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**Between the devil and the deep blue sea:  
Nationality, power and symbolic trade-offs among evangelical  
Protestants in contemporary Northern Ireland.**

**By**

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**Between the devil and the deep blue sea:**  
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*Abstract*

National identity is symbolically complex configuration, with shifts of emphasis and reprioritisations of content negotiated in contexts of power. This paper shows how they occur in one post conflict situation – Northern Ireland – among some of the most extreme of national actors – evangelical Protestants. In-depth interviews reveal quite radical shifts in the content of their British identity and in their understanding of and relation to the Irish state, with implications for their future politics. The implications for understanding ethno-religious nationalism, nationality shifts and the future of Northern Ireland are drawn out.

*Keywords*

National identity, power, evangelical Protestants, religion, Northern Ireland,

## **Introduction: nationality, strategy and power**

Nationality is not for selling. Yet the content of any particular nationality, the emphasis placed on one or other of its constitutive symbols and assumptions, is negotiated and developed by situated rational individuals in light of their perceptions of real opportunities and their own specific resources. Of course, as Ernest Gellner (1983: 61) noted, nationals do not make conscious calculations about material advantage or social mobility. Gellner, however, gave a classic description of the convergence of interest and identity when 'Ruritanian' actors marginalized in the face of state development with its institutionalisation of dominant cultural and linguistic norms and assumptions mobilise as a nation itself able and deserving of such institutions. The fact of ethno-cultural difference and the symbolic resources and repertoires that these actors call upon in their mobilisation are given for any generation, and they may be of extremely long provenance (Smith 1986, 1999). But there is also a process of highlighting and transforming particular distinctions, of cultural and moral 'innovation', which continues after nationalisms mobilise (Hutchinson, 2004). National movements which tailor their demands to real possibilities, accepting less than statehood in exchange for autonomy and respect, exemplify precisely this interplay of interest and identity, even if leaders or supporters subjectively see themselves as acting from new (European or global) affinities or moral principles (Castells 1997; Guibernau 1999; Keating 2001; Ruane et al 2003). Equally within any nation, shifting prioritisations – Irishness as cultural, Irish identity as economically successful, Irish as paradigmatically European – are articulated by

different sub-groups within the nation with the effect, and often also the intent, of furthering particular agendas.

That power is relevant to the construction and mobilisation of nations is hardly new. The swift break-up of the Soviet empire, however, has revived interest in the question, showing the importance of swift changes in power relations to modes of ethnic and national self-conception (Lake and Rothchild 1998; Brubaker 1996) A 'power-relations' approach to national identity has classically been argued from an instrumentalist perspective: actors are said strategically to change their national identifications with their material self interest (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 8-9; Gilley 2004). This view has rightly been criticised as failing to recognise the depth, persistence and affective character of ethno-national identification (Connor 1994). However an emphasis on the interrelation between power and identification is in principle compatible with a recognition of the embeddedness of national identity categories, their becoming infused with substantive content and personal significance, becoming a 'second nature', difficult to shift, (Jenkins 1996, 1997; Ruane and Todd 2004; Todd 2005; Wimmer, 2006). This perspective allows us to recognise the 'stickiness' or inertia of national identity while also seeing that it is open to reemphasis and reformation. It allows us to explore how everyday national actors respond to major change and to investigate the resources that lead some actors to change in one direction and others in another.

The shift of foci within national identities is of particular importance in cases where settlements of long-standing conflicts are attempted. What happens to national self-conceptions in a case like Northern Ireland, where the power relations between the

different ethno-national groups are increasingly equalised, where this is certified symbolically and institutionally by the two ‘parent’ states, and where radically new institutional opportunities for individual and group advance have been opened (Ruane and Todd, forthcoming)? Commentators disagree, some emphasising an increasing polarisation and segregation of two ethno-national communities, now represented by the most extreme nationalist parties (since the 2003 elections, the DUP and Sinn Féin have been the largest parties in their respective blocs), others pointing to the significant moderation of policy on the part of those parties (Mitchell et al 2001).

This article explores how ‘extreme’ everyday nationals in Northern Ireland – conservative evangelical Protestants – understand their nationality and respond to radical social and political change. This group has included some of the strongest and most strident of unionists (Wright 1973; Bruce 1986) and our sample is largely composed of supporters of the more extreme unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). They are far from typical of unionists in Northern Ireland, but we argue that their responses chart a path which other unionists may follow more slowly and unevenly. Moreover the strong religious element in their identity structure allows comparisons with other contemporary ethno-religious nationalisms (Cauthen, 2004; Smith, 1992). In this article we show how some of these ‘everyday nationals’ are negotiating their new environment, and in the process re-formulating what it means to be British and how they can relate to the Irish state.

