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Ethnicity and religion: Redefining the research agenda [1]

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ABSTRACT

This article maps some of the effects when ethnicity and religion overlap. Sometimes one category, with its related values and solidarity, is prioritised; this is expressed in the common view that religion is subsumed in ethnicity, and religious labels become markers of ethnic groups. Sometimes the effects are additive, each source of distinction and group solidarity strengthening the other. Sometimes there are interactive effects, with dynamic and emergent properties producing a more complex field of relationship. After tracing examples and arguing against a reductive approach, three avenues for future research are highlighted. First, mapping patterns of interrelation of ethnicity and religion in cultural distinction-making and group formation, showing the conditions and effects of each. Second, looking at the longer term historical, state and geo-political conditions for change in these relations. Third, reframing theories and concepts so better to grasp the range of ways religion and ethnicity function in social practice.

Ethnicity and religion: Redefining the research agenda

Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd

Religion has regained political prominence in the twenty first century and not least for the manner in which it intersects with ethnicity. Many ethnic conflicts have a strong religious dimension, and religion appears – for example in the role of fundamentalist religious groups at the centre of ethno-national movements – as a powerful force for mobilisation, solidarity and violence (Coakley, 2002; Smith, 2003; Fox, 2004). This raises important research questions. Historical and comparative research shows that religion and ethnicity can each act as a powerful base of identity, group formation and communal conflict. They can also overlap, with ethnic and religious boundaries coinciding, partially or completely, internally nested or intersecting. What happens in these cases? Is ethnicity or religion prioritised, and by whom, in what areas of life? Are the effects additive, with ethnic and religious distinctions each reinforcing the other? Do they coexist in tension? Or are there interactive effects with dynamic and emergent properties producing a much more complex field of relationships? When are there additive, when conflicting, when interactive effects?

Recent literature on ethnicity, ethnic boundaries and ethnic identities provides us with the conceptual tools to analyse these interrelations (Cornell, 1996; Lamont and Molnar, 2000; Brubaker, 2002; Jenkins 2008). Yet the literature on ethnicity has shown little interest in this question, operating with an inclusive concept of ethnicity whereby communities defined by religious labels are included in the general category of 'ethnic' (Chandra, 2006). The appeal of this approach for comparative study of ethnicity is that it extends the range of cases while bracketing or sidelining a potentially powerful and troublesome variable. But it comes at a cost. It misses the

insights that could be gained from comparing religion and ethnicity as contrasting sources of identity, community and conflict. Where it addresses the fact of overlap at all, it does so in a reductionist way, assuming that when ethnicity and religion are co-present, the specificity of the religious element can be ignored.

This volume looks at the interaction between religious and ethnic distinctions, both in cases where they appear to define the same populations (Malaysia, Northern Ireland, Ireland) and in cases where there is significant cross-cutting and differentiation (Ghana, Zimbabwe). It begins to map the possible effects of interaction, and aims to set an agenda for future research on the interrelation of ethnicity and religion. Part of that agenda is conceptual and theoretical. The very definition of ethnicity is contested. Narrowly conceived, ethnicity is usually conceived as a descent based category associated with territoriality and with a distinctive origin myth (Connor, 2004) while religion is concerned with the sacred and more narrowly again with confessional organisations and practices. This seemingly clear distinction, however, does not grasp the range of ways that religious and ethnic categories are used in practical processes of cultural distinction making, group formation and conflict. A key question is whether, in these situations, it is best to work with clear and narrow concepts of religion and ethnicity and build up to the complex identifications which are made by individuals and groups, or to break down the concepts of religion and ethnicity still further.

Most of the contemporary literature bypasses this question by bundling together ethnicity narrowly conceived and religion narrowly conceived into a broader inclusive notion of ethnicity (Chandra, 2006). This is a mistake for three reasons. First, and conceptually, to take such an indiscriminate approach to ethnicity is to focus on

boundaries rather than on the meaning and organisation of those boundaries (religious, or racial, or narrowly ethnic). This dissociation of boundary from content is, we believe, a wrong turn in the social sciences (Cornell, 1996; Ruane and Todd, 2004; Jenkins 2008). Symbolic boundaries and symbolic content, social boundaries and the intricacies of institutional organisation, are intrinsically interrelated (Jenkins, 2008, pp. 121-2; Barth, 1969, pp.14, 15, 30; Lamont and Molnar, 2002, p. 168). Secondly, and following from this, simply to bundle together religion and ethnicity is to fail to recognise the distinctive character each brings to symbolic distinction and social division. One would expect conflicts informed by religious distinctions to have a symbolic logic different from narrowly ethnic forms of conflict (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). If they do not, if instead they converge, this raises important questions about how and when symbolic distinctions translate into patterns of behavior, questions that require that we take the symbolic distinctions seriously. Third, and explanatorily, to take a broad and inclusive concept of ethnicity gives no explanatory purchase on whether or why in some circumstances ethnicity might lead to particularly persistent or intense forms of conflict.[1] Explanations of the particular persistence and intensity of ethnic conflict typically point to the characteristics of ethnicity narrowly conceived as descent, lineage, quasi-kin consciousness (Connor, 2004; Horowitz, 2001, pp. 45-49) and then – often – generalise illegitimately from a few (narrowly-defined) ethnic conflicts to all (broadly-defined) 'ethnic' conflicts.

