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Symbols, Language, and Identity in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Like a number of divided societies in the contemporary era, Northern Ireland has found it difficult to reconcile differences in the use of symbols, language, and other artefacts of identity, in its movement towards the creation of a stable, post-conflict national state. Historically, Northern Ireland has been socially and politically divided between Protestant Unionists who see themselves as British and Roman Catholic Nationalists who predominantly aspire to Irish unity. Even today, when there is relative peace, following violence that lasted three decades, there is still division between these two communities; each one having their own flags, symbols, sporting allegiances, and national or cultural folklore, which some might see as irreconcilable. This paper then asks the question of whether two such opposing forces can ever be reconciled, and if the two parts of this divided society can come together as one, finding a means of tolerating, if not quite accepting, the symbols of the other, and managing to transcend the idea of communal ownership of such symbols. It goes on to assess the viewpoint that such reconciliation can only occur when the symbols of the two sides are given equal status and legitimacy in the 'language' of the State itself, and finds positive voices in the literature to support this stance, drawing on socio-cultural and feminist theory to also re-examine the whole concept of a 'nation state' in itself.

Keywords: *Northern Ireland, national identity, conflict resolution, reconciliation*