### **National identity: categories, contents and symbolic trade-offs**

National identity is a complex construct (Smith 1991: 15). To investigate national identity shifts means moving from a focus on national identity categories (where

change is rare) to national identity content, and to symbolic boundaries understood as themselves content-ful (Hopkins and Reicher 1996; Todd 2005). The symbolic (cognitive and normative) richness and variety of nationalisms has been thoroughly discussed at the level of elite discourse and national narratives (Smith 1986, 1999; Greenfeld 1992). In the recent period it is also being explored at the everyday level (see recent work on 'everyday nationalism' in Scotland and England, Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Gill, 2005; Kiely et al, 2005; Reicher and Hopkins, 2001; Condor, 2000; Wright 1985). The 'content' of national identity for ordinary nationals tends to be diverse: it includes not just national narratives but also personal narratives where 'being national' becomes imbued with personal meaning and significance, values and assumptions about the world (see Ashmore et al 2004; Abdelal et al 2003). It involves an element of choice and self-positioning in a complex symbolic and social field: an individual is not just French but a particular sort of French, with a particular prioritisation of symbolism and narratives, of stance with respect to the Republic and to Europe and to the region, and the sort of French they are makes a radical difference to their actions and reactions – their perspectives on Vichy, their attitudes to the Front National, or to Muslims and 'beurs' (Grillo 1998; Bernstein 1999; Lamont et al 2002).

This perspective allows us conceptually to separate the feeling of 'group belonging' from the symbolic boundaries which define the group, and open the relationship between sense of solidarity and content of identity to empirical research (Brubaker, 2001). Once we look at the content of identification, then change in national identity can be seen at once to be frequent and to be politically significant (in the sense of changing the boundaries of the national group, and its relations with others: including some marginals, excluding others, making boundaries bright or blurred (Alba 2005)).



Our questions here are concerned with the interrelation of content and boundaries, how shifting contents of identity allow, indeed encourage, different ways of bounding from the other, and thus different political attitudes and actions (Todd 2005; Todd et al 2006; Wimmer 2006).

The literature on symbolic and social boundaries has much to offer to this study (Lamont and Molnar 2002). In particular, Lamont's studies of minority-majority relations and assimilation of immigrants suggest how symbolic and social trade-offs occur (Lamont, 2000; Lamont and Molnar 2001; Lamont and Fleming 2005; Lamont and Bail 2005). Particular sub-groups highlight one set of repertoires that at once provide value and dignity for the group in general, while redefining its contours and positioning the sub-group at its forefront. In these examples, interests are clear to the observer, but so too is the appeal to group-specific values and identities in the very process of redefining the group. This allows us to see identification as a process which is not simply interactive and behavioural but which involves embedded values and assumptions and meanings, changeable but at a cost. Identity is a boat that can be rebuilt while sailing in it, relying on resources and repertoires at hand (for attempts to theorise this see Mitchell 2003; Todd 2005). Change is not only internal, individual, phenomenological, but also carries with it implications for group belonging and group boundaries.

This is particularly important in symbolically complex conflicts such as Northern Ireland where a multiplicity of distinctions – national, ethnic, religious, colonial, moral – are interwoven into the sense of national identity (Akenson 1992; Ruane and Todd 1996; Mitchell 2005). In the formation of British identity itself, religion and

wider global perspectives played a key role (Colley 1992; Hastings 1997; Cannadine 1983; Samuel 1989). In the Irish situation, a colonial and a still sharper religious division was superimposed on this to constitute a richly textured opposition of British and Irish national identities, each incorporating a wide range of symbolic contents: the unionist arguments against Home Rule, calling on religious, ethnic, imperial and moral-progressive themes exemplify the range of contents incorporated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century mobilisation (Jackson, 1989). In such situations, trade-offs are likely to be common: dissidence or boundary-blurring on one dimension is socially tolerated to the extent that social norms are upheld on others. Changing power relations provoke more intense renegotiations of symbolic and social boundaries among wider sections of the population.

