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ABSTRACT

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It is a common misconception that religion in Northern Ireland is politically important only for Protestants, whereas for Catholics the causes of conflict are social, economic and political. Despite very high levels of religiosity amongst Catholics, faith is generally viewed as something located in the private sphere that does not spill over into the public realm. This paper challenges the assumption of the social insignificance of Catholicism and urges re-examination of how the relationships between religion and politics are conceived and measured for this group. It argues that analysis must extend beyond linkages between theological beliefs and political preferences. In fact other dimensions of religion, such as its role in the construction of community and identity as well as its institutional influence, are much more useful in understanding its political significance. The paper concludes that when these dimensions of religion are examined, we find that Catholicism has been enormously important in the politics of conflict in Northern Ireland. It concludes that after the Good Friday Agreement, the political roles of Catholicism have changed somewhat, but have by no means disappeared.

Publication information

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Claire Mitchell was the Guinness Newman Fellow in British-Irish Studies in University College Dublin, 2001-03. She gained her PhD from the Department of Politics in University College Dublin in 2001, specialising in religion and politics in contemporary Northern Ireland. She is currently a lecturer in the School of Sociology and Social Policy, Queen's University, Belfast, and is engaged in post-doctoral research on evangelicalism and political change in Britain and Ireland.

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INTRODUCTION

The religious dimensions of politics and the political dimensions of religion in Northern Ireland have been much under-estimated. Whilst some exception is made for a relatively small group of Protestant fundamentalists, religion is generally written off as a mere ethnic marker (McGarry and O'Leary, 1995; Coulter, 1997; Clayton, 1998). In particular, few studies have recognised the political significance of Catholicism. What literature does exist deals mainly with the institutional relationship between the Catholic Church and political structures (Fulton, 1991: 2002) or the political attitudes of clergy (McElroy, 1991). Whilst extremely important, the institutional dimensions of Catholicism are only one of a variety of ways in which it plays a role in social and political relationships in Northern Ireland. This paper widens the debate by exploring three ways in which Catholicism plays a political role in Northern Ireland—through institutional involvement, religious practice and the construction of community, and through providing an ideological resource for identification. Layered up on top of one another, it is clear that the social roles of Catholicism are rather pronounced. Each dimension tends to reinforce the others. Thus, the paper holds that Catholicism has been just as politically important as Protestantism, if not more so, but in rather different ways. The paper concludes by mapping recent changes in the religious and political landscape for Catholics in Northern Ireland and asks whether or not these public roles of religion will be sustained in the future.

CATHOLICISM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Whilst nearly nine out of ten people select a religious identification in Northern Ireland, conflict has not been essentially, or even primarily, a religious one. However, religion has played an important contributing role. Religion has overlapped with ethno-national, economic and cultural differences since the seventeenth century, providing institutional support, language, values and often leadership to Catholic and Protestant groups (Ruane and Todd, 1996). Moreover, the role of churches in structuring social, as well as religious, life has led to high levels of physical and ideological segregation between communities (Morrow et al, 1991). Whilst the churches have often spoken out against violence, their main interest through conflict was to locate themselves in the political mainstream of their respective communities.

In all, 40% of the population of Northern Ireland identified themselves as Catholics in the 2001 census (and 46% as Protestants). Along practically all indicators, levels of religiosity amongst this group are extremely high. Although there has been some decline in church attendance over the last 30 years, when weekly churchgoing

stood at 95% (Rose, 1971: 264), it remains strong: two thirds attend at least once a week, 11% at least once a month, 13% less frequently and only 9% never attend (NILT, 2001). In line with European patterns of secularisation, however, attendance is lowest amongst the youngest, with 45% of those under 35 attending church at least once a week compared with 70% of the over-45s (NILT, 2001).

Beliefs are also strong amongst Catholics, indicating that religion is much more important than just an ethnic marker in Northern Ireland. Very few of those who claim a Catholic identity report no belief in God or no personal God (5%)—58% have no doubts that God exists. In all, 87% believe in heaven; 70% believe in hell; 73% in miracles; 75% pray at least once a week and 66% describe themselves as at least somewhat religious (NILT, 1998). All of these items are between 10-30% higher than they are for Protestants. Overall then, in terms of religious beliefs, Catholics in Northern Ireland are amongst the most religious groups in Europe, even more so than their Protestant neighbours or their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland.

Catholics in Northern Ireland are not just religious, however, they are also rather conservative. Amongst Catholic churchgoers in Belfast, Boal, Keane and Livingstone (1997) found a high degree of orthodoxy and obedience to Church teachings. Overall, 48% of Catholic churchgoers were found to be of high orthodoxy, 38% of moderate, and only 14% of low orthodoxy.[1]

Whilst this seems to indicate that Catholic churchgoers are rather legalistic, Boal et al (1997) point out how, after the second Vatican council, ostensible obedience to rules camouflages a growing liberalisation, sense of individualism and disobedience in respect of formal religious requirements (see also Inglis, 1998). This change must also be seen in the light of the recent domestic problems of the Catholic Church in Ireland—including issues of child abuse—as well as the increased questioning of authority in secular Irish society. The large decline in numbers attending confession throughout Ireland is well documented (Inglis, 1998: 209), and almost half of those surveyed by Boal et al (1997) considered individual conscience, rather than Church teaching, to be the most important guide to their decision-making. This was particularly the case amongst younger Catholics who displayed a more "à-la-carte" attitude to Church teachings.

To summarise, whilst there have been some changes towards liberalisation and individualisation, Catholics in Northern Ireland continue to be clustered on the side of conservatism compared to their European counterparts and beliefs and practices remain very high. However, these figures do not reveal much about the social or political significance of religion for Catholics in Northern Ireland. It could be that religion persists, as Luckmann suggested (1967), in privatised form—consequential

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[1] This classification was made in relation to respondents' levels of belief in a range of Church teachings, for example the resurrection of Christ, the concept of sin, the Immaculate Conception, Papal Infallibility and the Catholic Church as the "One True Church".

for people's inner lives but not the social world. It is to this question that this paper now turns.

THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CATHOLICISM

There are extremely high correlations between religious (Catholic), national (Irish) and political (nationalist) identifications (Breen and Hayes, 1997; NILT, 2001). Similar correlations can be observed between religious identification and party preference and constitutional preference (Boal et al, 1997; NILT, 2001). However, despite high levels of religiosity amongst Catholics, religious identity is generally seen as marking out communal boundaries whilst religion *per se* has little effect on political identity or attitudes (Rose, 1971; MacAllister, 1983; McGarry and O'Leary, 1995; Coulter, 1997; Clayton, 1998).

