The Dynamics of Religious Difference in Contemporary Northern Ireland[1]

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Since the events of September 11th 2001, the role of religious or theologically derived justifications for acts of violence have been reassessed in a manner akin to what Thomas Kuhn perhaps would have referred to as a 'paradigmatic shift'.[2] This paradigmatic shift is one in which the previously much neglected role of religion in conflict has now come to the fore.[3]

The return to assessing the dynamics of religion in conflict scenarios on the international stage provides us with an opportunity to reassess some of the more commonly held assumptions relating to the conflict in Ireland. It was difficult for even the most ardent proponents of ethno-nationalism to assert to outsiders that religion was irrelevant in an Irish context when television viewers watched coverage of the Reverend Ian Paisley being thrown out of the European Parliament for denouncing the visit of Pope John Paul II,[4] or when thousands of Orangemen and nationalist protestors squared off against the almost idyllic backdrop of the Church of Ireland in Drumcree. Hence Northern Ireland is an ideal place to start when trying to tease out the dynamics behind conflict where religious resources or ideas have been invoked on occasion as justifications for violence.

The Institute for Conflict Research (ICR) conducted the research on which this article is based in Northern Ireland between April 2010 and November 2011. The approach adopted was qualitative and involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with 52 individuals from the lay population and 14 key informants from the various main churches.[5] The specific aims of the Northern Irish research were to:

- Explore the intersections of faith, politics, security, violence and identity;
- Track how individual and communal beliefs and practices have (or have not) changed over time;
- Assess the extent to which underlying attitudes have been affected by recent developments, especially since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998; and

- Inform comparative analysis of the distinctiveness of the Northern Ireland situation relative to other contexts of religiously motivated conflict in the UK and elsewhere, both in the past and in the present.

Interviews were conducted in Belfast, County Armagh and various locations west of the River Bann to provide a broad geographic spread.[6] Interviewees included men and women, Protestant and Catholic, with varying levels of religious commitment.[7] To contextualise levels of churchgoing interviewees are referred to as regular churchgoers, occasional churchgoers and non-churchgoers.[8]

While the remit of the project was relatively broad, this article focuses on two key themes emerging from the research. Firstly, the article provides analysis of attitudes to the role of the Roman Catholic Church during the hunger-strikes of 1981. Secondly, it assesses perceptions of the role of religion as a motivating factor in the Irish conflict compared to the motivations of those involved in violent attacks within a wider 'War on Terror' context.

'Blessed are those who hunger for justice'?

For a number of interviewees from both a churchgoing and a non-churchgoing Protestant background there was a perception that the Catholic Church and the IRA were working 'hand in glove' at the time of the hunger-strikes.[9] For some this 'connection' existed prior to 1981 and as such the alleged involvement of Father James Chesney in the Claudy bomb[10] merely confirmed what they had 'known all along'.[11] While this perception was not quite as strong as Jim Allister's assertion in the 1980s of the 'insoluble marriage of Roman Catholicism to militant Irish Republicanism',[12] a number of interviewees drew upon a similar narrative framework. One example given to this effect was the role of a number of priests in mediation efforts during the dispute over the prisoners' demands; another was the fact that the hunger-strikers were given Christian burials in consecrated ground:

> …The church on one hand were coming out and condemning it but on the other hand they were welcoming them in their paramilitary regalia…it just reinforced their views that they are supporting what's going on…I am not really aware of any Protestant church which would have had a paramilitary display as such in the grounds of the actual church. The churches didn't allow any actual trappings or gun salutes or anything like that, that never took place in the grounds of the actual churches. They may have buried them people but it was different. Whereas in the Roman Catholic community you had the actual displays in the graveyards (Int. 20).

In contrast to Protestant interviewees, republicans focused on the disputes and tension between themselves, the movement and the Catholic Church over their perceived lack of support for the hunger-strikers. For some, the hunger-strikes had been a turning point and had led to resentment of the Church:

I would have completely sort of stopped [going to Mass] around the hunger-strike and it was a parting of the ways for me with the Catholic Church were they rightly or wrongly, the view was that they were opposed to the hunger-strike and supported the British establishment in the north and like they were coming out making statements that they were committing suicide and this type of stuff. So we had a local priest Father [name of priest] you called him, he would have been prominent around Bloody Sunday you know, but he just was really pro-British…(Int. 8).

