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*Symbolic complexity and political division: the changing role of religion in
Northern Ireland*

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Symbolic complexity and political division: the changing role of religion in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Religious distinctions, ethnic oppositions and national differences intersect in Northern Ireland. In this article I explore how this symbolic complexity has fed political conflict. I argue the institutional structure of Northern Ireland encouraged the generalisation of religiously-informed values across the fields of ethnicity and politics which in turn feed back to tighten and constrain available religious repertoires. The recent process of institutional reform has interrupted this process. While this is only one factor which contributes to the reproduction of conflict, it allows us to make sense of otherwise paradoxical features of everyday division in Northern Ireland, and to explain the seemingly inchoate processes of change in the post-1998 period.

Keywords: conflict, settlement, ethnicity, religion, politics, symbolic boundaries, Northern Ireland.

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Symbolic complexity and political division: the changing role of religion in

Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Religious distinctions, ethnic oppositions and national differences intersect in Northern Ireland, creating considerable symbolic complexity that coexists with clear communal division, power inequality and national-political conflict. This article explores how and when such symbolic complexity serves as a resource for conflict and for change.

I begin from the premise that conflict in Northern Ireland is multiply-constituted and multi-levelled (Ruane and Todd, 1996, 1-48; Jenkins, 2008, pp. 94-110, 112-127). Religion is one of the several factors that contributes to community formation, identity and solidarity, communal opposition and political perspectives (Brewer, 1998; Mitchell, 2006; Ganiel, 2008). In this article I explore how religiously-informed values contribute to political and ethnic self-understandings and help frame conflict. I argue that the normal processes of inductive generalisation function in an institutionally divided society to reproduce singular opposition out of culturally plural elements. The recent reform process has challenged these oppositional understandings and religious values and resources have come to play a newly transformative role in the process of change. While religion is only one factor that contributes to conflict (and later settlement), including it in analysis allows us to make sense of otherwise paradoxical features of everyday division in Northern Ireland, and to explain the seemingly inchoate processes of change in the post-1998 period.

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To disentangle the relative roles of ethnicity and religion in conflict and settlement requires initial conceptual clarification. Some scholars work with a narrow concept of ethnicity which focuses on perceived common descent, centred in a common homeland, which tends to produce a strong (quasi-kin) sense of solidarity (Smith, 1986, pp. 21-31 ; Connor, 1994, pp 73-76, 93,197ff). Others work with a broad concept of ethnicity – which takes ethnicity as any ascribed category which is descent-related and difficult to change (Chandra, 2006). I use the narrow concept in this article, because it has the virtue of clarity and allows the identification of specifically ethnic motivations based on notions of common historic provenance and a related quasi-kin solidarity. Ethnic consciousness and organisation, in this narrow sense, can be more or less important in daily life, thicker or thinner in terms of meanings and values, more or less widely institutionalized, more or less clearly territorially demarcated and historically deep, for more or less people (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998, pp. 73-77; Jenkins 2008, p. 44).

For the purposes of this article, I work with a substantive concept of religion as a set of institutionalized beliefs and practices oriented to the sacred, and most particularly associated with the churches in Northern Ireland. It is this whole set of beliefs and practices that has sacred reference and that – for believers and practicants – confers it on each of its parts. Whether or not a particular proposition, belief, social practice, value-system or organisation is ‘religious’ therefore depends on what part it plays in the system as a whole. Religion too can be thicker or thinner in terms of its spread in everyday life and socio-political institutions, sometimes informing the values embedded in political organisations, constituting the ‘civil religion’ or ‘religious ideology’ of political movements and even of the state (Demerath, 2001, pp. 205-210, 234-240).

Nationality is generally conceived as encompassing an active (often politicized) and territorial sense of historic community, associated with a distinct public culture and common rights and duties (Miller, 1995, 27; Smith, 2001, 12-13). Popular usages of the term, however, are extremely diverse, ranging from ethnically-centred usages to a focus solely on citizenship.¹

Religion, ethnicity and nationality – separately or together – can be the basis for imagined communities, shared identities and communal solidarities. That the Northern Ireland conflict has a communal form does not make it an ethnic conflict (at least not in the narrow sense of term).² Nor should the evident fact that people in Northern Ireland are deeply divided in their national loyalties, in their constitutional desires (for a united Kingdom or a united Ireland) and in their party-political blocs, close off further exploration of the meanings of this division. The question of how religious and ethnic distinctions feed national-political conflict is not answered simply by pointing to the fact of such conflict.

To assess the relative importance of ethnicity or religion in constituting conflict is an interpretative task which involves showing how a given institution, practice or identity is understood by the actors themselves. To this end, I use the extensive survey data on Northern Ireland in conjunction with qualitative research findings. My argument is divided in three sections: first I show *that* religion is important to the political perspectives of many people in Northern Ireland; secondly I show *how* it is important; third I use this analysis to explain the highly uneven processes of change in contemporary post-settlement Northern Ireland.

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Plurality, division and patterning.