This argument has arisen from the fact that there seems to be no significant relationship between strength of theological beliefs and strength of political position amongst Catholics. Strong Catholic beliefs do not demarcate political "ultras" in the same way as strong Protestant beliefs do. In fact, Boal et al (1997: 67) found that despite internal theological diversity, Catholic churchgoers are almost unanimously united in being non-British, non-Ulster and non-Unionist. The effect of beliefs on party preference is not significant. Similarly, the effect of churchgoing on political attitudes is negligible for Catholics (if anything, frequent churchgoers are more likely to prefer the SDLP; NILT, 2001).

Where religious beliefs do appear to demarcate attitudinal differences is in relation to social mixing. Boal et al's (1997) study highlights the trend—both within Catholicism and Protestantism—for those with more liberal theological beliefs to be more open to having neighbours of the other religion, more willing to participate in ecumenical services, and more tolerant of mixed marriage and integrated education (1997: 44-54). Liberal theology and increased openness to mixing, as might be expected, was found amongst the youngest age groups (18-24s) and amongst the university educated, leading Boal et al to argue that attitudes to mixing may be differentiated by an age effect rather than theologically.[2]

Overall then, statistics show that theological perspective seems to make little difference to Catholics' political preferences, but does have some impact on attitudes to community relationships. This has led to a widespread view amongst commentators and observers of Northern Ireland politics, that religion must only be politically important for Protestants. Catholic grievances are held to be influenced, not by faith, but by the quest for social, economic and political equality (for a summary see McGarry and O'Leary, 1995: 205-207; for historical examples see Foster, 1988: 86-89; Rafferty, 1994: 28-29). There is no Catholic equivalent to Ian Paisley, or the

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[2] Overall, only 28% of Catholic churchgoers said they would be happy to marry a Northern Ireland Protestant. Amongst the 18-24 age group, 62% said they would be willing to marry a Northern Ireland Protestant (still less than an English, or black, partner). Amongst the university educated, 46% said they would marry a Northern Ireland Protestant (Boal et al, 1997: 50-51).

Free Presbyterian Church—who are heavily involved in politics through the Democratic Unionist Party (Bruce, 1986). Rose found that five out of six Catholics said that there was nothing they disliked about Protestant churches (1971: 256). Catholics are more likely to support ecumenism (at least in principle, if not in practice), and socially, are more likely to be in favour of cross-community mixing than Protestants (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 76; Boal et al, 1997). This led Opsahl to conclude (1993: 96), that whilst many Protestants' attitudes to politics can be explained "almost entirely in religious terms", "Catholics do not have the same problem with Protestantism as a religion, and are more tolerant of Protestants as individuals … The Catholic complaint is still with the politicians and the state".

This analysis is shared by most modern republicans. Many, such as Martin McGuinness and Mitchel McLaughlin, claim that their political beliefs are the sole product of Protestant discrimination during the Stormont years and British misrule after 1969—and that religion has influenced them in no way (McIntyre, 2000). Indeed, there is a long-standing tension between republicans and the Catholic Church, and many have felt alienated by the hierarchy's lack of support for them.[3]

All of this leaves us with a puzzle. Religious affiliation is still the dominant cleavage in Northern Ireland and Catholics are very religious along all indicators, but this appears at first glance to have few social or political effects. Can this really be the case?

MEASURING THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF RELIGION

There are three main reasons why it seems on the surface that Catholicism lacks social and political significance in Northern Ireland. Firstly, as Rose argued in 1971, the strength of opposition between communities has papered over great variations within them. This applies to theological perspectives, just as class and gender differences, all of which have been engulfed by a deeper communal cleavage. Rose argued (1971: 265) that religiosity did not make a difference to Catholic politics through the civil rights period, as most Catholics shared similar political grievances anyway. Similarly, it is possible that high rates of religiosity overall mask the specific social roles of religion. If only 9% of Catholics never attend mass, it is unlikely that churchgoing will mark out any specific attitudes. Secondly, it is well documented that moderate views are always over-emphasised in surveys in Northern Ireland (Whyte, 1990). After all, what churchgoer or believer in Northern Ireland is going to state their religion as a source of conflict? But there is an even more compelling reason why it is premature to dismiss religion on the basis of such findings. This is, thirdly, the issue of definition and measurement. What survey evidence ex-

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[3] For example, Brenda McCartney, republican ex-prisoner states, "Up until the troubles started, I just accepted that the priest was the one you revered and respected, and the hierarchy would look after you and all your interests: you were the flock, the sheep. But I've seen that the sheep can be savaged, the sheep can be stood upon, and the sheep can bleat—and they will turn a blind eye. That is my experience" (Conway Mill, 1995: 12).

ists primarily measures theological beliefs, or church attendance. Yet, these indices only skim the surface of religious meaning and function in society.

Indeed there is much debate on what exactly on should count as religion. Religion is often defined in a substantive way—as a means of relating man to God, answering "ultimate questions" or pertaining to the supernatural (Glock and Stark, 1965; Wilson, 1976; Tillich, 1963). When seeking to evaluate religion in this way, commentators generally look to "measurable" indicators of personal religiosity such as belief in certain doctrines or the supernatural. Others prefer functional definitions. This does not mean that we must go as far as Durkheim (1915) when he argues that religion is to be defined as the collective conscience of society and measured by ritual. Durkheim for example argues that it is the communal, expressive roles of religion, particularly in the reinforcement of group identity and the direction of action, that matter. Through meeting up together and practicing the same rituals, feelings of belonging are generated and a sense of shared views can be reinforced. Other theorists such as Marx and Gramsci are more concerned with religion's relationship to power, highlighting how churches and states use religion as a form of social control in an attempt to spread ideological hegemony. Religio-political alliances may form as churches endorse political agencies, and vice versa, to consolidate their social control. Another approach is to examine where religion intersects with ethnicity. Demerath for example (2001) argues that *cultural religion* is "an identification with a religious heritage without any religious participation or a sense of personal involvement per se" (2001: 59), similar to Bellah's (1967) "civil religion".

When faced with this array of definitions of religious meanings and functions, it may be difficult for the analyst to decide what to rule in and out. Indeed, most problems arise from an over-clear distinction between what religion *is* and what it *does*. In fact, the substantive dimensions of religion (beliefs, feelings, practices) often overlap with functional dimensions (acting as social cement or social control). They can reinforce each other in a complex two-way relationship. Analysis of Catholicism in Northern Ireland then must take on board this blurring between religious substance and function. So the question becomes one, not of looking for correlations between religious devotion and types of politics, but of the roles religion can play in politics for a community in conflict.

