Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Reassessing the Role of Religion in Northern Ireland Community Divisions

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1. Introduction

It is something of a truism that conflict and community divisions in Northern Ireland are 'not religious' in nature. Nevertheless, the manifestly religious categories of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' continue to be used as the axiomatic starting point for much analysis and policy development. Are these still appropriate, or do they risk distorting a complex reality and perpetuating stereotypes? This paper summarizes key insights from recent and ongoing research, drawing both on historical and comtemporary comparisons from outside Ireland and on a series of 66 semi-structured interviews with respondents from three different areas of Northern Ireland. It then suggests some policy implications.

2. Research Context

Protestant-Catholic Conflict: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Realities was an 'Ideas and Beliefs' Fellowship funded under the Research Councils UK 'Global Uncertainties: Security for All in a Changing World' programme (www.globaluncertainties.org.uk) . The Global Uncertainties programme runs from 2008 to 2018 and includes a wide portfolio of research also covering terrorism, transnational organized crime, cybersecurity, threats to infrastructures, and the proliferation of chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear (CBRN) weapons and technologies.

The *Protestant-Catholic Conflict* (www.open.ac.uk/Arts/protestant-catholic-conflict) project ran from 2009 until early 2013 and was a collaboration between the Open University and the Institute for Conflict Research [ICR] in Belfast. It linked a comparative overview and synthesis of research on Catholic-Protestant conflicts in the past – when they appeared at times a fundamental 'security' problem across Western Europe – with specific research on the changing role of religion in community tensions in two major English cities (Birmingham and Liverpool) since the nineteenth century, and in three areas of Northern Ireland (Belfast, South Armagh, and West of the Bann) since the start of the 'Troubles'. The comparative and English research was conducted by Prof John Wolffe, assisted by Dr Philomena Sutherland; the Northern Ireland research was carried out from ICR by John Bell, and overseen by the Director, Dr Neil Jarman, and by Prof Wolffe. The

English research drew primarily on printed and archival sources; the Northern Ireland work on semi-structured interviews, which combined inquiry into contemporary attitudes with some significant oral history from older respondents. The combination of historical and contemporary research was a distinctive feature of the project designed to lead to new insights: on the one hand to the development of a broad comparative framework in which to evaluate the role of religion in Northern Ireland; on the other to a more subtle analysis of written historical evidence informed by interviewees with living subjects. A further objective was to provide historical and comparative context for understanding contemporary Islamophobia, which, it was hypothesized, has significant similarities to historic anti-Catholicism.

3. Religious Conflict: Taking the Long and Comparative View

The comparative and historical dimension of the project drew substantially on John Wolffe's earlier research on nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism, and also on the expertise of a team of historians who assembled for a symposium in May 2011, and whose contributions are now published in John Wolffe, ed., *Protestant-Catholic Conflict from the Reformation to the 21st Century: The Dynamics of Religious Difference* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). A further conference in Belfast in September 2012 concentrated attention particularly on the recent and contemporary Irish experience, while also examining significant comparisons with Britain, Western Europe and the United States, and exploring Christian-Muslim tensions and potential solutions to them. This event is leading to a further book, John Wolffe, ed, *Irish Religious Conflict in Comparative Perspective: Catholics, Protestants and Muslims* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming, 2014). Some key insights from this work can be highlighted as follows:

- **Northern Ireland was less distinctive historically than is often supposed**. Indeed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (ie before partition) the situation here did not look qualitatively different from that in other regions with mixed Catholic and Protestant populations. Religious tensions were then rife in north-west England, southern Scotland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States as well as in Germany and elsewhere in continental Europe. Although such antagonisms have receded elsewhere their legacy is still discernible.

- **Religious antagonisms in general – and more specifically anti-Catholicism and Islamophobia – are complex and multi-faceted**, with dimensions that include the linking of national and religious identity, theological polemic, vernacular and calendar traditions such as those associated with July 12 and November 5, and social-cultural antagonisms such the belief that 'other side' systematically fosters sexual abuse or perversion. Hence implicit in the assertion that conflict in Northern Ireland (or anywhere else) is 'not religious' is an unduly narrow – and often unexamined – understanding of religion.

