sense of community is plural, overlapping. Among the various aspects of their lives, and the numerous collective categories to which they belong, being Protestant comes very far down their list of priorities.

At least another nine individuals of our sample, although nominally Protestant, did not connect their religious beliefs or practices with the social category of being Protestant: they did not highlight Protestant community or solidarity; they were not troubled by Protestant power or powerlessness.<sup>6</sup> Some had stopped even 'doing Protestant'. Some hardly went to church, some saw their spirituality and morality in non-church terms, some highlighted other categories and values. Significantly, some of these were incomers to Ireland, who had no claim to 'ethno-cultural' Protestantism. One woman, who self-defined as English although she had lived in Ireland for many years, felt socially closer to Catholics than to Protestants, whom she saw as *'high and mighty... a cut above the rest'*, even though she felt religiously closer to Protestantism than to Catholicism. Others recounted particular factors in their background which made it seem 'natural' for them to detach from social-Protestantism. Some, like Tom and Joan, reported easy and happy social relations in childhood, where mixing between Protestants and Catholics was taken as natural – in each case, specific and relatively unusual traits - a mother's unusual religious beliefs, a family tradition, a commitment to football - led to easy integration into the local (predominantly Catholic) peer-group.

Not every environment, however, easily supported this privatisation of religious belonging, and in Northern Ireland there were individuals who struggled to maintain their preferred categories of self-definition in the face of ascribed categories and communal expectations.<sup>7</sup> David, interviewed by Cañás Bottos, consistently rejected the ascribed categories. He defined himself not in religious or political terms but as *'hard working, a plumber... work every day that I can. ... see myself as having some sort of stature here in the town in the work that I do .... I get a lot of gratitude from*



*it. It's a hobby...* '. He had distanced himself from what he perceived as a restricted and violent sectarian '*mindset*' and refused to define himself in ethnic, religious or national terms. Only as the interview progressed were enough pieces of information given to allow the inference that he came from a Protestant background. Others emphasised the power of the ascribed categories. Anna – third level educated from a working class background - told O'Keefe:

*Nationality would be Northern Irish, so it would. Religion... probably I don't... I have to say Protestant because that's the way I was born into and the way I was brought up, sort of thing, but given the preference I'd prefer not to be classed by or under a religion.*

Leah, from a working class area, did not let religion matter much to her, and went out of her way to ensure that her daughter had Catholic friends and did not pick up sectarian attitudes. Leah was clear, however, that she herself was socially and communally Protestant: she felt safe attending Orange festivities but her Catholic friend would only attend (and bring her children) in Leah's company. Leah had dated Catholics in the past, but now pragmatically preferred to date Protestants because it was easier when she brought them home to meet her family.

### ***Being Protestant matters a lot: the loyalist***

Sometimes the relation between collective category, group solidarity and perceived threat is immediate.<sup>8</sup> Stuart recounts a rural family- and church-centred sense of childhood belonging, juxtaposed with looking up at a '*hail of thirty bullets*' and experiencing attack from Catholic neighbours: he responded by joining the British army. Arthur, a committed unionist recalls being told that the '*neighbour men*' were shot by the IRA '*because they were Protestants*'", and "*what is a protestant, what is a catholic*", "*we're Protestants*", '*yeah*', '*we're Unionists*', and the I.R.A don't want, they want a United Ireland, they don't want a British presence and they see us as a British presence and therefore they shoot us. So probably that, that's whenever I sort of realised you know what a Protestant was, what a Catholic was, what a Unionist was, what a Nationalist was'. He explained to Cañás Bottos how group networks, political belief and communal opposition converged to lead him to become a member of the Orange Order:

*A mixture of family, of friends, neighbours were in it, and also it was a statement saying that I'm Protestant, I'm Unionist, I believe in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and how do I express that, I express it by joining the Orange Order, and a certain amount of snubbing the nose to the likes of the I.R.A.*

Political involvement, in turn, intensifies communal solidarity and the sense of being under threat. This threat has not disappeared with the ceasefires and agreement: Len, another loyalist activist described 'his' people as simple, homogenous: ' *The Protestant is very, very simple, they see their culture, their identity gradually being taken away from them* '.