The sections that follow present a multi-levelled analysis of religious significance in Northern Ireland. The paper argues that Catholicism has been politically important in terms of religious institutions and political power, religious practice and community-building and also in terms of religious ideas and ethnic identifications. It has not been very politically salient insofar as doctrine or theology has influenced social action. The discussion is informed by Fulton's (2002) suggestion that Protestantism and Catholicism in Northern Ireland can be examined on their own terms. Just because theology is socially salient for many Protestants, it does not necessarily follow that religion will function in the same way for Catholics. In this way, the discussion leaves the theoretical debates about religious meaning and function open in order to better frame the analysis.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND POLITICAL POWER

The Catholic Church in Northern Ireland has been much more than just an interest group to be consulted in nationalist politics. Whilst there has been consistent clerical condemnation of secret societies and republican violence, the Church has always been at the heart of the nationalist political mainstream. The Catholic Church has no parallel with Protestant clerical politicians; however, it has continually articulated opinions and interpretations of the political situation in Northern Ireland. It is rare for priests to consciously promote party politics of one kind or another (McElroy, 1991: 78-79), but they have been consistent in their representations of the Catholic community, and mediations with those outside. This does not mean that the Catholic Church's *raison d'être* is to engender ideological monopoly in Northern Ireland. However, their location in the political nationalist mainstream has given them a unique position from which to promote Catholic values and teachings. Similarly, its support has lent added legitimacy to nationalist politics—so the relationship is mutually beneficial.

The Church has frequently been thrust into playing a political role in Ireland because it has been the institution best placed to provide stability and coherence for the Catholic community. Whilst this was unofficial throughout most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Church became a permanent participant in the political sphere in the nineteenth century as it threw its weight behind campaigns for Catholic Emancipation and home rule. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at a formative time in Irish politics, the Church was extremely close to Irish nationalism in general, and the emerging northern Catholic community in particular. Harris (1993: 262) argues that the Church soon became an integral part of nationalist politics in the newly established Northern Ireland and maintains that it was responsible in no small way for the delay of northern nationalists in recognising the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland state.

Throughout the Stormont years of devolved government in Northern Ireland (1922-1971), the Catholic Church continued to identify itself with the struggles and desires of the community. In the late 1960s, Bishop Edward Daly and his fellow clerics attended civil rights demonstrations in Derry. McElroy (1991: 15) argues that, given the unique position of priests within the Catholic community, this encouraged participation in civil rights activities and added respectability to the campaign as a whole. Amongst some of the most effective human rights campaigners in Northern Ireland have been priests, for example Fr Denis Faul of Dungannon, and Fr Raymond Murray of Armagh—and during the 1970s and 1980s, priests (although not the Church hierarchy) made pronouncements on the inhumanity and immorality of British government policies such as internment, the use of plastic bullets, interrogation in depth and the supergrass system (McElroy, 1991).

The political role of the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 is less prominent than during the eras of civil rights and the hunger strikes, but it is by no means absent. The Church continues to make political pronouncements, speak up for its people, negotiate on their behalf, and provide political guidance. The current Archbishop of Armagh, Dr Sean Brady, is perceived

as an active figure in political life, and has been criticised by unionists for "interfering" in the peace process (Taylor, 2000).[4] Whilst strongly supportive of the Agreement, the Church continually seeks to locate itself in the nationalist mainstream underlining Catholics' concerns about policing, decommissioning and demilitarisation.

At various junctures, Church leaders have also tried to act as political mediators, seeking to lessen tensions by deputations and negotiations with governments, parties and paramilitary organisations. For example, Cardinal Fiaich and Bishop Edward Daly tried to defuse the hunger strikes in the early 1980s; Fr Alex Reid mediated with the IRA in the late 1980s and 1990s to encourage them in from the political cold. Clergy were engaged in a consultation process with the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) in 1997. More recently, a former Derry-based priest, Fr Denis Bradley, who in the past has acted as an intermediary between the IRA and the British and Irish governments, encouraged the IRA to disarm, not in surrender to unionists, but at the behest of the Catholic community (*Irish News*, April 1999). Fr Denis Faul, generally associated with more radical political views, has urged Catholics to join the new RUC (editorial, *Irish News*, November 2000). Thus whilst in contemporary Northern Irish politics the Church's input may not be one of critical political significance, it remains symbolically important, maintaining the impression that the Church is a central spokesperson for its people.

Church personnel have also been involved in political mediation at grassroots as well as elite level. In the early 1990s a group of Jesuit priests influenced by liberation theology picked out a deprived Catholic housing estate in Portadown, county Armagh, to live and work amongst the local community. Coincidentally, this area became entangled in a lengthy and bitter dispute between Orangemen and Catholic residents over the right to march down the Garvaghy Road, a now predominantly Catholic part of mainly Protestant Portadown. The Jesuits became involved with the Garvaghy Road Residents Association, who held their meetings in the Jesuit house. So too, priests have been at the forefront of community relations in interface areas of Belfast, for example, Fr Aiden Troy's negotiations amidst the Holy Cross school disputes in 2001 and 2002. Fr Troy walked every day for three months with the 225 girls to Holy Cross Primary in the Ardoyne escorted by the security forces, as loyalists tried to block their path. Again, Catholic figures are seen to be at the heart of the community's struggles—their pastoral roles deepened and widened by the necessities of dealing with conflict.

Before moving on it is incumbent upon us to dispel some myths about the Catholic Church and radical republican politics. In fact, the Church has historically balanced on a tightrope between indigenous nationalist groups and the British establishment. Although it had been persecuted, by the early nineteenth century, Catholicism in Ulster was remarkable in its loyalty to the British crown and constitution, having supported the Act of Union (between Ireland and Britain) in 1800 (Rafferty, 1994:

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[4] Ulster Unionist John Taylor, for example, has accused senior clergy, including Sean Brady, of interfering in politics by trying to pressurise the British government on policing reform. The response of the clergy was that Taylor was paranoid (*Irish News*, October 2000).

127). Naturally conservative, it has often been reluctant to assume an anti-state position. As such, the institutional Church has always tended to distrust radical political movements, and has consistently opposed armed republicanism. The Catholic Church has continually denounced the modern IRA, banning membership in 1935 and making frequent references to the sinfulness of the organisation (Gallagher and Worrall, 1982: 198).