A different set of questions arises when we begin to unpack the ways populations themselves understand the character of their communal bonds and the sources of their cultural distinction. In situations where religion and ethnicity are cross-cutting distinctions, individuals routinely choose to prioritise between them, but we know little about why and when they make the choices they do. For example, in some

situations both religion and nation-hood are in question, as historically was the case in the ethno-religious shatterzones on the Rhine. In other cases, religious distinction exists within an ethno-national consensus (as in France or Great Britain), or ethno-national distinction within a religious consensus (as in the Basque Country, Catalonia, Galicia) (Coakley, 2009). Even when ethnicity and religion appear to coincide in defining the same populations (in Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland and Malaysia), they define them in different ways, with different prioritisation of aims and different permeability of boundaries. Actors not only choose to highlight one or other distinction, but distinguish amongst themselves on these grounds. In Northern Ireland, whether actors define themselves in terms of theological beliefs and religious practices, or in terms of ethnic descent groups, in terms of nationality or of key moral-political values affects not only the persistence and permeability of boundaries, but also their precise place: to what group Catholic unionists, or dissenting Protestants are assigned or welcomed. In Israel, broad ethno-religious alliances were forged by activists who quite strategically chose differentially to emphasise religious or political factors for different sub-groups (Shenhav, 2003). In each of these cases, a broad coincidence of religious and ethnic distinction disguises intense intra-group variation and contention over the nature of the distinctions with very strong fundamentalist religious clusters nested within the divided populations. Whether religious or secular clusters take the lead in mobilisation and representation is of major political import, with implications that spread well beyond the conflict-zone itself into the mobilisation of ethnic (or ethno-religious) diasporas and regional or global religious communities

As an initial step in analysis, a dichotomous distinction between 'high' and 'low' ethnicity and religiosity results in a simple schema :

TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE

TABLE ONE

		Religious identity and group solidarity	
		High	Low
Ethnic identity and group solidarity	High	1	2
	Low	3	4

Typical examples of (1) would be Irish Catholic nationalism, Ulster unionism and Zionism, typical examples of (2) would be Basque and Catalan nationalism, typical examples of (3) would be the religiously-transformative groups described by Ganiel in this volume, and typical examples of (4) would be mere categories – Ulster Scots in the United States - with a particular provenance but neither ethnic solidarity nor religiosity.

In practice 'high' and 'low' are opposite ends of separate continua, involving intensity, salience, solidarity, conceptual thickness or thinness, permeability or closure, exclusivity or inclusivity of boundaries, institutionalisation, politicisation (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998 ; Ashmore et al, 2004 ; Wimmer, 2008). The different measures do not converge. Thin identities can be held with great intensity while thick identities may be unmarked in the everyday run of life: Englishness is a thick, highly institutionalised identity but is not normally highlighted, indeed researchers have found respondents avoiding the category (Condor, 2000 ; Edensor, 2002 ; Fenton, 2007). We need to allow for much finer shading and more varied combinations. We also need to allow for the variation produced by individuals, groups, activists and

states constantly renegotiating and reprioritising and redefining the place, salience and meanings of boundaries.

We asked the contributors to this volume to discuss intersections of ethnicity and religion in cases where they had undertaken research, taking account of at least some of these distinctions and at least some of the questions outlined above. We begin with a case where a multiplicity of religious divisions crosscut a multiplicity of ethnic divisions – Ghana. Arnim Langer shows how individuals in Ghana – from elite student and non-elite backgrounds – hold each set of distinctions to be salient, but attach very different relative importance to them in different contexts. Ethnicity is held to be important in the public sphere, particularly by the up-coming elite who anticipate a level of preference or discrimination on its basis, but it is not important in private life where inter-ethnic marriages are common. Religion, not important in public, is held to be very important in private life and there is widespread opposition to marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims. This lack of cross-over between publicly institutionalised ethnicity and private religiosity disconfirms those theories that see ethnicity as important publicly *because* important personally. It confirms how the personal salience of distinctions is not readable from objective factors – for example ethnic intermarriage takes place despite major language difference.