That description partially fits Ellie, a woman whose family in the past had been involved in the loyalist paramilitaries, and who had left Belfast for an East Ulster town in order to shield her children from conflict and bitterness. She now lives in a working class Protestant estate with a strong paramilitary presence. Ellie's Protestantism is above all social and relational, with strong political resonances : if she speaks of being Protestant she immediately mentions her relation to Catholics and in particular to Sinn Féin and the SDLP . She hardly ever goes to church and associates being Protestant not with religious belief, but rather with family background. ' *Yes I am Protestant deep down inside you know, but on the outside I can communicate with Catholics in every aspect even with them having a united Ireland* ' . Her discussion switches between, on the one hand, a classic loyalism where Catholics are a threat and where being Protestant is identified with being British and with being a good Ulsterwoman, and, on the other hand, a much more moderate and reflective sense of the contingency of being born Protestant, and the mixedness in everyone's background (Ellie's aunt married a Catholic). Ellie does not want to feel bitter against Catholics, but sometimes she does feel bitter. As the interview progresses she tells of the past when celebration of Protestant communal culture was unrestrained :

*cause we used to follow the bands and it was all different then, we used to walk in front of the band and want to dance in front of the band and sing party songs like "Cap the Pope" and "Dolly's Brae" and all this here and all you know where nowadays you know there's someone even plays tunes 'till hymns and the Catholics are still not satisfied in Belfast you know, they still can't let a band parade certain flashpoints because they say they're playing party songs, you know and that there's an awful difference for me.*<sup>9</sup>

When O’Keefe asks if she has anything to add, Ellie’s tone becomes challenging: *‘I’m a fucking Protestant and proud to be one and I know you’re Catholic aren’t you?’*

O’Keefe deflects the question by distinguishing religion of origin and present religious belief, and Ellie again turns to discuss the contingency of religious division and how she didn’t want her children to grow up without knowing Catholics.

Like Ellie, other interviewees show a complexity of identification : a loyalist vision coexisting in tension with more general values.<sup>10</sup> Jean, with close relatives involved in paramilitaries, expresses the desire to move on , to leave the estate, the town, implicitly her own past. *‘Because I know everybody in it, and you know the bigots and you are like get me out of here - I don’t want the kids growing up with that.’....‘I’d like to just be European. I’d like the whole bloody place to just be European and then that would get rid of the whole lot of rubbish, wouldn’t it?’* While she stays, however, being Protestant remains important personally and interactionally : *‘If anybody tried to take it away from me I would fight for it the same as if anybody tried to take any part of my identity away I would fight for it.’* It affects her interactions when she meets Catholics whom she considers to be extremists: *‘sometimes it would come out when I would see sectarian people that I know and like I am so aggravated and so angry like, bullies, they’re all bullies’.*

Some of our interviewees had what appeared as a seamless web of Protestantism as belief, as community and as power, but even for them there was movement : Len and Stuart are now working for or with government funded agencies to lessen conflict ; Arthur is on the moderate wing of unionism. There are undoubtedly others in Northern Ireland who have moved less far from classic loyalism.<sup>11</sup> But some of our loyalist respondents – in particular a set of women whose relatives and neighbours were involved in paramilitary organisations – had moved farther. They shared in parts of the loyalist vision but at one remove : they also relativised it, combining it with other values and ideals. But, as the interviews with Jean and Ellie illustrate, despite their changes they are easily drawn back into an ethno-religious mindset.

### ***Universalising the values of the minority***

Cecil and Wilma are a middle aged Presbyterian couple who live in County Louth, the easternmost border county in the Irish state. They are very conscious of being part of a small Protestant minority community. They define their community in terms of its distinctive values and clearly differentiate their views from the ‘sectarianism’ of the North. They articulate moral and cultural values which would benefit the entire society, not just a part of it.