However, whilst tough on republicanism, the Catholic Church has retained a certain amount of ambiguity regarding republicans. Radical movements have been condemned, but their members have rarely been totally isolated from the religious community. Some lower clergy have maintained links with republicans and paramilitaries and have not been excommunicated. In the early 1970s there was a degree of clerical ambivalence about violence, and involvement in the Central Citizen's Defence Committee (CCDC), which included members of the IRA (O'Connor, 1993: 276). The Church also participates in politics symbolically. The vast majority of republican paramilitaries have received conventional Catholic funerals, which are not universally approved of, but which create the illusion of unity of purpose between the Church and "the struggle". Indeed, until the ceasefire in 1994 some lower clergy did appear to empathise with, if not support, the IRA's campaign (Buckley, 1994; McVeigh, 1989). But this is not the norm. In 1991 McElroy (1991: 66, 75) found that whilst 91% of Catholic clergy surveyed were in favour of Irish unity, 88% said they would be most likely to vote for the SDLP at the next election and just 4% for Sinn Féin. Thus the idea of a large body of dissident priests giving support to the IRA is fiction.

Despite this, the Church's relationship with nationalist politics has been close. Whilst this closeness is in a sense organic—priests, politicians and nationalists share a communal background—it is hard to deny that the relationship has been mutually beneficial. Political actors can sustain credibility by nurturing the ideological link whilst the Church can appear to be at the heart of the nationalist consensus. The Church enjoys a close (although unofficial) relationship with the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Although the SDLP have made efforts to widen the scope of their appeal and have rejected any formal relationship with the Church, the circumstances of Northern Ireland politics have often meant that they have been seen to be voicing a similar message or working together for certain issues or in certain areas. Their relationship is not one of ideological unity, but often of practical co-operation. Whilst some in the SDLP would prefer that the relationship was not so intimate (Murray, 1998), others know that closeness to the Church does them no harm. As O'Connor (1993, 290) remarked, "it would be difficult not to notice how nice they are about each other".

Even Sinn Féin were to be found trying to patch up their historically uneasy relationship with the Catholic Church in the wake of the current peace process: Gerry Adams said he appreciated the "radical efforts" being made by the Church for peace, whilst Cardinal Cathal Daly argued that Sinn Féin had an important political contribution to make and should be admitted into talks (*Irish News*, January 1996). The renewed relationship was highly significant, as it has helped Sinn Féin relocate themselves within the mainstream of the Catholic community. Again both sets of

actors may be close anyway in terms of what they feel is best for the community, but the issue is more politically pertinent than this. Through nurturing this relationship, the Church's symbolic power is emphasised and Sinn Féin are given added legitimacy. As in the past, religious endorsements of political actors could be swapped for Church-friendly policies such as the maintenance of denominational education (which nationalists rarely raise as a priority area for policy change). The cultivation of nationalist political consensus helps safeguard the position of both religious and secular institutions.

To summarise, the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland operates as a political actor insofar that it locates itself within the nationalist mainstream, interprets and advises on political issues and represents the Catholic community through political mediations. It does not get involved in paramilitary politics nor does it have direct influence on state policy. However, by occupying this position at the heart of the community, the Church is in a unique position to argue for it own ideological agenda. It is not that priests tell people how to vote (McEvoy, 1991); rather, by addressing current issues that affect Catholics, the Church has a platform from which to promote its own perspectives and values. Likewise, nationalist and republican politicians maintain a close relationship with the Church to add legitimacy to their message and in return often shy away from introducing policies that would incur the Church's opposition.

Indeed, the Catholic Church is a powerful agency in society, not just a neutral communal mediator. It is an organisation with beliefs, goals and strategies. It has clear ideas on the difference between right and wrong, and the meaning of the good life. Its purpose is to influence people. Presently in a conservative phase, it is an organisation with a mission, and its articulation and representation of community views is filtered through Catholic beliefs and positions. However a Marxist interpretation alone, of a power-bloc alliance of the Catholic Church and nationalist politicians attempting to gain social control by spreading ideological hegemony, does not suffice to explain the complexity of the relationship between the Church and the Catholic community. It is not simply the case that people are, as Fulton argues (1991: 227), "the real subjects of the battle for domination"—pawns in a religio-political power struggle. He says that Roman Catholic bishops are the intellectuals organising the beliefs of Catholic-nationalists in a conservative way (1991: 170). However, high orthodoxy and elite activity are not the best indicators for the influence of religion. By arguing for religion as imposed ruling ideas (Fulton, 1991: 24), not much space is left for alternative social or spiritual dimensions of religion. Of course analysis of structure and politics is integral to an understanding of Catholicism in Northern Ireland. But whilst these provide possibilities and constraints to human action, they do not totally control it. In fact, the relationship between the Church and the Catholic people is better described as co-dependent. Religious institutions do not just use people—people also use them. It is to the bottom-up dimensions of the link between religion and politics that we now turn in a discussion of religious practice and community-building.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING

The concept and practice of community provides the key to unlock the public significance of Catholicism in contemporary Northern Ireland. It is historically, eschatologically, organisationally and behaviourally central. Despite some decline in the Church's public profile in recent years, its structures continue to be heavily utilised by its members to organise daily life. High levels of participation in religious activities, as well as the involvement of the Church in everyday life, have meant that the *Catholic* aspect of community has been much more than nominal. It is unnecessary to take a strong functionalist view, that the essence of religion is to promote social unity—or a strong Durkheimian view, that through ritual the Catholic community upholds its own collective conscience—in order to appreciate the importance of the community-building functions of Catholicism in Northern Ireland.

Firstly, the concept of community is central in Catholicism, which is a ritualistic and socially-oriented religion.

> The sense of church is at the core of the experience of Catholic Christianity … Religion is not just a private affair, but is rooted in the experience of a faith community … the individual Catholic does not seek God alone, but by drawing close to God's people (Crilly, 1998: 41).

Although sometimes more ideal than real, over centuries of division, a Church-based understanding of community evolved amongst the Catholic community. Todd argues (1990: 35) that before the second Vatican council, the Church had a theological interest in unity and cohesion, as "the very concept of community is central to Catholic social thinking, and is seen to counter the trends of secularism, individualism and normless pluralism." Since the Vatican council, there has been more ideological openness, but concerns with unity and the relational context of faith are still over-riding. Belonging is important, faith is to be found in communion with others and the Church has been given a pastoral role to encourage the togetherness of followers of Christ.