This article explores cases where there has been such renegotiation, and where respondents report national identity shift from a radically oppositional sense of British identity to a more muted sense of difference. That such change occurs at all is itself of interest. What we attempt in this article is to show how changing power relations stimulate a reshuffling of the contents of nationality, and allow trade-offs whereby some categories, contents and values are prioritised over others. We expect that strategic self-interest will be involved, intertwined with self-redefinition, where individuals reprioritise values and assumptions in light of their new situation. This framework is open to revision or indeed refutation. It is quite possible that (some or many) individuals might, against our expectations, be crudely materially self-interested, or solely concerned with national solidarity, or that their national identity might not change at all. In this article we explore the narrative accounts given in in-

depth interviews with conservative evangelical Protestants in contemporary Northern Ireland, with these issues in mind.

### **Changing power relations in Northern Ireland**

In Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement, there have been precisely the sort of changes in power relations that are likely to affect national identity (Mitchell 2003, 2005; Ruane and Todd 2003, Ruane and Todd, forthcoming). From a situation in which unionists (as the majority in Northern Ireland) held executive political power up until 1972, a predominant position in the civil service and public sector up to the late 1980s, and in the security forces up to the end of the 1990s, their residual advantage in administration and politics has now gone, and it is rapidly decreasing in the reorganised security forces (McGarry and O'Leary 2004). From a situation where Protestants held a disproportionately strong economic position in every sector of the economy and in every type of employment and where Catholics were more than twice as likely to be unemployed as Protestants we have moved to a situation where employment equality law is the most advanced in Europe, where the communal employment differential is now minimal and the residual unemployment differential is no longer politically relevant in a period of relatively full employment (Whyte 1991: 52-66; Osborne et al 2004). From a situation in which British symbolism and ritual was pervasive in the public sphere and British sovereignty at once clear and unchallengable, we have moved to a situation where 'parity of esteem' is an official norm, where Irish symbolism is increasingly evident, and where British sovereignty is increasingly emptied of symbolic (and some would say political) content (Ruane and Todd 1996, 1999)

The situation of Protestants changed radically over the past four decades. The older signs of status and power are marginalized and in some respects – for example marches – stigmatised (Shirlow et al 1999; McKay 2000; O’Neill 2000). Collective pride is at a low ebb (Mitchell 2004, 2005; McKay 2000). Their once stigmatised enemies are involved in governance on the basis of equality: nationalists since 1985 (see Ruane and Todd 1996: 113-115) and republicans since 1998. Unionists’ sense of legitimacy, of having a history worthy of respect, has repeatedly been challenged by the reform process, most recently by the renaming of the police service (Patterson 2004). The United Kingdom itself is no longer be seen as a model and upholder of the unionist position: Opportunity structure, institutional avenues of advance and official norms are increasingly premised on sharing power with and giving respect to nationalists, blurring the international border between the United Kingdom and Ireland, working in a bi-national cultural environment and accepting invitations to participate in Irish-centred rather than British-centred committees and events. The union has not been challenged formally or constitutionally; the political status of Northern Ireland has, however, changed fundamentally (see Ruane and Todd, forthcoming).

Evangelical Protestants<sup>2</sup> have found their position profoundly affected by these shifts in power relations. Comprising about a quarter of Northern Ireland Protestants, or just over 10% of the population of Northern Ireland as a whole (Mitchell and Tilley 2004; Thomson 1998; Bruce 1994), evangelicals have been a vocal and influential minority. Like other Protestants, evangelicals identify predominantly as British, and certainly as ‘not Irish’, although their form of national identification is, to say the least, complex and contested. With Rev. Ian Paisley and the DUP’s infamous and potent blend of

religiously-inspired peoplehood, opposition to a 'priest-ridden' Irish state along with hints of British Israelism, evangelicals have often been dubbed political 'ultras' and seen as 'extreme' nationalists (Rose 1971; Todd 1987; Fulton 1991; Akenson 1992; Bruce 1994). Although recent research has shown that evangelicals cannot all be characterised as political 'ultras' (Mitchell and Tilley 2004; Ganiel 2002; Jordan 2001; Brewer 1998), it is the strong unionists who are discussed in this article.

If conservative evangelicals have espoused an 'extreme' form of unionism, showing attitudes typical of unionists and Protestants in particularly stark form, they are unlike other Protestants and unionists in at least two ways. First, as the interviews here attest, they are accustomed to taking unpopular stances, they are unworried by opposition. Second, they are willing to change: conversion and change of lifestyle is an accepted repertoire of evangelicalism. They are thus likely to be more immediately responsive to political and structural change than are other unionists. They are also an influential grouping. It has often been argued that they have sway beyond their numbers, not simply due to the electoral strength of the DUP, but also because of the ideological certainty provided by religio-political narratives in times when secular national identity seems threatened and insecure (Todd 1987; Bruce 1994; Mitchell 2005). To the extent that they are showing definite changes in national identification and its relation to political loyalty, there is good reason to believe that they may well be exemplars of wider tendencies to change within Protestantism and unionism, albeit at the forefront of this trend, manifesting it in public much sooner than do other Protestants and unionists.