The realisation for one former loyalist prisoner that some of his republican contemporaries had a different relationship with the Catholic Church from that he had previously believed came as something of a surprise:

When I was growing up I was always led to believe that they (Catholics) were all church going and chapel and saying prayers and Mass, but now I talk to republicans who would be the first ones to turn round and say '…are you joking? I don't go to church'. Which was a surprise for me (Int. 37).

Nevertheless, other Protestant interviewees saw little friction between the Catholic Church and republicanism. This perception however does not take into account the fact that IRA prisoners issued a public statement attacking the Catholic Church when the hunger-strikes ended, accusing the Church of being 'intricately immersed in the field of politics and deceit'.[13] However, criticism of the Catholic Church was not necessarily limited to republicans; some Catholic interviewees not involved with the republican movement echoed many of the same sentiments. For one female interviewee in Armagh there was a certain level of anger at some Catholic priests in the area at the time of the hunger-strikes when they had refused to allow their church to stay open at night so people could pray for the hunger-strikers (Int. 29).

The vastly differing perceptions of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the republican movement are revealing. While Protestant interviewees tended to view this relationship as 'cosy', this simplifies the complexity of this relationship in which at times individual priests were respected by republicans, while the Church hierarchy tended to be viewed with suspicion as 'pro-state'. The reduction of these complexities by some Protestant interviewees are similar to perceptions of Catholic interviewees with regards

to the relationship between the British state, unionist politicians and loyalist paramilitaries. Similarly, the focus of some Catholic interviewees on what they perceived to be the religious 'fervour' instilled by Ian Paisley did not tend to be qualified with praise for those Protestant clergy who consistently made conciliatory statements and favoured ecumenism.

Although Catholic ritual permeated, and still does permeate, many republican commemorations, uttering a decade of the Rosary at the start of a commemoration or having a priest conduct the funeral of a IRA member does not necessarily translate as support for violence. Similarly, when unionist political figures extended sympathy to the family and when a minister presided over the funeral of north Belfast UVF leader John Bingham who was killed in September 1986 by the IRA, it is unlikely that all in attendance were justifying the actions of the UVF.[14] However perceptions were formed on the basis of these very visible, symbolic and often very public events, which were damaging to relations between communities. Such public symbolism feeds into broader perceptions that the church of the 'Other' supports violence more than 'our' church does; as Liechty and Clegg have argued,[15] furthering the tendency to judge others by the worst actions of the worst elements of 'their' community.[16]

Rationality versus Irrationality: The 'Troubles' and the 'War on Terror'

Similar dynamics were apparent when the discussions moved outside Northern Ireland to look at the motivations of those involved in 9/11 or 7/7 style attacks, when the 'Other' became 'non-Christians'. Many interviewees recalled that the 'sights and sounds' of 9/11 and 7/7 reminded them of what occurred locally, albeit on a much larger scale. Nevertheless, the research findings reveal a reluctance to view the Northern Irish conflict as 'religious', and the majority of interviewees argued that the Northern Irish conflict was a political and territorial dispute. However many interviewees believed that the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks were motivated by religion and theology:

> …I could be wrong, but as far as I know and I am led to believe it is actually part of those people's religious beliefs that Christianity is not good and they should do everything within their power to ensure that Christianity is done away with. That's a different thing (Int. 9).

This distinction between the local and the global situation is significant as it also fed into perceptions that the political was rational and the religious irrational, with the majority of interviewees adopting the position that while dialogue in the Northern Irish context was crucial to solving what was

essentially a political and a territorial problem, dialogue is almost impossible with those who are 'irrationally' motivated by religion.

However, while 'Islamic fundamentalism' was viewed by the majority of interviewees as the driving force behind Al-Qaeda linked attacks, a small number of respondents believed that there were in all likelihood political motivations also attached to carrying out such acts. These individuals tended to be republicans and non-churchgoers. Indeed, one interviewee made parallels between *Fenianism* in the nineteenth-century and 'radicalisation' amongst some young Muslims in UK cities today (Int. 7).