- **There are significant parallels and similarities between anti-Catholicism, Islamophobia and other forms of racial and religious antagonism**, such as anti-Semitism. It is probably no coincidence that noticeable late twentieth-century declines in historic anti-Catholicism in most Western countries were accompanied by the rise of Islamophobia, suggesting a transference of stereotypes. Hence we need to be alert to the danger that a lessening of historic antagonisms between Northern Ireland's two major religious blocs might be followed by increased popular hostility to religious minorities such as Muslims.

- **There is no inevitability that religious *difference* leads to religious *conflict*.** Indeed the generally-accepted view of early modern Europe as riven by 'wars of religion' obscures the reality of localities and whole states characterised for long periods of time by peaceful coexistence, albeit sometimes in a climate of 'antagonistic tolerance' (a phrase coined by Robert M. Hayden) rather than genuine integration. The 'triggers' that turned such situations into ones of open conflict were usually very specific and contingent, quite often

unintended consequences of attempts to mitigate antagonisms, for example the British government's attempts in the late 1770s to relax penal legislation against Catholics, provoking the Protestant protests that led to the Gordon Riots of 1780. On the other hand, well-judged specific actions – such as John F Kennedy's efforts to reach out to Protestants following his election in 1960 as the first US Catholic President – have made a lasting positive difference. History thus suggests that individuals CAN make a substantial difference – for good or ill – in seemingly intractable situations, but that mis-timed or mis-communicated actions, however well-intentioned, can be disastrous.

- **Secularization will not be a solution to religious conflict**, as least not in any straightforward way. While it has weakened the cultural reach of historic theological antagonisms, it can also give rise to alternative forms of hostility, as manifested in the 'Protest the Pope' movement against Benedict XVI's visit to Britain in 2010. Moreover, by diminishing the influence of religious leaders it has lessened their potential to build bridges. The religious 'illiteracy' of much of the population leads to uninformed suspicion of organized religion, and leaves space for the fanatical or the unscrupulous to manipulate religion to their own ends. There are also indications (notably from the Netherlands) that rapid secularization and the consequent disappearance of traditional cultural and social structures can engender an insecurity that manifests itself in hostility to groups such as Muslims.

4. Views of Religion and Security in Northern Ireland

66 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Northern Ireland between 2010 and 2012. The sample consisted of 52 anonymous individuals (contacted though existing ICR and community networks), and 14 'key informants' who had prominent roles either currently, or during the Troubles, including for example, Lord Eames, Harold Good, Bernadette McAliskey, and Bishop Noel Treanor. The larger anonymous sample was made up as follows

'Community'	Protestant 28	Catholic 24	
Gender	Male 24	Female 28	
Location	Belfast 21	Armagh 18	West of Bann+ 13
Age	Under 30# 6	30-50 25	Over 50 21
Churchgoing	Regular 26	Occasional 11	Never* 15

+ Including Derry/Londonderry, Omagh, Strabane, Magherafelt
# All interviewees were over 18   * Except for weddings and funerals

Key insights were as follows:

- **Religious identities are sometimes fluid.** Although the majority of respondents self-identified with the standard categories of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant', there were significant minority responses. On the one hand respondents who had come to reject Christianity could feel ambivalent about still being categorised in terms of their background or upbringing. On the other, some active committed churchgoers were uncomfortable with having an ascribed identity that they perceived as being more political than religious in a Northern Ireland context, and preferred to self-identify simply as 'Christian'. This preference was most apparent among those from a Protestant background but was also present among a few younger Catholics. There was also evidence of people changing their religious self-identification, for example, through gradual disillusion with the term 'Protestant'.

- **Declining churchgoing does not necessarily mean decline in other forms of religious practice and nurture.** Some non-churchgoing interviewees still prayed regularly and/or ensured their children attended Sunday School. Religious practice often changed over the

life-course: in particular many interviewees stopped attending church in their late 'teens and 20s, but then resumed later when they had children of their own. Even those who never – or very rarely – attend church, still articulate a sense of religious identity that goes beyond the mere acceptance of a sectarian/community label.