*Cecil: But there are subtle differences that we... living here on the border, and I suppose living anywhere in Ireland... in the republic of Ireland, as Protestants would see... that's there is a ...hem... there's a culture that we don't... how would you call it... wouldn't have empathy with ... things that are done on Sundays... although we are much more lenient nowadays in how we react to things now... but... the corruption, and that, that is not to say that the Protestants wouldn't be corrupt but there is an awful lot of that in this country... and it is not denounced from the pulpits the way I feel it should be...so...[...]* and this attitude of...hem... there is a saying around... hem ... it is not very Presbyterian looking, not very Protestant looking... but if you go up to Northern Ireland, and you see... a lot of the farms and that and they are immaculate... whereas in some places, well I am generalising, maybe unfairly now... but some places down here, they don't look... as if the people CARE... There is debris and rubbish thrown around... [...] But you understand... so there are differences... But in general, as far as how we are treated by the State there is not an awful lot of difference...

*Wilma: “I had a disabled brother...who... because we were Protestants, we... and this is the difference.... There was a difference in this... lifestyle as well... Mum did not hide him away... he couldn't walk but he went to school with us, we pushed him to school in his wheelchair and she did everything she could for him, to get him into hospitals, and that sort of thing whereas... neighbours in the area who might have had children like him... would leave them in the house... they wouldn't bring them out... You know... they wouldn't let anybody see that their child wasn't... perfect...”*

Many on the Louth-Monaghan border area, like Cecil and Wilma, volunteered that they were a member of ‘the minority’, ‘a minority’, ‘the minority community’ or ‘a minority person’ defined by religion.<sup>12</sup> The boundaries of this community might be more permeable than before – some spoke of the young going to integrated schools – but some individuals still lived most of their life within it: ‘*So I mean that would be quite a big part of my social life would be the church, actually you know I don't really do anything outside the church as such*’. The very smallness of the community meant that each individual could spend much of their time sustaining communal activities. What was emphasised, however, was not primarily communal solidarity but the values of the particular Protestant tradition – in this area either Presbyterian or

evangelical. Not all were as strongly assertive as Cecil and Wilma, but many individuals spoke of the values they had taken from their tradition : *'you shouldn't be afraid of hard work and awkwardness shouldn't really get in your way ..'*; they emphasised the work ethic of Protestants, their tidiness, and their *'straightness'* rather than *'flexibility'*; some spoke of more specifically religious values of *'faith'* and *'unselfishness'*.<sup>13</sup> This was related to their sense of minority-ness: *'the pressure is on you to conform to the majority, the majority opinion,...'* ; Catholics, they said, treated everyone as if they were Catholics or spoke of *'non-Catholics'* rather than of *'Protestants'*, when *'... they'd prefer to be called Protestant because it's a positive affirmation of their identity'*.<sup>14</sup> The emphasis on Protestant values was not intended as superiority, although some were aware that it could be mistaken for this. Bob, a Protestant from the North who had long lived in the South, explained:

*...the Presbyterians, I think have fairly good reputation down through the years you know we were, we were active in opposing injustices down through the years and we are happy to be associated with a church with that outlook .... we don't see ourselves as being superior to others, now I'm telling you now this is fact, up North it used to be we felt sorry for the Roman Catholics, they mean well, the poor devils, they're misled altogether and they're doomed, they're going to hell that's it. Now we don't subscribe to that view eh, we try to adhere to what the scripture tells us...*

There were others in the North who were conscious of being, or becoming, a minority, although few identified explicitly as *'a minority'*.<sup>15</sup> Laura, who works on cross-community projects and lives in the Eastern border area was one of the few who highlighted minority status:

*... well... there's that phrase... the greening of the west... I suppose that's relevant to me, yeah... I suppose there is a tendency to feel a bit... yeah you do feel a bit under threat because we're not that far away from it and I suppose now I'm more conscious that the area used to be more mixed ... I suppose like any culture or any group that's becoming a minority there's a bit of... I don't know how to put it... a fear there... ... I wouldn't say I spend a lot of nights thinking about it but yeah I guess there's something in that...*

Unlike those on the Southern side of the border, however, she associated this change with a loyalism with which she did not (or did not want to) identify: *'we are a very sectarian society, we have aspirations... but at the end of the day if you touch my Protestantism or if you touch my Catholicism ... I want it back the way it is ...'* .