The vast majority (96%) of people in Northern Ireland were raised as Protestant or Catholic, and most so identify: only 10% report 'no religion' (Mitchell, 2006, pp 22-3). On all objective indicators, political divisions between Protestant and Catholic were deep and long-lasting even before the recent phase of violence, and they have intensified since (Barritt and Carter, 1962; Whyte, 1991, pp. 65-6, 67-71, 80-83). Protestants and Catholics have long been sharply polarized in constitutional preferences, party voting, and on a range of particular policies concerning security, equality and institutions of governance (Whyte, 1991, pp. 65-6, 67-93) Whyte (1991, p. 72-3) notes that the index of religious voting is both stable and extremely high in comparative terms, although not total: from the 1990s only about 10% of the population have voted for middle ground cross-community parties. Protestants and Catholics have also been divided in national identity, although to a lesser extent: since 1968, approximately two thirds of the population report a British(or Ulster) Protestant or Irish Catholic identity combination, with a third of the population cross-cutting or blurring these conventional choices in ways that themselves shift sharply over time (Coakley, 2007, 587-8; Trew, 1998).

Religion, however, also constitutes major divisions within each bloc. Within each bloc, and within each religious denomination, there are religious conservatives, liberals and secularists, those who go to church frequently, occasionally or not at all, those for whom religion is highly salient, and those for whom it has no salience, those for whom their religious identification centres on church, on local community, on personal belief, or on political alliances.³ Ethnicity also creates internal divisions within each bloc. Individuals differ very markedly in the salience they assign to ethnicity, in the strength of their communal solidarity, in the extent of inter-communal

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mixing in daily life, and in their construction of ethnic belonging – whether in
concentrated form (Irish-Catholic-Gaelic, Ulster-Protestant-British) or with a varied and
overlapping set of identifications (Protestant, Northern Irish, British, Irish, the wider
British world) (Ruane and Todd, 1996, pp. 57-60, 71). The reasons for political-
constitutional preferences also differ quite radically even among those whose
preferences converge (see Ruane and Todd, 1996, pp.55-6, 70). Surveys from 1968 to
the present show no direct mapping of religious divergence (conservative – liberal)
onto political preferences, although qualitative evidence suggests a definite religio-
political clustering of views.⁴ We can schematize the possible variations in religion,
ethnicity and national-politics along three continua:

- i. *Content*: conservative-liberal (religion), singular-plural (ethnicity), pro-
state – anti-state (national-politics), with more subtle distinctions in terms
of the reasons for holding the position and the sorts of narratives and
principles appealed to in its articulation.
- ii. *Depth*: The extent and spread of religious, ethnic and/or national-political
identification in an individual's social practice across any or all of the
following: self-reported identification, theorized ideology, collective and
personal narratives, values, everyday practices, institutional involvement.
A shallow identification would, at the limit, involve only an empty
identification with a label.
- iii. *Strength*: the salience of the identification, the strength and prioritisation
of associated values and preferences.

Taking into account the variation on each continuum for each category, and the
possibility of rejecting the salience of any category (as secularists do for religion),

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there are enormous numbers of possible combinations, and Nic Craith (2002) provides examples of many of them. Yet in the aggregate, variation stays broadly within Catholic/Protestant boundaries. The paradox, given the plurality of options, is why there is not more blurring of boundaries, why variation remains largely within blocs, and why, even symbolically, divisions rather than overlaps between blocs are highlighted by ordinary people.

There are two possible responses. The first argues that there is no paradox, that cultural identity (oppositional or plural, religious or ethnic) is irrelevant to actual conflict and the associated solidarities, oppositions and grievances (Laitin, 2007, 13-22). Religion, it is said, is simply irrelevant to politics for most people (for example Rose, 1971, p. 265). The second response, and the one that I take in this article, is that cultural plurality is patterned, with religious views affecting the meaning and significance of political views in ways that tend towards cultural polarisation. The challenge for those who take the latter tack is to show *how* religion affects the meaning of politics and *when* this makes a difference to behaviour.

I model these alternative claims on Table One. Columns A, B and E involve a cultural patterning of religion, politics and ethnicity, while column C involves an ethnic determination of political positions, and column D a differentiation of politics from both ethnicity and religion. If religion is irrelevant to politics, then most people in Northern Ireland belong to groups C and D. If there is a religiously-informed logic to political positions, then most people belong to groups A, B and E.

Table One about here

TABLE ONE : PATTERNS OF RELIGION, ETHNICITY AND POLITICS

	A : Totalizers	B Religio-politics	C Ethno-politics	D Differentiated spheres : autonomous politics	E : Change moderate and radical
Religion conservative to liberal Deep - shallow Strong-weak	deep, strong, conservative or liberal	strong and deep conservative or liberal	Void or minimal. Religion is <i>'simply a label'</i>	Differentiated, multiple	Liberal ecumenist or no religion
Ethnicity singular-plural, deep-shallow Strong-weak	deep, strong identification <i>'Irish born and bred'</i> , <i>'Deep down I'm a Protestant'</i>	Minimal, weak, plural, shallow, <i>'It doesn't mean anything ... I just say British because it's something to tick on a box'</i>	Strong identification, emotive and solidaristic <i>'Don't question my identity'</i>	Differentiated, multiple	Plural, open, with ethnicity subordinated to gender, class, etc.
National politics pro/anti state, depth-shalowness, strong-weak	deep, and strong commitment Strategies and tactics vary	Strong but not always deep commitment. Willingness to breach group boundaries and orthodoxies	Deep and strong political commitment, highly solidaristic,	Purely political commitment of varying depth and strength <i>'unionism .. not an entire philosophy of life .. but a theory of the state'</i> (Aughey, 1989, 28).	No strong constitutional views, openness to radical restructuring.