- **Even well-intentioned individuals committed to peace-building can still hold to stereotypes –** notably that Catholics have a strong sense of community (or, more negatively, are monolithic); or that Protestantism promotes individual integrity and initiative (or, more negatively, fragmentation).

- **A widespread perception that the churches 'should have done more' during and since the Troubles to promote peace.** There was recognition of significant individual initiatives but a frustration with institutional inertia. There was, however, converse criticism of the churches for losing touch with the aspirations of parts of their own natural constituencies: of the Catholic Church for its equivocal attitude to the IRA hunger-strikers; of the Protestant Churches for failing to engage effectively with the needs and concerns of the urban working class. For some the churches were too conciliatory, for others not conciliatory enough, but the overall implication is that they failed to exert the kind of leadership that would have maintained their own moral authority.

- Nevertheless, there was evidence that **the churches and religious organizations are still playing a significant role in grass-roots peace-building,** often in inconspicuous and unexpected ways. Quiet ongoing success stories of conflict averted and mitigated seldom attract the same degree of attention as unrest and confrontation. (It should be noted moreover that despite recent declines and considerable local variation, churchgoing in Northern Ireland remains on average substantially higher than in all other parts of the UK except the Western Isles of Scotland.)

- **There is no correlation between levels of religious practice and attitudes to the 'other' community.** Both some of the most negative and some of the most positive views in the sample were found among regular churchgoers. The key factor in determining attitudes among churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike was rather the extent of previous positive contact with the 'other' tradition.

- **Views on education were mixed.** Segregated education was seen as a major factor in perpetuating the community divide, but there was concern that young people should still be grounded in a 'Christian ethos'. (It might be noted that although 'faith schools' in England have their critics, at their best they can be very successful in bringing together children of all faiths and none.)

- **Perceptions of history** are evolving and less polarised than often supposed. For example, Protestant respondents were more often critical than celebratory of seventeenth-century events; Catholic ones ambivalent towards the legacy of the Easter Rising. For the majority of interviewees (especially Catholics) events within living memory (eg Bloody Sunday) had a greater resonance than those in the more remote past.

- **'Security', like religion, is a fluid concept.** Measures that reassure some are still liable to threaten others, and the institutionalisation of the community divide through power-sharing, however unavoidable in the short term, is nevertheless seen by some as a recipe for instability and conflict in the long term. 'Security policy' needs to recognize the importance of cultural security – a group's confidence that its own culture is not threatened and therefore does not need to be aggressively asserted – as an essential precondition for physical security. Religion remains a significant strand in cultural security and is likely to become more prominent in a context of challenge from other religious traditions or from secularization.

5. Ongoing Research

Further funding has been obtained from the Global Uncertainties programme for a subsequent project entitled *Religion, Martyrdom and Global Uncertainties, 1914-2014*, which runs from 2013 to 2015. This combines leadership activities with complementary detailed research. The leadership dimension is designed to integrate and communicate outside academia key insights from other relevant GU projects, exploring the various ways in 'religion' and its significance in relation to 'security' is currently understood by researchers. Work to date has exposed considerable variety in the way that researchers approach religion, but a consensus that it needs to be taken seriously as a significant factor in analysis of security issues on the global stage.

The research project is examining the development of the concept of martyrdom and sacrificial death in Britain and Ireland since the outbreak of the First World War. It is proceeding through archival, library and web-based research on historic sources, alongside a series of semi-structured interviews with political and religious activists, carried out in partnership with the Institute for Conflict Research, in four contrasting locations in Britain and Ireland, Belfast, Bradford, Dublin and London. The aim is to secure a balance of 'Catholic', 'Protestant' and 'Muslim' perspectives. The Belfast interviews have already been completed and show respondents generally cautious about ascribing the status of martyr outside a narrowly religious context, reflecting alertness to the divisive historic impact of perceived political martyrdom in Ireland. The interviews are also noteworthy in urging the importance of public education so that the upcoming centenaries are seen in their historic context, rather than perpetuating partisan mythologies focused on views of a single event taken in isolation.

