

Religious and national identity after the Belfast Good Friday Agreement

Muldoon, O. T., Trew, K., Todd, J., Rougier, N., and McLaughlin, K.

Synopsis

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A common feature in situations of political conflict is collective identification in which two groups develop opposing identities that are perceived as being negatively interdependent, so that a gain for one group is viewed as loss for the other. The central dimensions of religious and national identity separate the protagonists of the Northern Irish conflict. A series of population surveys conducted between 1989 and 2003 have examined how people self-categorize in terms of religious and national identity. Before the start of the Troubles 39% of Protestants categorized themselves as British, 32% had an Ulster identity and 20% saw themselves as Irish. A decade later two thirds of Protestants saw themselves as British, 20% had an Ulster identity and only 8% saw themselves as Irish. This has persisted and post ceasefire surveys show no more than 3% of Protestants view themselves as Irish, however the most recent survey saw less than half identify themselves as British and almost a fifth had an Ulster identity. Catholics have been more consistent, pre Troubles 75% saw themselves as Irish, 15% as British and 5% had an Ulster identity. Post-Agreement surveys show 60% choose an Irish identity, a small proportion chooses a British identity and an Ulster identity is rare. This shows the oppositional national identities that exist in Northern Ireland. The option of a Northern Irish identity which was not available in early surveys has become more popular and is now chosen by about 20% of Catholics and 20% of Protestants. Age differences are apparent too, more catholic 16 year olds categorize themselves as Irish than catholic adults, and more protestant 16 year olds categorize themselves as Northern Irish or Ulster than protestant adults, suggesting a shift in the pattern of national identification. Only 8% of the "Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey 2003" sample identified as having no religion and 84% identified with a religious group, mostly the two main religious groups, the "pace of secularisation is still restrained" in Northern Ireland.

The current pattern of identification suggests a high degree of inclusion and overlap between religious and national identities combined with opposing identities and negative interdependence. More recent qualitative studies have suggested that these identities have a degree of fluidity and can change depending on contextual factors. Two inter-related qualitative studies examined these two dimensions of identity, religion and nationality.

The first study used in depth interviews with two groups of adults, the first group lived in the border region, the second group were adults in mixed protestant catholic marriages. The interviewees spanned three generations. All the respondents said religious and national identity was important and largely stayed with their traditional category. They downplayed the differences and emphasized common ground, however the two groups differed in their process of self-categorization and the importance of religious and national identity. Those on the border all categorized themselves as Irish and felt an increasing confidence about an Irish identity, they showed a feeling that the identities were mutually exclusive, and that there was some overlap between national and religious identity. Cultural, linguistic, historical, religious and egalitarian dimensions made up the Irish identity but all these factors fell under one clear unambiguous category Irish and they were often very clear about rejecting what they believed they were not - namely British. Protestants living in the border region had a more complex categorization at times self-categorizing in more than one national category. Those in mixed marriages similarly showed more complex and nuanced views of national identity many reporting a change in they way they viewed national identity however this

was more of a blurring of boundaries rather than a conversion or crossing of boundaries. Amongst all interviewees there had been experience of segregation and social division in their lives, and all mixed marriage interviewees reported experience of prejudice and stigmatisation. Some saw religion as a thing that you do but do not talk about, but for others the increasing privatisation of religion in the sense of "believing without belonging" was important. For some mixed marriage interviewees prejudice or rejection had led to a more over-arching 'Christian' identity. Mixed marriages still seemed to create issues for people and churches were still seen as divisive.

The second study examined essays written by young people in the eastern border region of Northern Ireland. National identity was important and a source of pride to young people whether they identified themselves as Irish or British but a few added it was not something that justified fighting. Nationality was an achieved identity and subject to choice, and there was evidence of the oppositional nature of national identity in Northern Ireland. Sport, sportspeople, culture and characteristics such as friendliness and sense of humour were common cultural meanings associated with Irish identity. In a similar manner to the adult studies British identity invoked a more limited number of cultural meanings and were often combined with religion, events such as band parades, 12th of July and football matches. Conflation of nationality and religion was common and questions would be answered without distinguishing the two and occurred across emotional, cognitive and behavioural dimensions. Collective memory is more common in those who identify as Irish, such as references to specific events such as Bloody Sunday and the 1916 Easter rising or to more general historical happenings. These collective memories are used to declare oppositional identities and positions. Stereotypes of other groups are invoked to strengthen their own identities. Emotion and context were also issues, pride and shame were important and different contexts led to different emotional responses to national identity. Similar differences existed in the young people when it came to religion some emphasized religion in terms of a personal faith and morality whereas others had a collective identity often more political than spiritual.

Similarities between the studies include the frequent conflation of national and religious identities in young people and often in adults, this high degree of overlap is associated with less favourable outgroup attitudes and inter-group tolerance. Identity often involved relational definitions of 'what you are not', which were as important as 'what you are'. Catholic identity was broader and less ambiguous whereas British identity was linked to the state and it was often difficult to ascribe meaning to the identity, often young people imbued it with religious meaning. In adults a strategic use of national identity was acknowledged but the more subtle discourse about religion showed two levels one in which there was a tolerance and acceptance and a second more strategic level which permitted apparently contradictory interpersonal and intergroup positions. Religious and national identity continues to be constructed as oppositional and negatively interdependent and given the centrality of religion in structural and social divisions, recourse to religion as the vehicle to promote tolerance and pluralism would appear ill conceived. Given the association between identities, conflict and structural and institutional division, the post-Agreement landscape would be better served by reducing the influence of the political, national, religious and historical structures that divide Northern Ireland.