Instead of freeing her to assert in universalistic fashion the values of her tradition, it is as if the process of becoming a minority provoked in her a defensive response.

***Being Protestant differently: deconstructing social and symbolic division***

*The worst thing I remember, I always remember, was that with growing up an increasing sense of .... just how loyalist the area that I lived in was, how sectarian it was ..... Like there was the Catholic Church, behind, in the field behind where we lived and it must have been bombed about thirty times .... and then we started hearing, you know, on the grapevine about there was a guy who was Catholic who lived at the end of the.. road ... and his car was blown up and then there was a whole big untrue spiel about him being in league with the IRA ... so there was basically ethnic cleansing, or whatever you want to call it, going on in the area ... And I remember an increasing sense of, you know, feeling that this was totally horrendous and that I really didn't want to live here anymore if this was going on and feeling ashamed as well, ashamed of being Protestant, and I think the biggest shame was that in the same area there was a guy that had been living in the area .... he was shot dead by the Red Hand Commando .... my mum and dad used to call it a quiet area but I remember thinking as a teenager, there's no way that this area is quiet. .*

Denise's story is one of increasing political distancing from the Protestant community in Northern Ireland while retaining a continuity with her religious and familial tradition. She finds aspects and origins of her present attitudes in her parents' evangelical pietism – distanced from Protestant politics – and in her family history. She has, however, moved far from the anti-Catholicism which is prevalent within evangelicalism (Brewer, 1998). She recounts a process of 'mellowing' through increasingly finding herself in situations where she met Catholics and nationalists and where her 'prejudices [were] challenged'. The process accelerated, with a mixed marriage increasing the intensity of cross-community contact. In the process, she has reappropriated a Protestant tradition (which she now defines as part of a wider Christian tradition) which lives up to the values which the actual Protestant community described above rejected. The reflexive process of reevaluating tradition, values and interrelationships and of mediating between two communities in her daily interaction and familial relationships is continuing. She speaks of identity as an unfinished process.

These elements are common to a subset of our interviewees who distance themselves from community solidarity, find themselves in situations where prejudices are challenged, criticise the dominant Protestant tradition by using values from within that tradition and assess those values reflexively.<sup>16</sup> Several of them are in mixed marriages, although as the account above indicates, this is as much a consequence as a cause of change. Each highlights aspects of their religious and familial tradition while moving very far from conventional Protestant values. Being Protestant matters to them because they want to change the dominant ways of being Protestant and to subject its values to the test of intercommunal interaction. What emerges is idiosyncratic. Jack asserts a British military tradition, a rootedness in the land, together with an openness to Irish culture and a consciously principled fairness towards Catholics and nationalists: he has married a Catholic woman, and is involved in peace and reconciliation activities. In his ease in keeping an Irish as well as British dimension to his identity he is more like some of the Irish Protestants described by Ruane and Butler (2007) than like most Northern Protestants. What is common to these cases is a mixture of conservation of the values of Protestant tradition and conscious change and critique of communal practices in light of these values. A similar process, without some of the initial prejudices and without the intensity of communal opposition, can be seen in some Southern respondents. In all of these cases the collective category (being Protestant) is symbolically highlighted in order to change it cognitively, communally, and relationally.

### ***Renegotiating ethnic and religious boundaries.***

Ethnicity is felt at once as deep and as immediate, an identity which persists. Yet it is also negotiable (Jenkins, 2008, pp. 51-2). The prediction that radical social and political restructuring would stimulate change in symbolic and social boundaries (Ruane and Todd, 1996) is borne out by the intensity of renegotiation of ethnic and religious boundaries evidenced above. Our respondents themselves mentioned the following changes as impelling their rethinking: the political restrictions and demographic changes which render problematic the assumptions and values of the old Protestant world ; the equality ethos that relativises older unionist certainties, thrusts

republicans into every public body and requires Protestants to find a new *modus vivendi* with them ; the new cross-community and cross-border networks and opportunities (in which a section of our respondents were involved or employed) ; the relaxation of movement brought by peace, decommissioning and demilitarisation ; the more diffuse sense of a ‘new beginning’ which has surrounded the Good Friday Agreement. Residents on the Southern side of the border were also affected by the conflict and peace in Northern Ireland, as they themselves made clear (see Todd et al, 2006b).