The totalizing position (column A) integrates religious, ethnic and political views. It is exemplified by traditional evangelicals whose religious faith justified their pursuit of a Protestant state, their loyalty to the British monarchy (being Protestant), and their sense that ecumenism led to a challenge to unionist power (Brewer, 1998, pp. 135-146). It is also exemplified in the moderate unionists who move from a modernizing liberal form of Protestantism through to a sense of the progressive character of the Ulster people, to a modernizing unionism (Todd, 1987; examples include O'Neill, 1972). Traditional Catholic nationalists equally integrate Catholic beliefs, communal solidarity, a sense of ethno-territorial provenance, and nationalist politics (for

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examples, see Campbell, 1941; McCluskey, 1989). The religio-political perspective of column B allows a more individualised combination of political positions and religious commitment. It is exemplified in the religiously conservative Orangemen who interpret Orange ritual in liberal fashion, open to inter-communal relations (Kaufmann, 2007 p. 45 ; Kennaway, 2009). Column C involves a classic ethno-politics, seen in the secular working class loyalist assertion of Ulster and/or British identity (Patterson, 1980) and among the more secular of the Orange ‘rebels’ described by Kaufmann (2007, pp. 168-171). It is equally seen amongst those nationalists and republicans whose primary motivation lies in a sense of solidarity with their immediate communal and wider national group. In Column D, individuals differentiate religion, ethnicity and politics, without any attempt to reach coherence between the spheres. Their politics is determined by purely political values, irrespective of ethnic origin or religious belief . Both ‘structural unionists’ and classic republicans fall into this category (Walker, 2004,pp. 252-3 ; Porter, 1998). Column E encompasses those who blur or breach conventional boundaries on all dimensions. So for example, New Ulster Movement pamphlets in 1969-70 interrelated a call to general Christian principles with a Northern Ireland identity and advocacy of a reformed union (New Ulster Movement, 1973). Others reconceptualize religion, collective belonging and politics in line with radical feminist or socialist or ecologist perspectives. Political parties, appealing to a range of positions, span several columns : republican and unionist supporters can be found in each column.

The survey material gives an indication of the percentage of the population in each column. Despite a decline in religious practice and a liberalisation of religious belief since 1968, three quarters of the population remain religious believers (Mitchell, 2006, pp. 26-7, 24-5). In the 2007 Life and Times identity module

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(www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) between two thirds and three quarters of respondents (slightly more among Catholics than Protestants) said that 'religion is important to who I am', even more believed that nationality was important, and a full 60% of respondents believed that the two were 'strongly intertwined'.⁵ Among the smaller sample of Belfast church-goers, more Protestants said they did not want a united Ireland because they feared 'the power of the Roman Catholic church' than said they did not want it because they were 'afraid of losing British identity' (Boal et al, pp. 88-89).⁶ At a minimum, then, 60% of the population can be assigned to columns A, B and E. Since column E encompasses only a small minority of the population,⁷ this leaves over half of the population divided between groups A and B.

If we assign persons to column D whose religious/ethnic and political views are unconventionally combined, numbers are small. A section of 'Catholic unionists' who retain traditional Catholic religious views might be assigned here (Breen, 1996), as might those structural unionists who differentiate religion and ethnicity from politics (on any plausible measure, only a small fraction of UUP supporters, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s). A section of Alliance party voters also fall into category D. It seems unlikely that this goes much over 15% of the population, particularly in the earlier decades.

All of this suggests that the great bulk of the population – at least three quarters – fall into columns A, B, C, but it does not yet measure the relative importance of ethnicity, or the proportion of the population in column C. There is no direct over-time measure of the strength or depth of ethnic identity but there are some indirect measures. Rose's 1968 survey asked respondents why they thought of themselves as they did : over 70% of respondents gave the 'ethnic' answer 'born and bred' (the vast majority of

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Irish identifiers, only slightly less Ulster identifiers and less than half of British

identifiers) (Rose, 1971, p. 209). In the 2007 Life and Times identity module

(www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) two thirds of respondents said that Protestants and Catholics in

the past were 'separate peoples', and half agreed that this would continue to be the

case in the future. Overall, this puts ethnicity as important to well over half the

population over the period since 1968.⁸

In sum, the survey data tell us that most people in Northern Ireland fall into categories

A-C, with a preponderance in A. Well over half of the Northern Ireland population

themselves believe that religion and national identity are intertwined, for around the

same percentage, ethnicity is also intertwined in their world view, and while there is

substantial overlap between these groups, there is no coincidence. In the past, when

religious practice was more widespread and religious belief more conservative, there

is good reason to assume that the percentage in column A was still higher.

While 60% of the population believe that religion and nationality are entwined, they

may be mistaken. It is conceivable if implausible that large sections of the religiously-

believing and ethnically-conscious population keep their religious beliefs and ethnic

identity much more strictly separate from their political choices than they themselves

believe. While there is strong quantitative evidence (presented above) *that* religion is

important to politics, to make it fully compelling it is necessary to show *how* religion

is important to politics.

Religion, ethnicity and politics : mechanisms of connection

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How does religion contribute to political views and to conflict in Northern Ireland ?