Of course, in Northern Ireland conflict and power struggles encouraged not the unity of all Christians, but rather religion became the basis for oppositional constructions of community. It is the application of the Catholic idea of community to the Northern Irish context that makes it so potent. The historical relationship between Catholics and the British state produced a system of relationships where access to power was largely determined by religious background. As the nineteenth century became increasingly riddled with sectarianism, communal boundaries were drawn, and became rarely negotiable. This new attachment to the idea of Catholicism was not based on homogeneity, high levels of practice or recognisable post-Tridentine beliefs, but rather that it was a sense of belonging to a wider religious community that gave Catholics cohesion (Rafferty, 1994: 1).

Partition in 1922—which was interpreted as abandonment by their fellow patriots—caused an identity crisis for Ulster Catholics, who had to make the transition from a fractured to a self-reliant community. In addition, a political power vacuum had been created which the Catholic Church came forward, almost by default, to fill.

The Church saw itself as the spokesperson and defender of the Catholic community, and Harris points out (1993: 263), that the cumulative effect of so many clerical protests against the northern government provided "a rallying point for Catholics and increased their consciousness of a distinct identity." The Church was the most significant integrating force in the Catholic community, and one that engendered positive feelings of belonging and a certain amount of security.

This was the case at an organisational as well as emotional level. As Morrow (1991: 122) argues, "in the absence of a State to which many Catholics owe their unconditional allegiance, the Church has become the main institutional organiser". In this sense he maintains that institutionally, the political profile of the Catholic Church is much higher than that of any Protestant church. For a minority in a state manned by the majority, to which they were largely denied access, the Church became the key facilitator of a "state within a state" (Phoenix, 1989: 196), or a "society within a society" (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 52). Alternative networks of business, media, hospitals, sport, and importantly, education, for Catholics were established and soon became the focus for an alternative communal identity. From partition to the late 1950s at least, the parish was the main civic unit (O'Connor, 1993: 274). Although the social and economic institutions of Northern Ireland have become more accessible, other political, legal and cultural institutions continue to have a "chill factor" for many Catholics. As such, the Church has retained strong social functions and is still highly involved in the management of schools, social facilities and often economic initiatives.

Indeed the constant involvement of the Church in education has been of fundamental importance in sustaining a sense of Catholic community. Most Catholic children are educated denominationally (only 2% of children are educated in interdenominational schools; Frazer and Morgan, 1999). The Church continues to be involved with charities, such as Trócaire or St Vincent de Paul. It runs preparatory marriage courses and offers marriage guidance and pregnancy counselling. Its Council for Social Welfare concerns itself with emerging social problems—the nature of which differ from rural to urban areas and in specific areas of conflict in Northern Ireland. In addition it is involved in youth work and many other social clubs and cultural activities. The Catholic Church then has assumed a vitally important role, by default and by design, in the social organisation of the community.

On this, O'Connor's (1993) interviews are particularly helpful. One of her Derry interviewees explains,

> I was part of a majority community within a very small area, a tiny enclave of the town, but surrounding it were all these Protestant places, bigger and more powerful. You thought of yourself as a Catholic first, of course, because in a small town, everything happened through the parish. Going to Mass, to the chapel, that was your social life. Everybody around was Catholic—for most of my young life I never met anybody who wasn't, all the points of reference came from the Church: Catholic schools, the parochial hall, ceilis, carnivals to raise money for this and that, variety concerts, plays—a priest ran the drama society… (O'Connor, 1993: 278).

This paints a colourful picture of the Church's role in the community, and its importance as an agent of socialisation. The interviewee's formative experience has been one of isolation from "more powerful" Protestants, and of positive identification with the Catholic cultural activities organised by the Church. She does not talk of Catholic theology, but rather constructs a sense of communal belonging focused on Catholicism.

This is particularly pertinent when high levels of regular church attendance are considered. Virtually the entire community is baptised in, and still has regular links to, the Church—especially outside Belfast (Morrow, 1991). Religious practice in Northern Ireland is much more than a means of marking communal boundaries. When churches provide a meeting place, organise social life and activities or provide a public service, they function as social actors. This community-building role is intensified where religion overlaps with other dimensions of conflict; for example with inequality where the Catholic Church has administrated employment schemes or where prayers have been said on behalf of the unemployed (Burton, 1978). As clergy address the issues that affect Catholics, it creates a sense of shared experience, if only for a while. This role is intensified when conflict is most intense. The funerals of the hunger strikers became political acts—"occasions synergizing Catholic liturgy and Republican ritual" (O'Malley, 1990). Whilst this may not have been the intention of the Church, it is symbolically powerful. The Church has been seen as a sanctuary and haven for Catholics in times of communal hardship or crisis, a place to rebound to when one is under stress. This not only keeps communities separate in a practical sense, but also continues to invest this difference with meaning. For Catholics it keeps salient ideas of difference with Protestant practices of faith (and thus Protestants), and it delimits a "we" (and vice versa). As Durkheim suggested, through ritual performance, religion provides the symbols and values that help foster social unity. This is not to say that Catholics in Northern Ireland share in an unproblematic *conscience collective*. Rather, especially in the context of social division, repeated participation can reinforce not only feelings of belonging, but also of shared values.

A narrative of community runs through Catholic politics in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The aspiration to unity and togetherness is fundamental to Catholicism, but was reinforced by socio-structural conditions as well as the actual organisation of social and often economic life within the Church. Catholic ideas of community have been strong—because they have been performed and enacted, not just imagined. When people share in the performance of religious rituals, and use the Church to organise social life, a sense of identity and belonging is affirmed. It also serves to separate communities practically, as well as ideologically. Indeed the relationship between the practice and the imagination of community, to which we now turn, is integral.

RELIGIOUS IDEAS AND IDENTIFICATION

To maintain that separate social institutions provided by the Catholic Church have resulted in physical communal segregation, which has lead to lack of understanding

in Northern Ireland, is to seriously understate the case. For many, Catholicism has helped legitimise difference by providing an alternative idiom of identity in what was a predominantly Protestant polity. As such, the ideological and moral dimensions of Catholicism in Northern Ireland politics cannot be ignored. The Catholic community in Northern Ireland has a distinctive history and identity with particular cultural reference points—many of which are religiously derived. These concepts gave meaning to the particular contexts of powerlessness and abandonment that Catholics found themselves in. In other words, religiously derived ideas have been utilised as a symbolic resource for identification and communal boundary maintenance. This is different from theology. Although the concepts are informed by religious ideas, they are not concerned with answering spiritual questions. In such a way religion can be socially significant for those who have had a religious socialisation but do not necessarily have strong religious beliefs or practice in the present. But how can this happen and what sort of concepts are they?