## **The Data**

The paper draws on 20 interviews with conservative evangelical Protestants.<sup>3</sup> 18 out of the 20 conservative evangelical participants are involved with or support the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP); one is apolitical whilst another votes for the more moderate Ulster Unionist Party but is attracted to policies of the DUP. This enables us to get a sense of where the political attitudes of the sample lie in order to evaluate how priorities may be changing. The aim is not to claim that all evangelicals prefer the DUP – only half of them do (Mitchell and Tilley 2004) – but rather to isolate a suitable group for analysis. Moreover, if we can establish that there has been significant change in the content of national identity amongst conservative evangelical DUP supporters, whom we might assume to be highly resistant to political change, then we might be more hopeful for future change amongst the wider Protestant grouping.

The interviews were semi-structured with life-history component. Participants were initially asked to describe and elaborate on their own identity categories. They were then invited to recount situations, episodes or experiences that they felt shaped who they were over the course of their lives. Analysis focused on interviewees' self-presentations, presentations of other actors, of their relationship to power, perceptions of where they are active or passive actors and explored how moments of personal change were presented. The analysis does not seek to reconstruct a factual account of change, but understands individuals' narratives as present constructions of social identification. In the context of current commitments, some events may be underplayed whilst others may be over-emphasised. Trajectories and incidents may retrospectively be given a coherence that is more imagined than real. This is the nature of narratives. However, analysis of individuals' narratives of change is able to

shed much light on how they understand themselves and how they make meaning out of change.

### **Adapting identities to changing power relations**

#### *Being on the 'losing side'*

The data give an overwhelming sense that conservative evangelicals know that their views are not popular, but take pride in standing up for what they know is right. As Smith (1998) found in the context of the United States, evangelicals in Northern Ireland thrive on opposition, whether this comes from the Catholic Church or from forces of secular modernism. June, a teacher in her 40s, points out that 'opposition is not a problem for evangelicals'. She says that despite the difficulty for Protestants in Northern Ireland currently, she does not worry at the end of the day because she is going to heaven. Alistair underlines this point and says that whilst life is difficult for Protestants in contemporary Northern Ireland, the future of evangelicalism is 'golden'. This sense of religious reassurance in the face of social opposition is important. As is argued below, when national identifications have strong religious components, these resources can be utilised in politically troubling circumstances, sometimes in rather unexpected ways.

With this existential optimism in mind, a strong awareness of shifting power relations emerges in the data. Conservative evangelicals feel that they have lost the argument with regards to the political future of Northern Ireland. There is some variety with regards to the question of whether the situation could be redeemed. A handful of interviewees felt that a united Ireland would not occur in the foreseeable future and that there was scope for a renegotiated settlement. Most wanted a reworked

settlement rather than cosmetic surgery to the existing agreement, but hopes were not high at the time of the interviews.

However this, probably rather realistic, narrative that the situation was bad for Protestants, but not all was lost, was not dominant in the data. A more common interpretation was that a united Ireland was, in the words of Helen, 'a done deal'. The majority of interviewees said that they thought that it was inevitable that the DUP would talk to Sinn Fein, so power-sharing with nationalists was inevitable at the very least. No interviewee ruled it out. Whilst at the time of writing (2006) the DUP has inched closer to dialogue with Sinn Fein, at the time of interview (2002), their resistance was extremely vocal. Therefore it is significant that the vast majority of the DUP supporting interviewees felt that the political tide had inalterably turned against them at this early stage. Their perception of changing power relations is acute.