The main mechanisms are outlined in the scholarly literature : theological belief, for a few, directly affects political views (Bruce, 1986; Brewer, 1998; see Ganiel, 2008, pp. 109-120 for variation over time) ; religious organisation of communities is relevant for much larger numbers (Whyte, 1991, 26-51; see Mitchell, 2006, pp. 69-89 for variation over time) ; religion, for some, provides a marker for ethnic identity (McGarry and O’Leary, 1995, p. 212) ; religion generates distinctive values and ‘religious ideologies’ which inform political perceptions, preference and aims (Mitchell, 2006, pp. 91-116; Brewer, 1998; Leichty and Clegg, 2001). In this section, I explore the latter process, with a particular emphasis on the role of religion (both theology and everyday religious practice) as a source of moral values. I use this to make sense of some otherwise puzzling findings in qualitative research.

One of the paradoxes of contemporary qualitative research on Northern Ireland is that most people make clear distinctions between religion and politics even while they recurrently slide between the fields. Most individuals do not develop their politics directly in line with their theology : even religious conservatives make clear and precise distinctions between religion, ethnicity, nationality, and politics, as the following response in open-ended interview illustrates:

Well I suppose nationality wise I’m Northern Irish, but British, you know I belong to the United Kingdom, Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so, some would see themselves as being English but British, I see myself as being Irish but British, Northern Irish but British ... as a people I’m Protestant, I used to consider myself Protestant Irish of the Unionist tradition and our people use to be known as Scots Irish or lately as Ulster Scots, so I consider myself to be in that bracket.

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Religious wise I'm a Born Again Christian, my denomination is

Presbyterian and I suppose that's how I define myself. (Todd et al,

2006, p. 329)

Paradoxically, this precision is compatible with intermittent slides between these carefully distinguished fields : the same individual joined the Orange Order because

'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.' (Todd et al, 2009, p. 92).

Such slides were reported by McLaughlin et al (2006, p. 612) who note that in a school essay study 'young people spontaneously referred to ethno-national issues and inter-group relations when they were questioned about religion'. The related interview study shows that adults equally spontaneously referred to religion when questioned about nationality (Todd et al, 2006, p. 332). Moreover the slides continued even when individuals were in the process of radical revision of their views, with individuals moving smoothly from political to national to ethnic to moral questioning and back again (see Todd, 2006).

How are these slides possible ? Most people in Northern Ireland are careful not to confuse beliefs about God and beliefs about politics, or religious faith and political preference. They do, however, believe that their moral principles are relevant across many spheres of life. In Northern Ireland, these principles are rooted in particular religious and theological understandings. Not infrequently, individuals note that they can't vote for a particular person or policy '*for moral reasons*', and their moral opposition to adultery, violence or corruption is closely linked to their understanding

Todd, Symbolic Complexity of religion.⁹ One often finds political arguments phrased in concepts that have clear resonance with religiously-informed values. Writing of the violent 1970s and 1980s, Rev Prof James McEvoy (1986, p.24) articulates a much more wide-spread sentiment with a depth of resonance in Thomistic moral philosophy when he defines the choice faced by ordinary Catholics as *'to accept a measure of injustice and live with that, or to revolt'*. Reverend Brian Kennaway (2009) defines the real tradition of Orangeism as one which emphasizes moral virtues and Christianity not anti-Catholicism : he quotes one early Orange document that describes the Orangeman : *'He should have a sincere love and veneration for his Almighty Maker,productive of those happy fruits, righteousness and obedience to his commands... an utter enemy to savage brutality and unchristian cruelty... Wisdom and prudence should guide his actions ; honesty and integrity direct his conduct ; and honour and glory be the motives of his endeavours. Lastly he should pay the strictest attention to the religious observance of the Sabbath, and also of temperance and sobriety.'* Both the moral emphasis and the Protestant understanding within which it is situated are clear.

These are not isolated examples. In Northern Ireland there have been many episodes of contention - actions by the security forces, republican atrocities, Orange marches, civil rights marches, fair employment legislation, the hunger strikes of 1981, the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 – where Protestant and Catholic perspectives are utterly opposed. Detailed analyses have shown how such events express and condense a whole host of moral, political, religious and communal assumptions and values, on each of which Protestants and Catholics are opposed.¹⁰ To give just one example, in the H-Block protests and hunger-strikes of the early 1980s, the opposing Protestant and Catholic views were moral as much as they were ethnic or political. The most sustained arguments that the British government should give some concessions to the

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republican prisoners and later hunger strikers rested on concepts of justice explicitly informed by Catholic moral theology, published in religiously-controlled journals, and popularly repeated (Faul and Murray, 1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1981 ; see also O'Malley, 137-208). Those who argued that the British government should stand its ground against the hunger strikers' demands equally did so in terms of values of conscience, choice and loyalty which had clear resonances with Protestant moral theology (Eames, 1992, pp. 40-49; O'Malley, 1990, pp. 137-208).

This is the familiar phenomenon where general concepts, values and binary oppositions of one symbolic system (in this case religion) come to inform another (in this case politics).¹¹ To say this, however, simply displaces the paradox of plurality and opposition, since the religions in Northern Ireland are rich reservoirs of moral distinctions, within which one can find almost any conceivable way of relating or differentiating religion, ethnicity and politics. To explain the generalised oppositional perspectives of most Protestants and Catholics – the fact that they invest a political difference with strong normative and religious resonances so that it becomes totalising and all-important - requires something more, and that something is the historical congruence of institutional practices between fields. The activists who built the institutions of state and civil society spanned religious and political fields (or brokered alliances with those who did) and typically took conservative positions in each.¹² There is internal contest over meanings, values and traditions (Kaufmann, 2007 ; Patterson and Kaufmann, 2007; English, 2003) but it exists within clear social limits, with periodic expulsions of those who stray too far. In the early 1960s, for example, the dominance of traditionalists in the unionist organisational structure made it difficult for liberals to make much impact within organized unionism, despite support from the top (Mulholland, 2000, p. 143).