Conceptions of self are constituted relationally, in negotiation with other actors in the social world (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). People interpret their experiences in the present with relation to the past and in relation to their sense of place in society—at the centre, on the fringes or somewhere in between. It is argued here that it is only in relationship with others in society, and recognising what one is not, that people construct their own sense of who they are and where they feel they belong (Jenkins, 1996). As such, difference and familiarity are crucial factors in the identification process. These very often become entangled with moral evaluations—that difference is threatening, or in some way worse. It is at this level that we can talk about the religious dimensions of Catholic ideas and identification.

Indeed, one of the most useful concepts to have been integrated into the study of religion in recent years is that of habitus. Originally formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, it has been used by Inglis (1998) to analyse Irish Catholicism and Hervieu-Leger (2000; 2001) to examine Catholic aspects of French culture. Most recently Ruane and Todd (forthcoming, 2004) have utilised it as a mechanism for analysing national, ethnic, colonial as well as religious dimensions of communal identity in Northern Ireland. Habitus refers to a culturally specific way of doing, speaking, seeing, thinking and categorizing. We are all predisposed to sort social life into categories and make comparisons between people and groups (Hogg and Abrahams, 1988). The categories we use are heavily informed by the interpretations of powerful agencies. Habitus describes how we assimilate these cultural categories and meanings into our sense of self, and then think and act in ways that actually reproduce them. These become unconscious, taken for granted, shared understandings. They are embedded in how we perceive things, how we react and respond to situations.

Religious codes, symbols and categorizations are part of the habitus of Catholics in Northern Ireland. They are embodied and unconsciously reproduced in everyday life. As Ruane and Todd point out (forthcoming, 2004) each religious tradition "has its own core beliefs, rituals and symbols, its own form of organisation, architectural style, religious paraphernalia, accepted forms of piety and dress, style of clergy and clerical authority, characteristic relations between clergy and laity". They argue that

"for those brought up within a particular faith … the beliefs, symbols and rituals of their own denomination have the quality of the familiar, the natural and the normative, and it is in their terms that others appear different, strange, unsettling, threatening". Recent interview data (Mitchell, 2001) confirms this, finding Catholics presenting their religious ideas and practices in stark opposition to that of Protestants. Interviewees constructed oppositions of dress, decorum and mannerisms. Protestants wear hats and suits to church, Catholics wear trainers and jeans; Protestants are very serious and law-abiding about their faith, Catholics are much more laid-back.

Many of these religiously informed concepts have infused political analyses. One such set of concepts is victimhood and sacrifice. Catholic theology is infused with notions of spiritual reward for earthly suffering, and a sense of righteousness in persecution. Whilst the extent to which ordinary Catholics were or are influenced by this is impossible to quantify, it is however significant that the victim is a familiar theme, and is one that provides hope, at least in terms of the next world. The idea of the victim in the Christian tradition is powerful, with Christ the central illustration. The proper Christian attitude to persecution, as exemplified by Christ, is to turn the other cheek, accept what has happened and look to heaven for later vindication. Irish Catholic liturgy contains many references to heavenly rewards for the passive victim, and images of the sacrificial lamb being led to the slaughter. It is possible to argue then that eschatologically, Irish Catholicism, with a familiar theme of victimhood, has often encouraged passivity when faced with suffering, and in extreme circumstances hope for redemption through sacrifice or martyrdom, phenomena that have impacted upon political, as well as religious attitudes.

Take the 1981 hunger strikes for example, when Catholicism played heightened ideological and symbolic roles. Alongside the institutional input of the Church (trying to convince the prisoners to end the strike, yet visiting and praying with prisoners), religious imagery was used to gather support in the community. The hunger strikers were portrayed in murals and literature as Christ-like figures, claiming "blessed are they who hunger for justice". Marian themes were drawn upon, and the saying of the rosary was a common feature of political meetings at that time (Ruane and Todd, 1996: 96). Whilst Sands saw himself solely as a political, not a religious, prisoner, he frequently used the language and imagery of martyrdom. Consider his poetry:

> To walk the lonely road
> Like that of Calvary
> And take up the cross of Irishmen
> Who've carried liberty (cited in O'Malley, 1990: 51-52)

By identifying himself with Christ in this very explicit way, Sands portrayed his actions as having an almost transcendent purpose (although he could of course have been using religious ideas instrumentally for popular appeal). Although the demands of the hunger strikers were political, they were coming from a prevalent, if not shared, cultural understanding of the story of Irish martyrdom, where the oppression of the community could only be broken by the sacrifice of individuals, as in

1916. Although republicans are often harsh critics of the Church, they are also capable of drawing on Catholic ideas and institutions as symbolic resources. Even for Catholics for whom this myth did not match their understanding of real life, the fact that the prisoners were dying and being buried in such a constant stream could not but affect the community far beyond the parameters of those with a mystical reading of Irish history.

But what is the political significance of this and how far can it even be described as religious? Victimhood and sacrifice are not necessarily theological concepts, although they do have religious parallels. They are narratives of morality, helping define Catholic innocence and British and Protestant guilt. At least until the 1990s, republicans have used a "pure, distilled Catholic victimhood" to block out their guilt for violence and justify the IRA (O'Connor, 1993: 99, 111, 151). O'Malley (1990), perhaps overstating the case, argues that Sands came to symbolise the accumulated wrongs done to Catholics and that the hunger strikers' funerals "awakened a deeper Catholic awareness of their own inner sense of victimisation". For many nationalists at the time, this was the latest instalment of an historical precedent; it fitted in with an overall narrative of innocence and guilt, constructed over centuries, and was utilised to make sense of the present. The strikes may have been seen as unnecessary, even embarrassing, but still could be understood and often even sympathised with. One group could be perceived as heartless, uncaring, guilty of persecution, the other as selfless, sincere and an "innocent" victim. So religion played a significant symbolic role in fostering a sense of common grievance and shared purpose. In the context of the early 1980s, religious and moral meanings became fused with political diagnoses of a terrible situation for the Catholic community. To quote O'Malley, the hunger strikes "brought into sharp focus the religious dimension of the conflict—differences in the definition and meaning of moral concepts, underwriting our notions of right and wrong that make reconciliation difficult, differences that transcend the politics of conflict".