Several non-churchgoing interviewees from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds also referred to the impact which security policy can have on raising the potential for conflict by alienating sections of the population, as occurred in Northern Ireland with the introduction of Internment, Stop and Search and the Special Powers Act.[17] Reflecting upon the treatment of Irish citizens in the 1970s and 1980s, the interviewee referred to above continued:[18]

> You are thinking back to what used to happen. At Heathrow you used to have some sort of a cow shed set up where the Irish where herded into during the Troubles, they didn't even bother to provide people with an adequate zone. What those issues don't do is they don't alienate the Jihadi because they are alienated anyway, but they are increasing the pool of water in which those guys can swim. Because it goes on a sliding scale, those that are mildly disenchanted become greatly disenchanted, those that are not disenchanted become mildly disenchanted, that type of thing. When that happens, or does happen, it sort of has a rippling effect, people who might talk to the police if they saw something think 'Maybe I didn't see anything'. Somebody that may say to the boys, 'I don't think maybe you should be doing that', will say, 'Well leave them be', and on and on it goes. It's a huge issue (Int. 7).

It would appear rather paradoxically therefore that the promotion of physical security through the infrastructure of security checks and the building of installations can have the unintended consequence of increasing a sense of insecurity for some. While the removal of a watchtower for the majority of Catholics indicated a process of moving towards 'normalisation', for a number of Protestants it signified 'loss' and made them feel less secure:

> …I come from a background that if I saw an army check or a police check there was a level of security there, you felt secure. Some people felt threatened. I didn't… (Int. 22).

…the whole scaling down of military barracks and all that which are closed down, that has actually helped the peace process (Int. 26).

There are potential lessons to be learnt in this regard within the contemporary context of the 'War on Terror' in terms of security measures adopted which may prove counter-productive. It is also significant that the reduction of complex and potentially multiple factors which may influence why, where and how violent attacks take place to purely being a result of religious fundamentalism serves to delegitimise the 'Other' as irrational and tends to rule out the potential for dialogue.

Conclusion

The inclination to generalise about the 'Other' was reflected in both the discussions around the relationship of the Catholic Church and the republican movement at the time of the hunger-strikes and also in perceptions in the difference between the Northern Ireland conflict and the broader 'War on Terror'. While a number of Protestant interviewees, both churchgoing and non-churchgoing, viewed the Catholic Church as supporting physical force republicanism, they argued that Protestant churches condemned loyalist violence. Republicans argued that the Catholic Church was pro-state and did not support the movement. The holding of republican paramilitary funerals on consecrated ground with priests officiating or the attendance of a minister at an event alongside a loyalist paramilitary member acted as trigger events which could negatively impact upon perceptions of the 'Other'.[19] It also confirmed to some that the church of the 'Other' was more complicit in violence than 'our' church, effectively, a tendency to judge one's perceived opponents more harshly than would oneself in a conflict setting.[20] In this context one is reminded of Matthew 7, verse 3, and the focus on the speck in a friend's eye while ignoring the log in one's own.

However, these binary opposites usually employed in the local setting of 'us' and 'them' or Protestant/Catholic are somewhat subsumed within the broader global context of the 'War on Terror' when the 'Other' become 'non-Christians', and more specifically, Muslims. As such, interviewees took time to highlight the complexity of the local situation (as they had done with their 'own side' in the Northern Irish context) which was primarily about politics while suggesting that those involved in attacks such as 9/11 and 7/7 were motivated purely by theology. Again, this is not to suggest that religion is not a motivating factor, but rather by focusing on purely religious motivations, the 'Other' is delegitimised and there is little room for dialogue or a broader understanding as to what motivates individuals to use violent means.

We should also remember that even the most secular political nationalism is much more than a political ideology, it also acts as a 'surrogate religion'.[21] Anthony Smith's discussion of the cult of the 'Glorious Dead' is particularly pertinent in this regard as it indicates heroic self-sacrifice on behalf of the nation and its manifest destiny.[22] The 'Glorious Dead' are commemorated annually in Northern Ireland with each side commemorating their 'own', and there is a tendency in the Irish context to present linear and parallel narratives of a 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' history which only intersect through violence.

Historical anniversaries of key foundational events including the centenary of both the Battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising in 2016, mean that the 'Glorious Dead' are likely to assume even greater significance in coming years. Perhaps now is an opportune time to think creatively about marking the upcoming raft of historical anniversaries in a revised light, reassessing the role of religion and the churches and the complexity and unpredictability of historical developments as part of the process.