For the many people in Northern Ireland whose social practices span ‘congruent’ religious and political institutions and communal organisations, it is not only easy to slide between concepts applicable in each sphere, but daily experience confirms the validity of that slide. People who give no normative priority to religion find seemingly ‘universal’ norms of liberty, rationality, justice informing the everyday practices of both religion and politics. Institutional congruencies thus generate communally weighted concepts: ‘rationality’ comes to be understood in terms of Protestant and British referents (so that Catholic and Irish difference is understood as irrational, backward, superstitious); ‘justice’ is understood as justice-for-communities-like-ours, so that those who refuse our demands must have ‘no conscience’ (Millar, 2006, pp. 110-11). Such communally specific concepts have been analysed as the product of cognitive mistakes, hasty generalisations in situations where category-use and network belonging are superimposed (‘cat-nets’) (Rydgren, 2008, 307-326). While Rydgren’s description of such category-formation in situations of ethnic division and conflict is insightful, I prefer a simpler explanation which sees such categories as produced by the normal cognitive tendency to favour commonly available, socially ‘entrenched’ categories and concepts, inductive reasoning itself (Goodman, 1969, 74). Given institutional congruence, and differential positions within it of Protestants and Catholics, individuals rationally pick up on the common, general values in their environment, leaving to one side the multiplicity of alternative repertoires that are recessive within each institution. Thus is generated a tendency towards symbolic polarisation, despite a plurality of available cultural and religious resources.¹³

If such a mechanism exists, it means that ‘ethnic’ reactions, antipathies and responses are produced in particular configurations of institutional practice and that religious

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practices may be particularly important in this respect.¹⁴ Does such a mechanism

exist? The account given above is eminently testable. The process is practical, rooted in the form of existing institutions. One would therefore expect

- i. the concepts and understandings held by those whose practices are primarily within congruent institutions will differ significantly from those whose practices span a range of institutions: the former will be more likely to fall into columns A-C of table one, the latter into column D, or perhaps (if they wish to create an individualised coherence) column E. So, for example, one would expect different understandings of political values among those who went to integrated school and those who did not, those who play cross-community and cross-border sports and those who do not.¹⁵
- ii. The recent institutional changes in Northern Ireland – radical but uneven in their impact on different subgroups – will produce similarly uneven change in political values, and in particular in the entrenched conceptualisations which interlink religion and politics.

In the final section of this paper I give a preliminary assessment of the second hypothesis.

The changing patterns of religion and politics since 1998

In the past two decades, there have been accelerating institutional and social changes:

- The political system and power relations have been radically changed with the following key events: 1985 (Anglo-Irish Agreement), 1989 (Fair Employment

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Act) 1998 (Good Friday Agreement), 1999-2003 (reform of policing). Since

1998 this has begun to percolate down to everyday experience, for example in republican participation at all levels of decision-making and in a visible nationalist presence in every part of the public sphere.

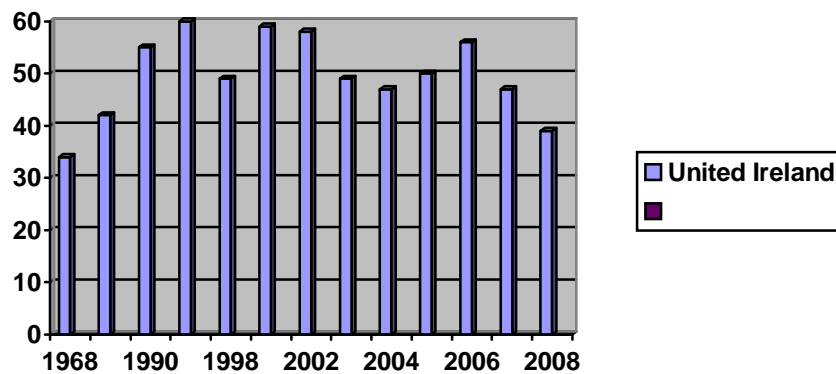
- Social networks have been diffused. This has occurred in three ways. First, by increased funding for cross-community venues and integrated schooling, although such cross-networking remains relatively localized and small-scale. Secondly, fair employment legislation has stimulated more widespread change in work relations in particular a culture of 'neutrality' in integrated workplaces (Dickson and Hargie, 2002, pp. 300-1). Third, and more pervasive again, general cultural trends and consumerism (from foreign holidays to non-place shopping malls to home cinema) have led to greater individualisation, a lesser reliance on social capital, although separate religio-leisure networks remain.
- The older 'worlds' and the associated expectations are challenged and increasingly problematized by new legislation. Protestants can no longer march where they will, their perceptions and judgements can no longer be stated freely in the workplace, they no longer see themselves reflected in the public culture. For Catholics, once economically segregated 'Catholic' and militarily contained 'republican' worlds are increasingly integrated into the mainstream economy and politics. This confirms their beliefs (the need for public equality) while radically changing their practices.

These changes – which impact differentially on sections of the population - generate multiple everyday challenges to entrenched concepts and habitual expectations.