6. Policy Implications

The research shows that religion remains a significant force in Northern Ireland, deserving greater specific recognition and consideration than that accorded in the recent OFMDFM document *Together: Building a United Community* which appears to subsume the role of religious groups in that of 'community organisations'. A caution towards religion is understandable in the light of the ways in which elements in the churches historically reinforced sectarian polarization (although their past record is more complex than is often supposed). Irish history also yields extensive evidence of the dangers of political manipulation and mobilization of religion.

Nevertheless, there are converse dangers in disregarding religion. Even though organized Christianity in Northern Ireland has been in decline in recent decades, its influence is still considerable, and liable to resurface and mutate in unexpected ways, as for example as a strand in the recent loyalist flag protests. Moreover in a wider comparative global perspective, religion is now widely seen as resurgent, or at least adapting in significant and creative ways to a changing world order. These trends are likely to have an increasing impact in Northern Ireland in the coming years, especially with growing migration to the province. Hence it is important that there is sensitivity to the potential religious ramifications of policy initiatives, and also to the role that religious leaders and organizations can still play in building a 'shared society'. It is therefore encouraging to note the support of the OFMDFM for the Irish Churches Peace Project.

More specifically, I would suggest

1. That ways be found of giving greater visibility to those individuals uncomfortable with the traditional designations of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant'. While such a position may often reflect a secular 'no religion' outlook, our research shows how it also arises from a religiously-rooted sense of Christian unity. People who hold such an outlook should surely be recognized as strategic in the building of a 'united community' rather than marginalised as a statistical inconvenience.

2. Churches and religious organizations have significant unrealized potential both as 'bridge-builders' and as channels for reconciling the marginalized and alienated in their own communities. Their work, however, is often unrecognized and under-resourced, and hence liable to lose momentum. Consideration should be given to ways in which it can be judiciously affirmed and better supported. The development of new cross-community initiatives – for example for the removal of 'peace walls' or the development of integrated education - should draw on the 'on the ground' experience of the churches.

3. That the 'shared future' agenda needs to be pursued with caution and sensitivity. There are still widespread stereotypes of the 'other' that need to be broken down as a preliminary to effective cooperation, and premature attempts to – for example - remove peace walls or impose integrated education risk provoking a counterproductive backlash from those who perceive a threat to their cultural or physical security.

4. That the 'decade of anniversaries' should be accompanied by measures of public historical education, to assist people to understand problematic events in their context. In particular there should also be opportunities to reassess and better understand the sometimes ambivalent historic role of the churches as part of the wider process of 'dealing with the past'. Such historical reflection could provide a springboard for the churches to disentangle themselves for the future from the political and nationalistic associations that have in the past limited their capacity to serve as bridge-builders. The 150th anniversary of disestablishment in 2019-20 would be one such occasion. Constructive engagement with more remote anniversaries will help to lay a foundation for non-confrontational commemoration of the more painful (because still in living memory) sequence of 50th anniversaries that will begin in 2019.

5. That there is considerable value in pursuing ways of seeing the Northern Ireland situation in a wider UK and indeed global perspective. In a future multi-cultural Northern Ireland the importance of the Protestant-Catholic binary will be lessened, but the parallels and possible continuities between historic anti-Catholicism and contemporary Islamophobia imply a need to ensure that the mitigation of historic antagonisms is not accompanied by a transfer of hostility to Northern Ireland's new religious minorities. Conversely, the Northern Ireland experience may well have relevant implications for endeavours to pre-empt and mitigate religious antagonisms in other jurisdictions.

7. Bibliography

For more detailed accounts of our research see the publications noted in section 2 above, and John Bell, 'For God, Ulster and Ireland? Religion, Identity and Security in Northern Ireland', Belfast: Institute for Conflict Research, March 2013 (downloadable from www.conflictresearch.org.uk).

Other important recent publications are:
John D. Brewer, Gareth I. Higgins and Francis Teeney, *Religion, Civil Society and Peace in Northern Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Gladys Ganiel, *Evangelicalism and Conflict in Northern Ireland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Claire Mitchell, *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

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