Another way in which religious ideas have provided a resource for identification is through anti-Protestantism. Whilst anti-Catholicism amongst Protestants has received academic and popular attention (most recently Brewer, 1998) anti-Protestantism is a term seldom used. A google search conducted in May 2003 came up with 1,610 hits for "anti-Catholicism" and "Ireland", and only 24 for "anti-Protestantism". Anti-Protestantism is a much more subtle phenomenon than anti-Catholicism, lacking the latter's stark religio-political language and imagery. This, however, is exactly the point. Catholic identity has been constructed as a negation of Protestant religious fervour. History has bequeathed to Irish Catholicism, on the one hand, a sense of being the underdog, of being powerless and victimised; and on the other, a sense of strength in one's own community and values. The Protestant community has been identified as the aggressor, whose religious convictions have often been perceived as the motivation for their discriminating tendencies. As such, Catholic identity has been constructed as open and tolerant, as a negation of ideas of Protestant fervour and inflexibility. This construction is dramatised and re-

produced in the present, as Catholics look to events at Drumcree and Harryville[5], often concluding that there is something different about the nature of Protestantism and Protestants that allows this to happen. Often, Catholics argue that they are not like Protestants; they do not take their religious beliefs to these extremes. But this itself is othering—casting the Protestant community as wayward and guilty. It is the assumption that Protestants have got it wrong, and must be convinced of the Catholic community's more tolerant point of view, that is often at the heart of often strained social and political relationships.

Although it is rarely articulated on theological premises by Catholics in contemporary Northern Ireland, anti-Protestantism partially stems from religious ideas. Conservative Catholic theology holds that Protestant beliefs in "Sola Scriptura" (the bible alone), private judgement and justification by faith alone are illogical. This is because of the "pride of private intellect" (Herbermann et al, 1911: 497). Faith in Catholicism is about submission and the combined wisdom of interpretation. It is argued that private judgement may be dangerous in that people may have particular prejudices and can twist the bible to suit themselves, whereas "faith consists in submitting; private interpretation consists in judging". Thus there is a focus on the "unhappy divisions" within Protestantism that are "destructive of unity" (Heberman et al, 1911: 593).

The political implications of this stereotype of Protestant intolerance, however, stretch far beyond theological debate. Protestant superiority and domination have historically been intertwined with unionist politics (the "Protestant state for a Protestant people"). Narratives of the Protestant other in Northern Ireland have been constructed in the context of communal conflict. At their heart lie moral evaluations of Protestants as worse than Catholics, based on experiences throughout conflict and, in no small part, Protestant anti-Catholicism. In its strong form, this narrative holds that Protestants are bigots, whereas Catholics are open, tolerant and generous. These may help make sense of political relationships for many Catholics, given the explicitly religious nature of some Protestant grievances; however, it fails to understand how many Protestants see themselves. By singling out unionists for criticism, they distance the Catholic community from what might look like religiously motivated ideas. However, not only does this fail to take into account how Protestantism and unionism are inseparably entangled for many, but it constructs Catholic identity in opposition to strong religion. As such, whilst this dimension of Catholic identification might not appear *religious*, it has historically been constructed in negation of Northern Ireland Protestantism and Protestants. Although none of these ideas are articulated as a critique of Protestant theology, it is nonetheless interesting that there exist such parallels between traditional theological teachings about, and contemporary political ideas of, Protestant inflexibility and arrogance.

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[5] "Harryville" refers to the pickets staged by fundamentalist Protestants in Ballymena in 1996-98 outside Our Lady's Catholic Church. They attempted to stop Catholics going into mass, harassing them as they entered and exited the building. Coming in the middle of a time of political unrest surrounding the Agreement and stalled Orange Order marches in Drumcree and elsewhere, the pickets were seen as a political as well as religious attack.

These ideas of victimhood, sacrifice and anti-Protestantism are often used as resources for identification—values and codes that can be used to identify and attribute value to different social groups. For many Catholics, they have been used to construct ideas of self and other in a divided political situation. These types of religiously-informed ideas can ebb and flow in relation to political context. This is most explicitly seen in the idea of sacrifice, and to a lesser extent, victimhood. In situations of communal anxiety, or in times when political methods seem hopeless, sacrifice has come to the fore. Sacrifice has emotional consequences, and it often brings the community together. It has clear moral dimensions of innocence and guilt, which helps give meaning to conflict and dramatises the moral failings of the other. Moreover, it helps give a sense of purpose for the future, clearly defining goals and perhaps aiming for redemption. Victimhood is also a contextual narrative, generally simmering, and surfacing in times of communal stress. Anti-Protestantism is a more constant narrative, but somewhat less emotive. In such ways Catholic ideas, morality, habitus and religiously-informed stereotypes have functioned as a resource for identification of self and other for a community in conflict.

VERSIONS OF THE FUTURE

What, then, for the future of Catholicism and politics in Northern Ireland? It is clear that change is taking place independently along all three of the dimensions identified in this article. How far these will spell the decline of religious significance is a matter of some dispute. Below I outline varieties of institutional, behavioural and ideological religious realignment, suggesting the possible consequences for Catholicism and politics in Northern Ireland.

Firstly, the institutional power of the Catholic Church is waning. Although it never exercised the kind of total power suggested by some, its moral authority and institutional dominance are declining in the present. This is due to an increased questioning in Irish and Northern Irish society in general as well as the specific problems that the Church encountered in relation to their handling of cases of child abuse since the 1990s. In the latter case, the Irish government for the first time decided that the Church must be subject to civil investigation and penalties. The special position of the Catholic Church in Irish life is fading now in practice as well as in legal theory. As an island-wide faith, this has of course impacted upon Catholics in Northern Ireland as well, amongst whom distrust of religious institutions has grown in recent years. The Church now must compete more convincingly with other agencies that seek to speak up for and represent Catholics in Northern Ireland. Moreover, as nationalism becomes more integrated in the structures of Northern Ireland, the church is beginning to cater less for a community in conflict. It no longer needs to play the political roles it was called upon for during civil rights or the hunger strikes. Although of course events like the Holy Cross School protests contradict this trend, overall the Church's brief is changing.

Finally, the Church also faces internal restructuring. An acute manpower crisis (Inglis, 1998) means that it must respond to internal calls for greater democratisation of religious life from the laity. As Casanova suggests (1994) the role of modern

churches is often to fill the gaps left by secular society by articulating a message of alternative morality. He argues that in such a way churches maintain their public significance. Whilst this may be the case with the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland, it is more difficult to see how this role would prop up the politics of conflict as was the case in the past, as it may agitate in a less partisan fashion for the "good of society" rather than the Catholic grouping within it.