Before proceeding to discuss the impact of political change on national identity, it is important to briefly draw attention to a number of religious responses to this perceived shift in power relations. A quarter of interviewees spontaneously produced a narrative of the Agreement as a 'sign of the times'. Billy, a council worker in his 50s, for example, says that 'providential circumstances are being created in Northern Ireland to bring about evangelical testimony'. In other words, the Agreement is a signal of the second coming of Christ, as predicted in the biblical book of Revelation. Where the 'end times' was emphasised, this seems to have provoked a reorientation to identity from primarily political to primarily spiritual. A variety of interviewees indicated that they had lost interest in politics and had begun to focus more on saving souls, evangelism and conversion. Raymond for example says that the passing of the



Agreement brought it home to him that time is now precious as we enter the end times, and now focuses on spreading the good news rather than his previous political activism. Helen is in her 40s and works in the public sector. She says,

I think we've been taking our eyes off politics, I really think that Christians, when they look at the world, see a real urgency – I think they are evangelising more now – I think a lot of us think, you know, well the Lord's laying his hand, there are signs in the world, you know the green (nationalist) victory...The revival will come before the end and it is happening in other parts of the world.

What is interesting about this response to change is the implication it has for people's actions. Helen, once active in politics, has cut back her activity. I interviewed Helen for another project three years before and at that time, incensed by the Agreement, she was considering standing as a candidate for the DUP. Now she asks 'why bother?' and describes herself as a 'reluctant' unionist and a 'reluctant' (although regular) DUP voter. Billy too describes his progressive political withdrawal and says he now 'clings to his faith' even more. Alan, once a keen Orangeman, is no longer a member of that organisation. These are complex trade-offs, indicating a recognition that politics will probably not deliver the value and dignity they desire, whilst placing many more eggs in the religious basket than before.

For these interviewees, their primary identity categories have not changed over time. They all maintain that they are evangelical, British and unionist. However, their narratives show clearly that we cannot make traditional assumptions about what these

categories mean. For up to half of those interviewed, unionism appears to be becoming subordinate to the religious category of evangelical. Individuals have started to give up hope for unionism politically, and whilst they may continue to vote for the DUP, this vote is not a vote for political resistance as it once was. This is a situation where a primarily religious understanding of identity is beginning to enable reconfiguration of the ethno-national category. This indicates that the type of resources from which ethno-national identifications are constructed may have a significant impact on the direction of change they take in response to shifts of power. It also shows how identification involves deeply embedded values, assumptions and meanings, and how some of these meanings can take on a new significance in times of stress. We proceed now to unpick the implications of this for British national identity.

#### *Changes in the substance of the British category*

The traditional imagined communities of Protestant evangelicals in Northern Ireland have been Britain, Ulster and a more abstract idea of the ‘Protestant people’, sometimes rooted more in shared religion than nationality. These have been accorded different weights at different times for different groups, each coming into play when the other platforms of identity seem insecure. Drawing on traditional religious certainties has been useful when Britain seems to be ‘selling out’ unionists, such as after the Anglo-Irish Agreement, whilst a secular (if somewhat out-dated) mode of British identity is a more attractive resource for many unionists to call upon when appealing to ‘Gold Coast’ business class voters.

Currently 66% of Protestants select a primary national identity of British<sup>4</sup>, yet qualitative evidence continually points to the thinness of the category, and to feelings

of estrangement from British society (Todd et al 2006; McKay 2000). Participants in this research confirmed this estrangement, and analysis of their narratives adds to our understanding of the meaning of the British category, especially with regards to the tensions between religious and national identities.

Britain was routinely identified by participants as a corrupt society that had lost track of its integrity and principles. One in three interviewees said that continued unity with Britain was just as bad an option as a united Ireland, on account of their bad laws.

Arthur is an evangelist from a rural town. He preaches at local events and says he and his family 'live by faith'. Arthur speculates that a united Ireland might not be such a bad option, especially in the light of the degree of secularism in other parts of the UK. He is a DUP voter, although he describes his political views as having moderated over recent years.

Staying under British rule I can foresee a problem for those who are evangelical. While I dislike Catholicism in the south, the problem is that we are talking about the devil and the deep blue sea, and the mainland is hedonism and paganism, which, it's really hard to know which is going to be the worst.

Arthur's narrative helps illuminate how the on the surface, identity categories can be maintained, whilst the substance of those categories may increasingly be altered. He describes the public face of unionism as 'drum banging' whilst inwardly people realise, and privately discuss, their growing readjustment to political change.

I think people generally from, what could be termed a unionist persuasion, would be thinking that whilst they might bang their drum and say what they believe into the radio and so on, inwardly many of them are thinking from an evangelical point of view, the status quo is okay because at least as Rome is at bay, Rome is curtailed. But I think inwardly, there is an inward realisation that things are changing, and that being under the mainland, the mainland is absolutely pagan and that's a concern.