Turning to a case of substantive overlap between ethnicity and religion in Malaysia, Graham Brown analyses the increasing importance of religion in state discourse and practice. Conventional explanations see this as reflecting a popular response to the disruption of traditional identities brought by globalisation and urbanisation. Brown shows that this is too simple. While there is some decline in the reported salience of ethnicity vis-à-vis religion, this is complexly structured at the popular level and

insufficient to explain the 'desecularising' shift at state level. He argues that the change is a consequence of the increasing top-down 'legibility' of religion as a means of differentiating, and 'disciplining' the population and exerting social control. Here clear political interests in distinction dominate over any gradual social change in boundaries.

In Northern Ireland, state (British and Irish) interests in blurring distinction give greater openings to popular attempts to renegotiate boundaries. Three papers look at the variation between groups and over time. Mitchell points to the growing tendency in the literature to see religion as an important and independent factor in individual motivation and group formation even in cases of 'ethnic' conflict. Working from qualitative and biographical material relating to working class Protestant loyalists in Northern Ireland, where the ethnic and religious distinction coincide, she shows the tensions within the ethnic/religious mix and the variety of ways that individuals choose to prioritise ethnicity or religion. In this situation, individuals hold both sets of distinctions as salient in most aspects of their lives. But the perceived interrelations vary quite dramatically, producing a complex set of relationships in which religion and ethnicity offer contradictory imperatives to individuals, each salient, neither dominating fully the other.

Lowe and Muldoon take a wider sample of respondents from Northern Ireland and the border counties, covering areas with high experience of violence and with low experience of violence. They look at the different combinations of self-reported religious and ethnic categories and the varying degrees of 'collective self-esteem' associated with the categories in each case. Their study confirms the existence of

unexpected identity combinations (Protestant Irish, Catholic British) even in areas of high experience of violence where polarisation might be expected. Most significantly, it gives quantitative proof that the strength of identification varies with the interrelation of ethnic and religious categories. The 'expected' combinations (Protestant British, Catholic Irish) in general produce stronger identification, particularly in areas that have experienced violence. This raises a further intriguing question, whether violence precludes the normal critical mechanisms by which, in peaceful societies, individuals partially distance themselves from collective categories which have the potential for mobilisation (see Condor, 2000).

Todd takes the Northern Ireland case as a study of how religion, ethnicity and politics intertwine with dynamic and emergent effects, creating very powerful foci of solidarity and value. Rather than simply an effect of religious ideology or ethnic solidarity, singly or in addition, she argues that these foci of identification and value are produced by the normal processes of cognitive generalisation in an institutionally divided society. Their rational basis and general form make them the stronger and the more persistent, while allowing a plurality of perspectives to coexist within an overarching opposition. She argues that this explains many of the paradoxes noted in qualitative studies of Northern Ireland, while predicting quite radical change in the post-settlement period. In this process of change, religious resources come to be used for transformative purposes.

We conclude the volume with two explicitly comparative papers that deal with the intersection of religion and ethnicity. Ganiel studies the processes by which religious values come to be used to criticise ethnic divisions. She shows remarkably similar

mechanisms involved in two contrasting cases: a situation of cross-cutting ethnic and religious cleavages (Zimbabwe) and a situation of seemingly coinciding cleavages (Northern Ireland). Taking a multi-ethnic congregation in Harare and a 'post-evangelical' community in Belfast, she shows formally similar sequences of relative isolation, safety and equality through which, despite the different contexts and religious content, the rich emancipatory potential of religious tradition can be freed to criticise ethnic institutionalisation. She argues that such 'religious havens' function as mechanisms for disrupting long entrenched feedback patterns of opposition and conflict, whether ethno-religious, as in Northern Ireland, or ethno-racial, as in Zimbabwe.

Ruane addresses the question of religious peoplehood and its intersection with ethnic peoplehood. Despite their different bases, religious and ethnic peoplehood share many attributes and may powerfully reinforce each other. Their relative importance as sources of community and identity, however, varies between cases and over time. He compares a case where religion and ethnicity were once of high importance but where ethnicity has now become recessive (Protestants in the Republic of Ireland) with one where the sense of peoplehood was always purely religious (French Protestants). One implication of the analysis is to question inclusive definitions of ethnicity which uncritically assimilate into the category 'ethnicity' groups whose communal basis and identity is religious or territorial or political.