The activity we discuss is individual, with its immediate effects limited to family and friends. It is nevertheless important to record and make visible the different repertoires of being Protestant, not least to show how the seemingly persistent ethnic boundaries are constantly subverted and the seeming stable ethnic identities constantly redefined at the everyday level (for an extended discussion of everyday ethnicity, see Brubaker et al, 2006). Many of our respondents, and in particular those who had moved furthest, did not identify strongly with a community or worry about its power resources. They willingly breached social boundaries, while redefining symbolic : but even then, there were major obstacles to change in terms of others’ definitions and ascriptions (Jenkins, 2008, 55-64, 74-6 ).

A few of our respondents – often Protestant residents of majority Catholic towns, North and South – already live in a plural everyday world, where the Protestant/Catholic cleavage has fallen into disuse. This ‘secularised’ world where religion is a differentiated sphere is, however, in part a function of their unusual individual attributes - Joan contrasts her perspective with that of her husband – and in part a function of their locality. In more contested local areas, even those who want to transcend the categories of distinction are constantly forced back into them by others’ ascription (Jenkins, 2008, 55-64, 74-6). In this situation, individuals have a limited number of options (Todd, 2005). One is privatisation, to distance oneself from all the collective categories which could trigger a sense of division. David exemplified this response. He did not go to church, and he refused to answer questions about the area he lived in, or where his children went to school which might highlight his religion of origin. In his everyday work as a plumber it is plausible that he succeeded in avoiding ethno-religious labels, although whether it was so easy in his neighbourhood and for



his children is not clear from the interview. Another option is adaptation: Leah pragmatically adapted her behaviour to local community and familial norms by dating only Protestants, while asserting her principles in her daughter's upbringing. The longer term effects of this choice will depend crucially on a threshold number of individuals so acting: if they do, the next generation has a good chance of living in an environment where social division does not coincide with religious and ethno-cultural boundaries become significantly more permeable.

Others, faced with social divisions which they find morally repugnant, appeal to the values of the Protestant tradition to criticise its practices. This 'assimilatory' process highlights religious values in order to transcend ethnic. The individuals in this cluster transform in their own lives the categories, values and relationships that are at the core of social division : they show new repertoires of being Protestant, in the process remaking boundaries. Many reformulated religious, national and political collective narratives for themselves ; their main impact on the public arena is, however, through the activities of small groups involved in reconciliation or ecumenical activity (for discussion of such groups, see Ganiel, 2006, 2008).

Greater communal solidarity is shown by the Protestants in the border counties of the Irish state, a small but sufficiently dense minority to sustain a range of church-centred activities which contribute to a sense of community which is comparable, perhaps even more cohesive, than that described by Butler and Ruane (this volume) in West Cork. These were also the respondents who most clearly asserted minority values as universalisable. They were aware that this could be seen as a fallback to older views of Protestant superiority and resentment of the Irish state, but their self-presentation was of a minority willing, in the context of social and political changes, to make a greater social input.

Different again, and perhaps most revealing of the mechanisms of change and reproduction of ethno-religious opposition, are the accounts of those loyalists who see their old Protestant world disappearing. Our respondents lacked any great communal solidarity : it is the Protestant world which is mourned, not the Protestant community about which considerable ambivalence is voiced. Even those women who find the process challenging have done enough (Ellie's physical move from Belfast) to

produce much greater ease in interaction (and intermarriage) in the younger generation (Leah, Anna, and Ellie's own daughter). In contrast to studies which focus on male (ex)-paramilitary activists, our interviews show considerable rethinking and renegotiating of boundaries by Protestant working class individuals. The interviews, however, also point to the limits of this process. There were many triggers – even in the interviews - that thrust Ellie and Jean back to an older ethno-religious consciousness and assertion. If ethno-religious identity is persistent, it is persistent through change, through the re-triggering of opposition in interaction. Where this is reported and overcome in the narratives, it is through stronger imperatives – Ellie's, Jean's and Leah's hopes for their own children, David's, Denise's and Jack's moral principles, Denise's, Cecil's and Wilma's religious resources.