This depiction of the tension between inward and outward orientations to Britain provides an important insight into how identifications may be reconstructed at the same time as being strongly espoused. In this case, the public performance of identity continues unabated, whilst internal readjustment takes place.

Colin's narrative tells us more about the rationale for this change in substance. Colin is in his twenties and has spent time studying for a university degree in England. He says he has a strong British identity and votes for the DUP because he believes they provide the strongest voice for unionism. Colin is one of the more optimistic interviewees in that he does not think that a united Ireland is inevitable. He expresses ambiguity about what a united Ireland would be like, in some sense speculating that life might be harder for evangelicals, whilst on the other hand postulating that evangelicals may in fact have more rights. Overall, it seems he would not like a united Ireland, but could live with it.

Colin's attitudes to Ireland are shaped through the lens of what he perceives to be Britain's attitudes to unionism. He taps into the popular narrative of abandonment,

pointing out, 'it's hard to say you're a unionist when you know the British Government doesn't even want you'. Closer reading of his narrative suggests that the reason he maintains his unionist identity lies in its opposition to republicanism. He says, 'I would probably be better off living down south, so why am I a unionist?' The answer may lie in his next statement: 'if we turn round and say yes we want a united Ireland, we would just be giving into them'. So whilst Colin's attachment to the unionist and British identity categories is strong, the substance of these categories appears to be rather thin. It seems to primarily entail not giving in to, or being like, the other. It involves simultaneously espousing Britishness whilst feeling abandoned by Britain. It is perhaps because of the thinness of national or ethnic content of identity that Colin is able to speculate that in fact there may be advantages to 'living down south'.

These ambiguous attitudes about the constitutional future of Northern Ireland are at least partially shaped by Colin's growing disillusionment with the nature of British society. Whatever obstacles he imagines may lie in wait for evangelicals in a united Ireland, information about the lack of respect for the evangelical viewpoint in Britain is readily at hand. Colin says he found it difficult to express his faith when he lived in England – he reports feeling isolated in a setting where none of his peers shared his views. He says,

There is still a respect for [religion in Northern Ireland] whereas in England [...] especially down south, the place is dead nobody cares about [religion]. Don't have any time for it, you can't preach. I heard one American fella who stood in Cardiff preaching just in the open air and saying there is only one

God and you have to be saved and there is no Islam, and some Muslims came up and threatened him, and says do you want to come around the back and I'll give you a hiding and all this here and you know he says no. You can do it here if you want. I'm not afraid.

Colin's narrative demonstrates a highly rational adaptation to change. Given the global reorientation of evangelicalism from the Catholic other to the Islamic other, Colin has identified that the religious terrain in the UK is now difficult for evangelicals to negotiate. It seems that the traditional nemesis of a 'priest-ridden Ireland' is gradually being replaced for some by a 'mullah-ridden Britain'. This is posing important reconfigurations in the substance of Britishness for many evangelicals who continue to emphasise the importance of the category.

#### *Changes in the substance of the Irish category*

How far have attitudes to Irishness changed however? None of the conservative Protestant evangelicals interviewed said they had an Irish identification. This is unsurprising. However, they expressed a great deal of ambiguity about the Republic of Ireland, Irish people and Irishness. The traditional narrative of a priest-ridden enemy state was striking by its absence. Only one older interviewee talked of Ireland in these highly oppositional terms. Another said that Ireland would still be a 'cold house' for Protestants. However, a significant number talked about Ireland not as threatening, but simply as unfamiliar. Although originating from Northern Ireland, the interviewer lived in Dublin and attended what was perceived as a Catholic university. Rather than being a source of conflict, she found that most respondents were intensely

curious, pressing her for information and seeking confirmation of hunches they had formed about social change south of the border.

Firstly, there was a widespread (and accurate) feeling that Catholicism had declined in strength in the Republic of Ireland. There was an awareness of the difficulties of the Catholic Church surrounding recent scandals. Whilst most remained somewhat suspicious of the repressive nature of Catholicism, nearly all mentioned that the south had changed in this regard. For example, Paul says that it is right for Northern Ireland to be part of the UK and he does not want a united Ireland. His experience of the south is largely concentrated on religious evangelism. He says in the past whilst evangelising he was chased by a Catholic with a sickle around the border. Now he says that in the Republic of Ireland, the 'persecution has gone'; he would no longer take up arms nor fight for the union – 'those days are long gone'.

John is a DUP activist as well as helping run a number of conservative evangelical organisations. He expresses a similar relaxation of his fear of Ireland.