These case studies point to three interrelated avenues for further research. First, the tracing of different patterns of interrelation of ethnicity and religion, their conditions and their effects, is a research priority. The articles in this volume show that even in

cases where there appears to be coincidence between religious and ethnic boundaries, the highlighting of one or other distinction may have major political consequences. Tensions and prioritisations between ethnic and religious imperatives are worked out at subgroup and even at individual level within the limits of state-led policies and requirements. The articles point to some of the factors that condition choice: historical situation, state policies, experience of violence, institutionalisation of distinction, and situational understandings and imperatives. They also point to the very wide range of dimensions of variation: different degrees of institutionalisation and politicisation, intensity, salience, 'thickness' of identity content, associated values, associated narratives, asserted collective self-esteem and solidarity. Although the possible combinations are limitless, clear patterns emerged in the articles in this volume. In particular, religion turned out to be much more than a residual category, with religious resurgence evident among urban Malays and young Protestants in Northern Ireland and, where ethnic and religious imperatives differed, the religious was by no means always trumped by the ethnic. In some cases, religious values and imperatives gave direction to seemingly secular interests and solidarities or even, in Walter Benjamin's image (1969, p. 253), controlled them. In other cases there was a division of labour, with religion playing a key role in organising some areas of life and not others. In still other cases, the potentially critical and even emancipatory resources of religion were clear, although it required quite specific institutional and organisational opportunities to allow individuals and groups to make use of these resources.

Second, comparative research on the variation of patterns over time and between cases is necessary, taking into account issues of institutionalisation, power and the state. This is a presupposed background to many of the essays in this volume. Of

course the historical contexts which explain the different degrees of overlap of confessional and ethnic boundaries are themselves varied. In Europe, the context of was one of wars of religion and a geographical division between Protestant, Catholic, and mixed regions (Ruane, 2006; Coakley, 2009; Ruane and Todd, 2009). The rule of *cuius regio, cuius religio*, meant that state- and nation-building were religiously motivated and organised through religious networks, making use of religious resources (Hastings, 1997; Smith, 2003; Gorski, 2003). Where they survived, religious minorities were politically and usually also nationally marginalized. The timing and forms of political emancipation make a major difference to the present state of minority-majority relationships (Ruane, 2006; Ruane and Todd, 2009; Cabanel, 2009; Rigoulot, 2009). In many parts of Africa and Asia, on the other hand, the historical context is one of colonisation and in-migration of religiously distinct groups, either en masse, as in some of the settler colonies (South Africa, Zimbabwe), or as workers or slaves brought in by the colonial power (Malaysia, Kenya and the Caribbean countries). In addition, proselytising and mass conversion further complicated the mix. Where religious distinction was connected to state power and/or colonial economy, it could take on many of the attributes often attributed to ethnicity, including a sense of grievance/superiority, a particular world view, a sense of solidarity (cf Akenson, 1992; Smith, 2003; Ruane this volume). Where stateness and colonialism converged in upholding religious distinction, as in Northern Ireland case, ethnicity and religion were particularly closely intertwined (Ruane and Todd, 1996). This is not, of course, of merely historical interest. States still make use of religious distinction as ways of 'disciplining' and ordering the population (Brown this volume) while activists use religion to form new national and trans-national political alliances. Relatively little work has been done on the historical variation in the interrelations of

ethnicity and religion over time. In this respect, one-case studies are particularly useful in showing when and where state interests and state highlighting of one set of categories, when and where wider societal processes of change are important in explaining variation. The Irish case is one where the relative roles of ethnicity and religion change quite dramatically over time, inviting historico-sociological analysis (Ruane and Todd, 1996, pp 22-25, 28-30, 34-7; Ruane and Butler, 2007). Important too is the experience of violence. Research suggests that violence has paradoxical effects, at once increasing the salience and collective self-esteem associated with ethnic and religious categories (Lowe and Muldoon, this volume), thinning out the content of the categories (Todd et al, 2009) and, at the limit, encouraging brutally strategic action and category crossing (Kalyvas, 2008). Here further comparative study is indispensable.

A third important area for future research is conceptual and theoretical. Several of the articles in this volume suggest that the seemingly clear-cut distinction between religious and ethnic groups masks many common elements, and that the classic view that ethnicity trumps religion is unfounded. The case studies discussed here suggest that the paradigmatic cases of ethno-national conflict (in single religion states like Spain) or reformation conflicts (in single nation states like Germany or France) may in fact be exceptional. While a conceptual distinction between religious and ethnic categories is essential, once embedded in institutions and entrenched as reference points for group solidarity, each category is capable of taking on forms, functions and meanings associated with the other. Religious formation can involve a sense of peoplehood normally associated with ethnicity, although with explicit denial of ethnic or national difference, and ethnic distinction can be permeated by religious values. In

short, the ways ordinary people construct and understand their solidarities and their identities are at once more subtle and more powerful than our analytic categories. If the concepts of ethnicity and religion are indispensable, they are so as abstractions, analytic building blocks, from which the real forms of communities must be reconstructed. A comparative research agenda has to look at the ways in which conflicts of interest are embued with values and sacred quality from religion, even while these values take on a communal (quasi-ethnic) specificity.

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[1] Chandra (2006) argues that ethnicity per se does not matter. Wimmer (2008) who provides a strong processual argument as to why it matters when it does, relies on theories of networks and boundaries which are not specific to ethnicity as such.

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