



Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-based policy and law-making within Northern Ireland



Beyond the 'dreary steeples'? Reassessing the role of religion in Northern Ireland

community divisions

**Prof John Wolffe
The Open University**

‘But as the deluge subsides and the waters fall short, we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again. The integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that has been unaltered in the cataclysm which has swept the world.’

Winston Churchill
22 February 1922



Structure of Presentation

1. Research Background
2. Taking the Long/Broad View
3. Religion and Security in Northern Ireland
4. Ongoing Research
5. Policy Implications



Research Background: RCUK Global Uncertainties

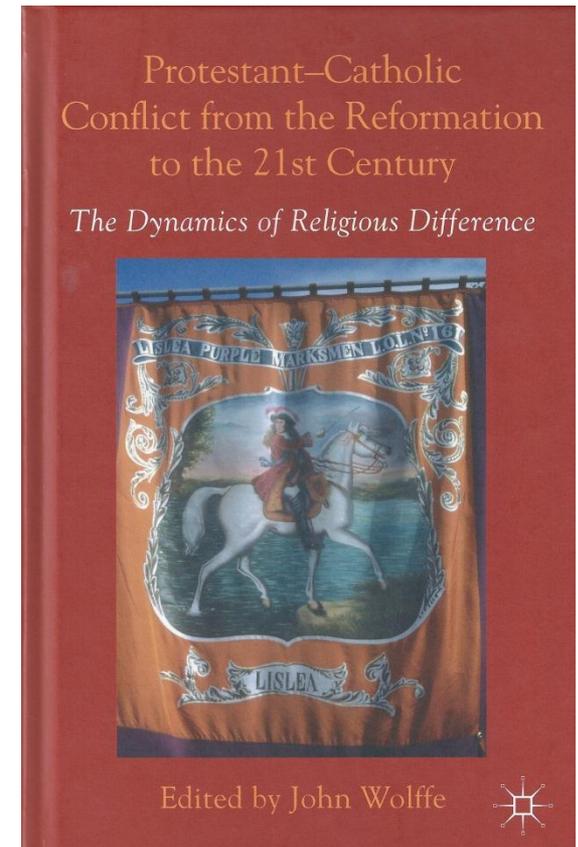


- Examines causes of insecurity and how security risks and threats can be predicted, prevented and managed.
- One of six RCUK priority themes, bringing together the activities of all seven UK Research Councils
- Collaboration between academic partners and funders and a range of national and international policy makers, public bodies, non-governmental organisations, the private sector and the public.
- Core areas: Ideologies and beliefs, terrorism, transnational organised crime, cybersecurity, threats in infrastructures, proliferation of CBRN weapons
- Runs from 2008 to 2018.
- Led by Economic and Social Research Council
- £384 million portfolio to date of research and activities



Research Context: Protestant-Catholic Conflict

- Global Uncertainties Ideas and Beliefs Fellowship 2009-13
- Collaboration between Open University and Institute for Conflict Research (Belfast)
- Comparative overview + detailed case studies in NI and England
- Combined historical and contemporary research
- Context for understanding Islamophobia?



Taking the Long/Broad View 1

- Northern Ireland before Partition resembled other regions with mixed Protestant/Catholic populations – eg NW England, Australia
- Religious antagonisms multi-faceted – linking with national identity, theological polemic, vernacular/calendar traditions, socio-cultural/sexual suspicions
- Parallels and similarities between anti-Catholicism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism. Transference of stereotypes?

Taking the Long/Broad View 2

No inevitability religious *difference* leads to religious *conflict*

- Widespread coexistence in early modern Europe
- But unrest triggered by attempts to mitigate underlying antagonisms – eg Gordon Riots (1780)
- Potential benefits from well-judged individual initiatives – eg Kennedy (1960), Sheppard and Worlock in Liverpool (1970s-80s)

Secularization not necessarily the solution

- Anti-religious antagonisms + religious illiteracy
- Diminishes positive influence of religious leaders
- Loss of traditional structures can breed insecurity and instability

Religion and Security in Northern Ireland: Sample

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

Total 52 + 14 key informants



Religion and Security in NI

Research carried out
2010-2012

Report by John Bell available
for download from

<http://www.conflictresearch.org.uk>

iCR
INSTITUTE for CONFLICT RESEARCH



For God, Ulster or Ireland?

Religion, Identity and Security in Northern Ireland

John Bell

March 2013



Religion and Security in NI: Highlights 1

- Religious identities sometimes fluid – eg respondents who prefer to self-identify as ‘Christian’ rather than ‘Catholic’ or ‘Protestant’
- Declining churchgoing does not necessarily mean decline in other forms of religious practice/identification
- Stereotypes of ‘other’ tradition still widespread
 - BUT a) no correlation with levels of religious practice
 - b) perceptions of history becoming less polarised

Religion and Security in NI: Highlights 2

- Perception the churches 'should have done more' to promote peace BUT reality of churches and religious organizations playing significant if inconspicuous role in grass-roots peacebuilding
- 'Security' like 'religion' is a fluid concept.
One person's 'security' is another's 'threat'
Importance of cultural security (which has religious dimension) as precondition for physical security

Ongoing Research

Further funding for *Religion, Martyrdom and Global Uncertainties, 1914-2014* from 2013 to 2015

- Leadership: integration and communication outside academia of key insights from other GU project regarding 'religion' and 'security'
- Research: ideas of martyrdom and sacrificial death in Britain and Ireland since 1914
: archival research + interviews in Belfast, Bradford, Dublin and London with sample of 'Catholics', 'Protestants' and 'Muslims'



Policy and Religion

**DO NOT
TOUCH**

OR

**HANDLE
WITH CARE**

?

Policy Implications 1

- Make space for religious people who are uncomfortable with the Catholic-Protestant binary
- Give greater recognition and support to appropriate 'shared future' work by the churches and draw on their local knowledge

Policy Implications 2

- Pursue 'shared future' with caution. Premature challenges to cultural/religious security are likely to provoke a counterproductive backlash. Secularization may increase rather than diminish this risk.
- Public historical education, including regarding role of churches to accompany 'decade of anniversaries'
- Share experience and ideas with Dublin, Edinburgh, and London governments and beyond - NI less distinctive than often supposed!





Northern Ireland
Assembly



The Open University



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