No I wouldn't have the same fear of the whole home-rule, Rome rule scenario I don't think. Sometimes I think that my pendulum is swinging too much the other way, and when I go over the border and see the shrines by the roadside, and you think, oh this is a Catholic country compared with the north, and that there is quite a big gap between it, and the gap is still there, but I think it has narrowed. And I think it's because people have become more sophisticated and the world is a smaller place [...] no I wouldn't have the same fear. But I

wouldn't want it, I wouldn't want it, I don't think it would be good for us. But if it happened, it happened.

It is interesting that he says he sometimes thinks his pendulum has swung 'too much the other way'. If he travels to the Republic of Ireland he is surprised by the signs of Catholic material culture, but it is almost as if, in the safety of the north, he simply assumes modern societies are 'sophisticated' (i.e. not Catholic) and has to work to remind himself that Ireland is the other. This is perhaps an example of the work individuals need to undertake to retain the traditional content of identity in a rapidly changing social context. The uncertainty expressed in John's narrative suggests that the traditional content of Protestant identity as a negation of Catholic Ireland is for him unstable. It is significant also to note that John is an activist in the religious wing of the DUP, a group often thought to be more reactionary than most.

A variety of interviewees mentioned that the decline of Catholicism in the south was an excellent opportunity for evangelical Christians from the north to evangelise. A construction of Ireland as godless and consumerist, expressed by a significant minority of interviewees, was an interesting replacement for 'priest-ridden'. Ireland, in Paul's view, is more consumerist as well as less Catholic. Now he feels that Catholics can be won for Christ in the south because they have 'an inner emptiness'. Henry says that there are encouraging signs that Catholics are getting converted. He says the south needs a revival because it is never had one, and now might be the right time.



In fact, 8 out of 20 interviewees independently brought up the idea that evangelicalism is doing very well in the Republic of Ireland, they had heard of many more Catholics being converted and that there were now new opportunities for missions and evangelism. Other interviewees concurred with this assessment when probed. This is very significant in that it extends an invitation to *Irish* Catholics to become part of the evangelical group, thus subverting the original British/Ulster ethnic foundation. It is unclear, however, as to how far Irish Catholics can really be accepted into the evangelical group. One newly converted interviewee, Jackie, tries to fuse the categories, saying, 'they still think of themselves as Catholic. But they are born-again Christian Catholics'. Other interviewees are firm that to be born-again entails turning one's back on Catholicism. Whilst the Catholic dimension of identity remains problematic then, the Irish aspect is much more straightforward. Irish people can and should be born-again whilst retaining their Irishness. This is a complex redrawing of group boundaries that represents a significant shift in the substance of the Irish category for Protestant evangelicals. It is now not automatically 'other'. Moreover, this demonstrates the importance of the religious content of identities, in particular their ability to reconstruct in response to changing power relations, and to cross previously rather fixed national boundaries.

Again, it is neither surprising nor particularly interesting that evangelical Protestants would highlight evangelism and conversion as key priorities. But what is surprising is that this was often accompanied by statements about likely actions, for example claims that they would be quite happy to move to the Republic of Ireland for work or other reasons. DUP-voting Jackie says 'I could probably be shot for saying this... but if I had a choice, and I could get up and move in the morning, I would go right away

down South'. Other interviewees gave other reasons for their willingness to move to the Republic of Ireland, from better wages to more protection for Protestant rights. Of course, most of the interviews are still interspersed with feelings of estrangement from the south, however the emphasis was on benign acceptance of its normality and/or a focus on religious opportunity, rather than political fear. The fact that Jackie remarks she could be 'shot for saying this' indicates that private reassessments of Irishness are still tempered by public Protestant discourse, which is still, in Alan's words, 'drum-banging'.

Overall, this data indicates that the substance of the Irish category has changed for many conservative evangelical Protestants. It is seen as a less homogenously Catholic, more cosmopolitan identity. It is now seen as compatible with evangelical religion, and optimistically targeted as a category ripe for conversion. Indeed, privately these DUP interviewees seemed unexpectedly happy to express a degree of comfort with the concept of 'Ireland'. This must be seen in the light of changing power relations in Northern Ireland, and in view of the fact that nearly all interviewees believed a closer relationship with Ireland was inevitable. It is also a response to changes in religious power in the Republic of Ireland, as well as a secularisation of British society. Moving towards acceptance of Ireland as a neighbour, employer and potential convert is a highly rational adaptation to change. It is significant though that no interviewee in this sample was willing to accompany this softening with identification of an Irish component of their self-concept. Irishness is still the other even if Ireland is seen as more benign. In this way it is possible to understand both the embeddedness and the adaptability of national identity categories.