Notes

1   This article is based on a chapter in a forthcoming book *Protestant-Catholic Conflict from the Reformation to the 21st Century* edited by Professor John Wolffe (OU) [Palgrave MacMillan].

2   Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

3   David Herbert, 'Shifting Securities in Northern Ireland: 'Terror' and the Troubles' in global media and local memory', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(3), 2006, 343–359.

4   Paisley was thrown out of the European parliament in October 1988 after heckling the visiting Pope John Paul II.

5   This chapter focuses on the interviews with the lay informants. The majority of our interviewees were aged 30 years and above as an aim of the project was to assess how the role of religion had changed during an individual's lifetime, but a small number of individuals in their late teens and 20s were also interviewed to assess whether the significance of religion differed at all for them compared to their older counterparts.

6   To include as wide a range of interviewees as possible individuals from the community sector, victims sector, political categories (former paramilitary and security force members) and a faith background (individuals not associated with any of these categories but who happened to be churchgoers) were specifically targeted.

7   In terms of demographic breakdown, the 52 interviewees included 28 Protestants and 24 Catholics; 24 males and 28 females. 50 interviews were conducted as two of the interviews included two people in each setting.

8   Those classified as 'non-churchgoers' include those who attend church only for special occasions such as weddings and funerals. While recognising that these are arbitrary and basic categorisations they merely aim to assist the reader in terms of attributing quotes to individuals by contextualising their levels of churchgoing.

9   Only two interviewees from a Protestant community background when questioned on the topic believed that there were tensions between the Catholic Church and republicanism.

10 On 31st July 1972 three car-bombs exploded in the small village of Claudy just south of Derry Londonderry. Nine Protestants were killed, including an eight year old girl, Kathyrn Eakin. The bombing was attributed to the South Derry brigade of the IRA, and RUC intelligence from August 1972 identified Father James Chesney, a local Catholic priest, as the Quartermaster and Director of Operations of the South Derry Provisional IRA.

11 For further information on the allegations in relation to Father Chesney see the
    report of the Police Ombudsman which was published in October 2010. The
    report is available online at
    http://www.policeombudsman.org/Publicationsuploads/Claudy.pdf
    accessed July 23nd 2012.

12 Bruce, *God Save Ulster*, p.122.

13 The IRA statement read: 'We contend that their position (the Catholic Church) has
    at all times been established by political consideration rather than the Christian
    values of truth and justice. Therefore their stance has been extremely immoral and
    misleading' (referred to in Maloney, *Secret History of the IRA*, pp.236-7.

14 Bingham was also a member of the Orange Order. Bishop Cahal Daly (later to be
    made Cardinal) stated that many Protestants and Catholics had been dismayed by
    the sight of politicians 'attending the recent paramilitary funeral of a recognised and
    admitted leader of an illegal organisation. They owe the public an explanation of
    why they did so'. See McKittrick et al., *Lost Lives*, p.1049.

15 Liechty and Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism*, p.12.

16 Nor does reducing the complexities of such relationships reflect what may be
    pastoral care rather than making a political statement, although it is often perceived
    as the latter by members of the 'Other' community. See also Elliott, *When God Took
    Sides*; Liechty and Clegg, *Moving Beyond Sectarianism*. Elliott discusses the
    tendency to make sweeping generalisations about the 'Other' based upon the actions
    of a small number of individuals who 'represent' that community.

17 The Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1974 replaced the Civil Authorities (Special
    Powers) and Emergency Provisions Acts and introduced the seven day power of
    arrest. However, the British government had already used legislation in August 1971
    to intern hundreds of predominantly Catholic men from working-class nationalist
    and republican communities in Northern Ireland. The Committee on the
    Administration of Justice found that of all those 1,981 interned in the 1970s just 107
    were Protestant while the remaining 1,874 were Catholic. The use of stop and search
    tactics was also primarily directed at the Catholic community. Between 1978 and
    1986 over 50,000 people were arrested, around three-quarters of whom were
    Catholic. Approximately 75% of those individuals arrested under Emergency
    Provisions legislation were eventually released without charge. See Committee on
    the Administration of Justice, *War on Terror: Lessons from Northern Ireland*
    (Belfast: CAJ, 2008), pp.33, 35, 40.