We have described 'being Protestant' as a complex construct, not defined by any one element, belief, practice or collective narrative, but involving a putting together of these elements cognitively (the personal meaning and salience of religion), imaginatively (the nature and strength of communal bonding), and relationally (in interactions with Catholics). In this sense, ethno-religious boundaries are inherently changeable, not from above but through countless individual choices that are sustained or reversed in interactional negotiations the outcomes of which are highly dependent on the macro-political context.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors acknowledge funding from Peace II, the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation through the Higher Education Authority North-South Strand II funding programme, and from the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions, III which funded the two research projects on which this article is based. Jennifer Todd acknowledges an IRCHSS senior research fellowship which permitted her to work on this material after the projects had ended, and thanks Joe Ruane for comments.

<sup>2</sup> Intergenerational Transmission and Ethno-national Identity in the (Irish) Border Area (ITENIBA) (funded by the EU programme for Peace and Reconciliation through the Irish Higher Education Authority North-South Strand Two programme) (see [www.ucd.ie/euiteniba](http://www.ucd.ie/euiteniba) accessed November 2007) and Identity, Diversity, Citizenship, (IDC) funded by the Irish Higher Education Authority's third Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions. For this initial categorisation, we took the broadest definition of Protestant, as encompassing either religious practice in a Protestant church or familial or communal background

<sup>3</sup> There was a good gender, class and generational spread of respondents, but we do not claim that the sample is representative. In particular, there was a female/male imbalance among working class Protestant respondents in Northern Ireland. This provides a useful counter-balance to existing studies of the Protestant working class, which have predominantly focussed on men.

<sup>4</sup> A draft analysis along these lines was circulated to all authors for further input after which Todd wrote the paper.

<sup>5</sup> In what follows we give references to each interview in formulae which identify their relevant social characteristics, and in terms of which cross references between articles can be made. Joan, interviewed by Nathalie Rougier, a second generation female Protestant working class in a Northern border town, is identified as NF2NHP05. Tom, interviewed by Theresa O'Keefe, a professional in an Eastern town in the Irish state, is identified as TM2MDP55 and is referred to in the archive as (D55).

<sup>6</sup> TF2MPA01, TF2MPA6, TF2MPA7, TM2MPD14 ; JF2MPB02; NF1FWP01, LM2EPY1, JM2MPD01, LF1WPC1,

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<sup>7</sup> TF2WPA06, TF2MPA07, JF2MPB02. LM2EPY1

<sup>8</sup> LM2OPY2. LM2NPH1, LM2OPY1.

<sup>9</sup> Cap the Pope and Dolly's Brae are highly sectarian songs, the latter celebrating a 'battle' in 1849 in which only the Orange party was armed and thirty Catholics were killed.

<sup>10</sup> TF1WPA02 ; TF1WPA09.

<sup>11</sup> See Rural Community Network. 'You'd feel you'd have no say' Border Protestants and Community Development. Cookstown : 2002 ; Bruce, 1994 ; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006. .

<sup>12</sup> NM1DMP01, NF1DTP02,; NM2DMP03, LF1WPC2, LF2WPC4, LM1NPC1, LM2FPC1.

<sup>13</sup> LM2FPC1, LF2WPC3, NF3DSP04, TM1MPD51.

<sup>14</sup> NM2DMP03, LM2FPC1, LF2WPC3.

<sup>15</sup> NF2NOP02 and JF2MPB02 were both conscious of the local demographic balance in which Protestants were in a minority.

<sup>16</sup> At least five of our Protestant interviewees in Northern Ireland fall into this category (LM2FPH1, NF1FWP01, JF2MPB03, TM2TA16, JF2MPB01) with others in the Irish state (TM1MPD51, JM2MPD01, LF1WPC1). Some Catholic respondents manifested very similar processes of changing identification, as did children of mixed marriage couples.