## **Conclusions**

The evangelical Protestants whose stories are discussed above are not typical of unionists in Northern Ireland, or of 'everyday nationals' in general. Nonetheless three general conclusions follow from the discussion, one about the role of religion as a resource in processes of change, one about the present politics of Northern Ireland, and one about national identity change.

These respondents are deeply religious, and the religious content of their identity has affected the changes reported here. Where there are significant religious components of ethno-national identity, this may have a particular impact on possible identity shifts. Religious values may legitimate and ease changes in the content of national identity, while religious priorities may soften the pain of change. Religion is a resource that can make universal claims and that can in some situations be more nationally malleable than one might expect (Mitchell 2006). The most strident religious 'fundamentalists' whose lives are ones of opposition and conversion may, as in this study, adapt to new circumstances more quickly than their liberal and secular compatriots. This is an important counter-intuitive to studies of fundamental religion that stress unbending adherence to traditional religious and national positions.

If the narratives show the way religion and nationality may be interrelated and their values 'traded off' against each other, they also show an internal reassessment of the national category. These individuals could have resisted all change, and indeed this may have been their initial reaction: it was the initial reaction of their preferred political party, the DUP. Instead they are looking realistically and rationally at their options and charting a narrow path between the devil (an increasingly inhospitable

Britain) and the deep blue sea (the Irish unknown), retaining a British identity while moderating the sense of opposition to the Irish state and imaginatively loosening the connection to the British one. The cost is a certain loss of substance to national identity (they now emphasise the religious aspects and values) but the benefit is that they are better able to deal with a political and social situation which they did not choose and whose opportunities they would previously have been unable to grasp. The political party that they support, the DUP, has moved towards an uneven acceptance of aspects of the new political configuration, while negotiating for advantage within it. Other work has shown that its activists have altered their politics to allow this (Ganiel, 2006). The findings reported here suggest that the changes at (parts of) the grass roots may be greater than those at the political party level. It suggests that there is more movement than appears in the presently stalled political negotiations. These respondents are ready and willing to grasp the new opportunities on offer, albeit in quite different ways than the two governments which drafted the Agreement might have expected. They have not stopped being British, but their ways of being British, and the politics that follow from it, are changing.

More generally, the case study has relevance to our understanding of national identity and contemporary nationalisms. Given decisively changed power relations and appropriate opportunity structures, nationalisms and nationalists adapt, change, negotiate, mutate into more liberal or post-sovereigntist forms (Keating 2001). This study shows that it can happen even in post-conflict situations, among the most strident of nationalists. What is much less clear, and we do not attempt to address it in this article, is what opportunity structures and circumstances facilitate such shifts.

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<sup>2</sup> Evangelicalism comprises several core tenets: a belief in authority of Scripture, the need for personal conversion and the necessity of evangelism (Johnson 2000; Jordan 2001). There has been much debate about how far evangelicalism can be distinguished from fundamentalism. In fact, fundamentalists might be best seen as a sub-group of evangelicals, characterized by an opposition to liberal theology which not all evangelicals share (Marsden 1991).

<sup>3</sup> This is a subset of data from a wider research project exploring religious identifications over time that includes liberal evangelicals as well as those who have left their faith. Sampling for the project was not random, but aimed to select participants from a range of conservative to liberal evangelical traditions. Initial field contacts, based on a variety of personal recommendations and introductions, were made with a variety of individuals and organisations across Northern Ireland and using these leads, a snowballing technique was used to elicit further participants. In total, 10 of the 20 interviewees in this sub-sample are under 40 and 10 are over 40. 6 are educated to university level. The sample is evenly divided between middle and working class participants. 15 participants are male and only 5 are female. Three participants are religious ministers. The interviews were conducted by a female interviewer with a Protestant background, and the shared communal background was probably advantageous in terms of establishing trust. They were conducted in 2002, each lasting between one and three hours. Each was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

<sup>4</sup> Of the remainder, 22% identified as 'Northern Irish', 2% as Irish, 8% as 'Ulster', 1% as 'Scottish' and 1% as 'other'. None identified as 'English'. When asked a question allowing respondents to identify with multiple, rather than primary, national identity categories, 78% of Protestants selected a 'British' identification (NILTS 2003).