18 More recently the Progressive Unionist Policy (PUP), who have historically been
    associated with the UVF, argued that the Historical Enquiries Team (HET) who have
    a remit to investigate unsolved 'Troubles' related murders are disproportionately

focusing upon loyalists. See the BBC News Story, 'Progressive Unionist Party Accuses HET of arrests bias', http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-12747620, accessed 6 September 2012.

19 It is important that church leaders of all faiths are aware of how their actions may be interpreted by others belonging to different communities.

20 Shirlow and McGovern, *Who are the 'People'?*, p.3.

21 Anthony Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p.33.

22 Ibid., pp.143-4.

Interviews

1. Male, 40s, Catholic, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.
2. Male, 50s, Protestant, Belfast, Churchgoer.
3. Male, 30s, Protestant, Armagh, Occasional Churchgoer.
4. Male, 40s, Protestant, West of the Bann, Churchgoer.
5. Male, 50s, Protestant, Belfast, Churchgoer.
6. Male, 50s, Former Christian, West of the Bann, Churchgoer.
7. Male, 50s, Catholic, Armagh, Non-churchgoer.
8. Male, 40s Catholic, West of the Bann, Non-churchgoer.
9. Male, 60s, Catholic, West of the Bann, Occasional Churchgoer.
10. Female, 30s, Protestant, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.
11. Two females – Female One: 30s, Catholic, West of Bann, Occasional Churchgoer. Female Two: 40s, Catholic, West of the Bann, Churchgoer.
12. Female, Protestant, 50s, Armagh, Churchgoer.
13. Male, 60s, Protestant, Armagh, Churchgoer.
14. Female, 30s, Catholic, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.
15. Female, 20s, Catholic, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.
16. Male, 50s, Protestant, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.
17. Female, 50s, Protestant, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.
18. Male, 50s, Protestant, West of the Bann, Churchgoer.
19. Female, 20s, Protestant, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.
20. Male, 40s, Protestant, Armagh, Churchgoer.
21. Male, 50s, Catholic, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.
22. Male, 50s, Protestant, Armagh, Occasional Churchgoer.
23. Male, 40s, Protestant, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.
24. Female, 50s, Protestant, Armagh, Churchgoer.
25. Female, 40s, Catholic, Belfast, Churchgoer.
26. Male, 40s, Catholic, West of the Bann, Churchgoer.
27. Male, 30s, Protestant, West of the Bann, Occasional churchgoer.
28. Two females – Female One: 60s, Protestant, Armagh, Churchgoer. Female Two: 50s, Protestant, Armagh, Non-churchgoer.
29. Female, 50s, Catholic, Armagh, Churchgoer.
30. Female, 40s, Catholic, Armagh, Churchgoer.
31. Male, 40s, Protestant, Belfast, Churchgoer.
32. Female, 40s, Catholic, Armagh, Occasional churchgoer.
33. Female, 50s, Catholic, Armagh, Churchgoer.
34. Female, 40s, Protestant, Belfast, Churchgoer.
35. Male, 40s, Protestant, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.
36. Female, 60s, Catholic, Armagh, Occasional churchgoer.
37. Male, 40s, Protestant, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.
38. Female, 50s, Catholic, Belfast, Non-churchgoer.

39. Female, 30s, Catholic, Belfast, Occasional churchgoer.
40. Male, 30s, Catholic, Armagh, Occasional churchgoer.
41. Female, 30s, Catholic, West of the Bann, Churchgoer.
42. Female, 20s, Protestant, Belfast, Churchgoer.
43. Female, 20s, Protestant, Armagh, Occasional churchgoer.
44. Male, 20s, Catholic, Armagh, Churchgoer.
45. Female, 30s, Catholic, Belfast, Churchgoer.
46. Female, 30s, Protestant, West of the Bann, Occasional churchgoer.
47. Female, 30s, Protestant, West of the Bann, Churchgoer.
48. Female, 60s, Protestant, West of the Bann, Churchgoer.
49. Female, 19, Catholic, Belfast, Churchgoer.
50. Male, 60s, Protestant, West of the Bann, Churchgoer.