As well as facing institutional change, Catholics in Northern Ireland are also in the process of substantial behavioural change. Rates of religious practice, whilst extremely high overall, are declining amongst the young. This is very much in line with generational patterns of ritual secularisation in Western Europe as a whole (I use the term ritual secularisation because practice and attendance are only one of the many indicators by which religion can be measured—other dimensions such as beliefs are not secularising in a similar fashion). There is much debate as to whether low rates of attendance amongst the young are due to generational or life-cycle factors—i.e. when people begin to form families they may resume religious practices. Results for the British data seem to suggest that generational changes are more significant—i.e. those who have stopped going to church are less likely to start again (Tilley, 2003). Whilst this has not yet been tested in a Northern Ireland context, there may be parallels. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the extra salience of communal belonging in Northern Ireland means that Church structures continue to be used more widely as family formation, along with the desire to let children know where they belong, sets in (Mitchell, 2001).

What this means overall for the social and political significance of religion is that it may play less of a community-building role in the future amongst Catholics. The Church may be less likely to form a basis of shared experience. It might also mean that there would be a decline not just in the religious dimensions of community, but also less experience of community, full stop. At the present time there are no institutions or practices comparable with the Church in terms of organising shared rituals or practices. Cultural and voluntary associations, and even rituals surrounding sporting activities, come nowhere near the Church in their ability to unite in practice the entire spectrum of the community. As fewer people enact the same religious ritual every week, community membership becomes more imagined than practiced. This brings us to the final dimension of religious significance—ideas and identity.

Above we mapped some of the ways in which religiously inspired ideas have provided an idiom of identity through which many Catholics have come to see themselves and relate to Protestants in Northern Ireland. These ideas have been politically salient because they have made sense of social and structural conditions for many Catholics up until the present. Ideas of victimhood helped identify and evaluate the Protestant victimiser whilst providing some form of consolation for suffering. So too, religiously informed ideas of sacrifice helped some put the hunger strikes into perspective. However, these explanations are clearly not required of religion by social groups in more fortunate positions in society. As Weber suggests, as we occupy different social positions we have different types of ideal interests and existential questions, and consequently, we call upon religion to play quite different roles. Inglis (1998: 11) suggests that this is what is happening amongst southern Catho-

lics—as the laity move from rural farming to urban professional class backgrounds, their religious interests move from demand for compensation to demand for symbolic legitimation. So too as Catholics in Northern Ireland have entered the middle classes *en masse*, they are becoming ever more integrated into social and economic structures, and although many republican political goals are still far from being achieved there is a sense in which Catholics are beginning to see themselves as equals, not as victims, in society (Mitchell, 2004). As such, religious ideas of rewards for suffering and so on are less likely to have explanatory power for many Catholics in contemporary Northern Ireland. In this way too Catholicism may be losing its position in the hearts and minds of its affiliates. Other, more secular, narratives may be used to symbolically imagine the community, and community relationships, as time goes on.

The paragraphs above, however, represent the pessimistic version of the future of Catholicism in Northern Ireland (or the optimistic version if one wishes religion to disappear). It would be misleading to leave it at that. Some comments remain to be made about the public as well as private roles that Catholicism will continue to play, at least for the foreseeable future.

First of all, few sociologists of religion argue for an undiluted secularisation thesis any longer. This was the idea that as societies modernise religion inevitably dies out (Wilson, 1976). Some, such as Bruce (1996, 1995) maintain a slightly weaker version of the thesis: that as societies modernise, religion first loses all its social significance and then inevitably dies out. He qualifies this (1995) by exempting situations of ethnic conflict and ethnic transition, where religion may temporarily live on. The counter-argument, put forward by people like Davie (1994, 2000), Hervieu-Leger (2001) and now Berger (1999), is that religion continues to be publicly significant, but often in different, less institutionalised, ways than before. Despite experiences of the trends described above, they argue that religious beliefs are as strong as ever and continue to permeate social and political life, even in the most ostensibly secularised and conflict-free societies. Is this the case in Northern Ireland?

Firstly, at an institutional level, the Catholic Church, despite all its problems, remains the most significant chief communal organiser. In all, 78% of Catholic still state that they have some degree of confidence in the Church, and rates of religious practice remain very high comparatively speaking. The Church continues to monopolise the Catholic market in the education system. Although there is a vast majority of lay teachers in the Catholic maintained schools, clerics continue to be influential at management level and Catholic symbolism and ritual continue to form an integral part of school life. Similarly, the Church remains involved in a wide variety of other areas of social and cultural life—its personnel and resources are pumped into community welfare and development schemes throughout Northern Ireland. Priests continue in many senses to be gatekeepers of the community. This is evidenced whenever political crises erupt. In times of stress, clergy often assume the mantle of the people's representative and protector and they often try to provide guidance. Once again, Holy Cross provides a striking example. As low-level conflict persists in Northern Ireland and community relationships continue to be strained

(Shirlow, 2001), there is still a role for the Church in these types of political mediations—albeit now a part-time job.

A second area in which Catholicism maintains public significance is where it intersects with ethnicity. Often it is presumed that religion simply acts as a marker for ethnicity. However, concepts such as the habitus, explained above, help us appreciate the ways in which religion actually can give meaning to ethnicity. This can be in both practical and imagined ways. Group formation and boundary maintenance are a universal part of social relationships. It is also quite normal for groups to attribute value, positively and negatively, to in-group and out-group members respectively. These are integrally human processes and are at work in peaceful pluralist, never mind deeply divided, societies. It is highly unlikely that the Catholic-Protestant boundary in Northern Ireland is going to be replaced by something more secular any time soon, despite attempts to cast the conflict as a purely political one. Often, through marking out boundaries, religion actively helps constitute what it means to belong to a particular community. It may give meanings and values to the boundary. In this sense the religious, and indeed moral, dimensions of group belonging would seem set to continue. They are deeply embedded in the habitus of Northern Ireland Catholics.

However, the religious dimensions of identity and community are of course contextual. Extra structural and symbolic roles are demanded of religion most in times of crisis and uncertainty. Should the conflict wane considerably, it may well be that Catholicism recedes into a more private sphere, concerned with spirituality and the inner lives of its members. As Casanova (1994) suggests, the Church may continue to articulate alternative conceptions of morality in the public sphere. However, the widespread institutional and ideological contributions to political life may fade away. On the other hand, should conflict persist even at this lower level (which seems most likely) Catholicism will probably continue to play many of the political roles outlined above. In such a way, we are able to conceive of religion, not as something that just causes political attitudes, but also something that responds to politics. What roles Catholicism will play in the future in Northern Ireland then depends as much on politicians and community relationships as it does on the laity and their religious leaders.

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