Change is evident in an opening up of national identification, with a considerable increase in those who see both a British and an Irish aspect to their identity (now half

Todd, Symbolic Complexity of Catholics and over 60% of Protestants) and a striking increase in Protestants who report a Northern Irish identity, from 18% in 1998 to 32% in 2008.¹⁶ Meanwhile the desire for a united Ireland has declined over ten years even while the Sinn Féin vote has risen.¹⁷ Religious liberalisation and a rapid decline in religious practice is evident over the last 40 years, although there has been a slight increase in religious observance since the Good Friday Agreement.¹⁸

FIGURE One: Constitutional preferences of Catholics in Northern Ireland



These data, however, disguise very different directions of change. In what follows, I use the results of recent qualitative research to show how the direction of change for different sub-groups depends not just on the different political and economic opportunities opened to them, but also on their cultural (and religious) resources.

- Fundamentalist religious unionists – what Ganiel (2008, pp. 4-8) calls *traditional evangelicals* - were at the organisational core of the Democratic Unionist Party, and formed the rural constituency of DUP support (Bruce, 1986). This group ‘interprets political life through a religious lens’ (Ganiel and Mitchell, 2009), falling clearly into the ‘totalizing’ column A of Table One above. It has changed politically much more quickly than might have been

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expected – DUP supporters’ approval of power-sharing increased by 33% between 1998 and 2003 (Mitchell et al, 2008, p. 410) – and there is direct interview evidence of the process of change.¹⁹ Claire Mitchell describes how some traditional evangelicals sensed political defeat in 1998, and responded by prioritizing religious values over political, ‘purifying’ religion of its failed political resonance (Mitchell, 2003). This freed them to change their political assumptions, which no longer mattered so much because they were detached from sacred values, and it allowed them to take advantage of the opportunities on offer in the new cross-border structures and in interest-group politics in the newly egalitarian Northern Ireland (Mitchell and Todd, 2007; Ganiel, 2008, pp.80-82; Ganiel and Dixon, 2008). Changes in their religio-political understanding freed them to seize new opportunities and to back the pragmatists in the DUP leadership in bringing about quite radical change in political practice and organisation.

- One-time *Protestant paramilitary supporters* who opted for an ethno-political position (column C) have found it harder to orient themselves to the new social order. The secular loyalist paramilitary world-view, as expressed in magazines and songs, involved radical ethnic binaries, seeing republicans as evil (‘vermin’) and themselves as a vanguard community, defending the state and the Protestant communal position. Now they fear being swallowed up by Catholic, nationalist and republican expansion. A wide range of responses have been found by researchers (most recently, see Edwards and Bloomer, 2008). Some working class Protestants respond by privatizing, emphasizing everyday values (motherhood, increasing affluence, a hard day’s work) rather than religion, ethnicity or politics.²⁰ The new opportunities in Northern

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Ireland, however, require engagement with erstwhile republican opponents by whom privatizing Protestants easily feel out-manoevred. Some attempt to lead their people away from violence: their 'conflict transformation', however, transforms militarism and adds class values to a perspective where political and ethnic binaries may not often be mentioned but neither are they criticized (see Spencer, 2008; Edwards and Bloomer, 2008). Some reassert the old ethno-cultural project: the Glenbryn protestors stopped Catholic girls walking to school in the name of equality with republicans and nationalists (who stopped Orange marches). For many of these individuals, neither the real opportunities to benefit from the new order nor the cultural resources to reconstitute political ideology seem to be easily available. There is much evidence of rethinking and an awareness of the need to change, but difficulty both socially and ideologically in moving beyond the older oppositions.

- Some unionists did change more radically. A set of Protestant '*mediating*' *evangelicals* within the broad unionist bloc began to take a more critical perspective on unionist politics in the late 1980s and 1990s within the ECONI network (Ganiel, 2008, pp. 4-8). By the 2000s, they had become among the most active and vocal sections of the Protestant population and had moved far from their previous unionist politics. These individuals typically reflexively reassessed many of the oppositional contents of their self- and world-understandings, often reporting a helter-skelter of change, with initial movement leading to new levels of cognitive dissonance and further change (Ganiel, 2008, pp 90-97.). Respondents report using religious and moral values to criticize social divisions and political assumptions (Ganiel, 2008, pp. 94-5), with their new practices feeding back into ethnic self-questioning and

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into a refinement of their values. This unravelling of the previous web of belief leads to quite radical change in the content of religion, ethnicity and politics. In effect, they moved from a moderate unionism (table one, column B) to a position of more radical change (table one, column E). Todd (2006) and Todd et al (2009) report a very similar trajectory for some mixed marriage respondents. This form of change is not widespread, but it is significant that it happens at sub-group level, not simply among isolated individuals.

- Self-identified '*structural unionists*' in the Ulster Unionist Party – with considerably more opportunities open to them than the loyalist working class - have also found their assumptions challenged in the new order: they have resisted reform of the policing system, argued against the reduction of British symbolism in the public life of Northern Ireland, and rejected British and Irish governments' insistence on bringing Sinn Féin into partnership government prior to decommissioning because it seemed to legitimate past republican terrorism. The leaders expressed outrage at the 'moral equilateralism' of the new order which defined nationalist resistance as equivalent to the enforcement of the law of the state, and which reinterpreted British sovereignty to be compatible not simply with equal rights for individual nationalists, but for nationalism (Godson, 2004, pp. 472-9). None of this explicitly referred to religion or ethnic solidarity : the principles were taken as free-standing axioms of British democracy. But this meant that pragmatic political compromises could be seen as breaches of political principle. As their principles were increasingly defined as irrelevant by the governments, the UUP leadership failed to ward off challenges from unionist activists, or to convince the wider unionist public that its path was necessary. They were

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unable within the confines of structural unionism to lead the public through a process which was necessarily one of moral and social as well as political reevaluation.²¹

- *Nationalists* , in contrast, have had their basic assumptions confirmed in the new agreement and their mood has been described as ‘buoyant’ (Hughes, 2004). This has been correlated with an increasing assertion of Irish identity particularly among the young, with 80% of 16 year-olds self-reporting as Irish in 2007 (www.ark.ac.uk/ylt), and an increasing religious liberalisation. But the wider values and aims associated with the assertion of Irish identity have changed. As we have seen, now more Catholics acknowledge a British aspect to their identity and the desire for a united Ireland has declined. Nationalists, and young nationalists in particular, have seen the changes as confirming their Irish identity, and at the same time freeing them to decide whether or not they actually want constitutional change. This was described by a politically-moderate nationalist in a border town in Northern Ireland, in his late twenties at the time of the interview:

[IN THE PAST IF] ‘you were very strongly Irish [IT] almost accredited you supporting the IRA or Republicanism, you know... .. but now I’m much more confident about saying I’m Irish and... proud to say I’m Irish... because there seems to be less attack on that notion of Irishness’... [and he went on]...’

a united Ireland would be great and what we realize that, you know, it’s... not at any cost... And I think that none of us feel strongly that if it never came about that it would be the worse thing in the world, you know’²²

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If most ordinary nationalists remain ‘totalizers’ in column A or ethno-politicals in column C, without radical change to the *structure* of their worldview, the *substance* of their views have changed quite radically, liberalizing on religion, pluralizing on ethnicity and very considerably moderating on politics.

- *Republicans* have had new political and economic opportunities in the post-Agreement period but at the cost of cognitive dissonance. The ‘republican analysis’ of Northern Ireland classically worked from a concept of the ethno-communal ‘people’ oppressed by a corrupting imperial British state, aided by a Protestant population still for the most part caught in a settler mentality (Ruane, 2004). The Catholic character of the people was seldom in doubt, whether in the origin myths and rituals associated with republican grief or in everyday discussions of morality in time of war (O’Malley, 1990; Millar, 2006) although the relative emphasis placed on religiously-informed values, ethnic solidarity and political primacy varied widely between subgroups and over time: republican supporters were to be found in all the columns of Table One.²³ Post 1998, this unifying republican analysis no longer fits the practice of republican participation in government, support for devolved policing and work within and funded by the British state. Several responses have emerged. Some supporters who once shared republican aims now accept or even prefer a reformed Northern Ireland to a united Ireland, simply wanting to ensure opportunities and security within it: *‘The worst thing that could ever happen is that there is a united Ireland and that will never happen because the whole system would be so fucked up it would be unreal. The whole health service, everything, it just doesn’t, the schooling system, everything – all the wrongs*

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would outweigh the rights ²⁴ Some work pragmatically within the present political order, while retaining their aims. Yet these responses give rise to moral dilemmas which are not easy to resolve: if they can compromise now, what of the principles for which they fought in the past? Have the values which gave dignity and depth to an otherwise horrific struggle now been jettisoned in an unprincipled fashion? Republican electoral success and international favour has been gained by a public silencing of the questions, with the evident danger of leaving the moral high ground of republicanism to the dissidents and to those who have not shared in the new politico-economic opportunities.

These sorts of responses suggest that when institutional restructuring creates cognitive dissonance, individuals' responses are mediated culturally: those who most quickly come to terms with both conflict and settlement are those who re-find aspects of a moral tradition by which to reinterpret it. It seems presently easier for people in Northern Ireland to find such moral resources in the religious traditions than in politics or in ethno-history. That religion can help the process of change post-conflict is itself of comparative interest. But the discussion raises a further question: What sort of political and social restructuring might allow the necessary 'moral resources' to be found in political tradition and ethnic history as well as in religion?

Conclusion

I have argued that social divisions and organisational histories in Northern Ireland give individuals continuing incentives to generalize concepts between religion, ethnicity and politics. This turns plural cultural resources into communally opposed

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concepts. A self-reproducing cycle ensues, where values and principles legitimate social solidarity and the pursuit of politics in the communal interest, and encourage individuals with these views to play leading roles in communal organisations, thus reproducing the institutional conditions that encourage such cognitive generalisation. The feed-back pattern has been disrupted by the settlement and reform process, and some groups have used religious resources to come to terms with the new order. This is not to claim that religiously-informed values are in any sense the most important cause of conflict or of settlement. For many people in Northern Ireland, however, such values are as or more important than a narrow sense of ethnic-provenance in providing the intuitive sense of connection which binds together each of the historic communities. As institutional change disrupts this generalisation of values, the plurality of cultural resources and possibilities comes into view. Grasping the symbolic and cognitive aspects of the process lets us understand both the potential for change and the likely problems involved.

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¹ It was not uncommon in recent interviews in Northern Ireland (ITENIBA and IDC research projects, see acknowledgments) for respondents to answer questions on national identity by speaking of their choice of passport.

² The most developed argument that the Northern Ireland conflict is primarily an ethno-national conflict is McGarry and O'Leary, 1995 which concedes a role for religion but a secondary one (p. 212).

³ For full discussion of religious variation among Belfast churchgoers, see Boal et al, 1997 ; for divisions among evangelicals, Ganiel, 2008, pp. 4-8 , 140-148; for different forms of anti-Catholicism, Brewer and Higgins, 1998, and of sectarianism, Leichty and Clegg, 2001, pp. 148-183

⁴ Rose, 1971, pp. 261-2; Boal et al, 1997, p. 111; Mitchell and Tilley, 2004. Qualitative research shows that conservative Protestants cluster in different (traditional, pietist and perhaps also mediating) groups with different political view (Ganiel, 2008; Ganiel and Mitchell, 2009). As Bruce (2003, 84-5) notes, this leaves the extremes 'cancelling each other out' in the survey data. .

⁵ As is clear from their answer to the follow-up question, they do not treat this as a legal or institutional matter: a clear majority do not believe that only Catholics can be Irish or Protestants British.

⁶ While Protestant churchgoers are unrepresentative of Protestants as a whole (much less the whole population), half the Protestant population go to church at least once a month, so their views are significant.

⁷ While it is tempting to assign cross-community voters to this column, Moxon-Browne (1983, pp. 70-78) shows that it is primarily Alliance activists rather than supporters who develop a distinctive cross-community set of perspectives. Even if the numbers have since increased, it would be over-optimistic to assign more than 10% of the population to this column, and considerably less in the past.

⁸ The 1999-2000 European Value Survey – using different measures - suggests that national identity is held to be distinct from ethnic identity for the majority of both Protestants and Catholics, with only about 30% of respondents holding that there is a strong ‘ethnic’ (Protestant/Catholic) dimension to British and Irish identity (Fahey et al 2005, pp. 69-70, 81). This measure does not distinguish ‘ethnicity’ from ‘religion’. While it appears to be at odds with the Life and Times data, the analysis in the next section of this paper suggests an explanation: while people explicitly distinguish fields, they implicitly blur them, and the questions in different surveys may tap into these different responses.

⁹ Ganiel (2008 pp 73) reports strong religiously-based moral judgements among evangelicals on the Good Friday Agreement. Republicanism, past and present, also had a strong moral tone which has been analysed less than the morality of conservative Protestants.

¹⁰ Examples include Brewer, 1998, pp. 143, 155; Buckley, 1995, pp. 57-72 ; Millar, 2006, pp. 87. 110-11; Mitchell 2006, pp.102-3; Nelson, 1975; O’Malley, 1990 pp. 162-169, 183; Ruane and Todd, 1996, pp. 108-115, 147, 175-6, 200 ;

¹¹ In the sociology of religion, this is conceived as ‘civil religion’ (Demerath, 2001, 234-240) but the ambiguities of this concept are such that I do not use it here. Bourdieu (1990) describes the ‘generative schemes’ of the ‘habitus’ which internalise structural relations and opportunities and generalise them across fields. Mitchell (2006) describes the process as one of ‘religious ideology’, although I think this term overstates the ideological, as opposed to practical-experiential aspects of the process.

¹² For an account of how unionist leaders who were personally liberal prioritized unionist unity – and thus alliance with religious and political extremes – over liberal principle, see Walker, 2004.

¹³ I am not claiming that cultural plurality is illusory : there are several possible ways of interpreting and prioritizing liberty, individuality, justice as is shown by the class-mediated political conflict within each bloc.

¹⁴ Of course, once formed, these responses may become deep-set and costly to change: change, not necessarily to more moderate positions, is provoked by changing the institutional configuration (see Todd et al, 2006).

¹⁵ Where institutions are highly differentiated in their constitutive norms, culturally deep religious distinctions do not automatically carry over to political culture (Laitin, 1986). Some individuals may still prefer overall cognitive coherence to cognitive differentiation, but in such situations generalisation tends to take more complex, individualised, reflexive forms.

¹⁶ Life and times, identity module, 2007, community relations module, 2008 (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)

¹⁷ A new question was asked in 2008, which gave respondents choices not simply between a united Ireland or the united Kingdom, but between the former and direct rule or devolution within the united Kingdom: as in the past, the Catholic preference for a united Ireland decreased when more options were given (Ruane and Todd, 1996, pp. 66-69). Even if we discount the 2008 figure, however, a stabilisation of the desire for a united Ireland after 1998 is evident.

¹⁸ Life and Times, religious observance module, 1998, 2004, 2008 (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt); Religious observance in 1968 was much higher, see Whyte, 1990, 26-8.

¹⁹ There are many reasons, including good political ones, for the change. See Gormley-Heenan and MacGinty (2008), my point is simply that it is aided by change among sections of the DUP’s religious supporters.

²⁰ This was a typical response in the ITENIBA and IDC projects, see Todd et al, 2009.

²¹ It was logically possible to revise the principles without casting them aside, as Aughey (2005) demonstrated within a philosophical - rather than public political - context.

²² Interview conducted by Nathalie Rougier for the ITENIBA project (see acknowledgements)

²³ The different ways of putting together the republican world view are accessible in republican journals and newspapers, and are particularly evident in debates in *Republican News* and *An Phoblacht* in the 1970s.

²⁴ A respondent who once had supported republicanism, interviewed by Theresa O’Keefe for the IDC project (see acknowledgements)

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