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RELIGIOUS SUBCULTURE AFTER THE
BELFAST AGREEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

EVERYDAY EVANGELICALS: LIFE IN A RELIGIOUS SUBCULTURE AFTER THE BELFAST AGREEMENT*

This paper examines the everyday lives of Northern Irish evangelicals since the Belfast Agreement of 1998. Drawing on more than 100 semi-structured interviews with evangelicals (conducted between 2002-2007), we explore the relationship between macro-level social and political changes and individuals' religious change. While recognising the importance of macro-level factors in leading evangelicals to a privatisation, moderation or transformation of their faith, we argue that the importance of micro-level, subcultural factors in contributing to change has been underestimated. Thus we sketch out the main elements of a Northern Irish evangelical subculture, exploring how it has contributed to change—especially in directions we describe as converting, conserving and exiting. We conclude that a fuller understanding of individual religious change requires an appreciation of how these macro-level and micro-level factors intersect. In the context of the religiously-plural public sphere which is developing in Northern Ireland, we argue that evangelicals have more flexibility and specifically religious resources for political engagement than has been previously supposed.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

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INTRODUCTION: RELIGION AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND CONFLICT

There is considerable disagreement over the extent to which religion has contributed to the Northern Ireland conflict. This is a crucial debate, because how both policy makers and academics understand the role of religion will impact on how they engage with religious actors in the peace building and transitional justice stages of the transformation of the conflict.

Until the late 1990s, there was what Hayes and McAllister (1999) have called an “academic consensus” around the “ethnic marker” thesis about the role of religion in the conflict. McGarry and O’Leary (1995) were the most enthusiastic proponents of this idea, which argues that the divided communities have used the terms “Catholic” and “Protestant” to define themselves against each other but that religion per se has not been an important factor. Rather, the conflict has been primarily a dispute about ethno-national identity, influenced by other factors, such as economic inequalities. Bruce was a dissenting voice. In his classic studies of Paisleyism from the 1980s, he went so far as to declare that: “The Northern Ireland conflict is a religious conflict” (1986: 249; see also Bruce, 2007). Bruce’s argument is based on the distinction he makes between Catholics’ “national” identity and Protestants’ “ethnic” identity. Because Catholics’ national identity is secure (they identify with the Irish Republic), the religious elements of their identity are not as important. Protestants, on the other hand, feel insecure in their British identity because they are aware that their values and ideals seem bizarre to those on the British mainland—and that the British do not seem to want them. Accordingly, Bruce understands Protestants as an ethnic group, and what makes them most distinct from their Catholic neighbours is their religion. So religion mattered—but it mattered more for Protestants.

Bruce’s work fed into the idea that fundamentalist or evangelical Protestantism has been the most divisive brand of religion throughout the conflict (Ganiel and Dixon, 2008). Bruce argued that evangelicalism made Paisley and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) appealing because it resonated with the “core” of Protestant identity, which was inextricably tied up with evangelical and Calvinist concepts. Bruce is not alone in this analysis. For example, Wright’s (1973) influential analysis of “Protestant ideology” stressed the importance of covenantal Calvinist ideas for the Protestant community, Miller (1978) explored the relationship between Calvinism and Protestants’ idea of “conditional loyalty” to the British crown, and Todd (1987) outlined the importance of evangelicalism in the formation of an “Ulster loyalist” identity. Akenson (1992) expounded further on how covenantal Calvinism contributed to the formation of Protestants’ self-conceptions as a “chosen people” in a “promised land”, Morrow (1997) identified the fundamentalist-informed “myths” that justified

violence and division, and Brewer and Higgins (1998) analysed the links between evangelicalism, anti-Catholicism, and conflict. Liechty and Clegg (2001) and Thomson (2002) have claimed that evangelicalism was especially important in forming and maintaining boundaries between Catholics and Protestants. Patrick Mitchel (2003) also sees evangelicalism as crucial to Protestant identity, arguing that an evangelical ethos underwrote the unionist-dominated Stormont government from 1921-1972 (78-87). Claire Mitchell (2006) argues that religion matters for both Protestant and Catholics, but says that the way that “mattering” is expressed varies for the two groups. Religious rituals matter more for Catholics, and religiously-informed ideologies (informed by evangelicalism) matter more for Protestants (See also Mitchell, 2005). Ganiel (2008a) also argues that evangelicalism had a privileged relationship with social and political power, especially from 1921-1972, and that this contributed to divisions between Catholics and Protestants. The breakdown of that relationship, which has been taking place throughout the Troubles and the post-conflict peace process, has forced evangelicals to change both their identities and their political projects (Ganiel, 2006, 2008a, 2008b).

What is striking about almost all of these analyses is that evangelicalism is conceived of in rigid social or political identity categories. These categories have been linked to the conflict in that they are sometimes seen as explanatory variables—helping us to understand how boundaries between Catholics and Protestants are maintained or how Protestants justify conflict. The more recent work has shown how those categories are loosening and in some cases breaking down, relating those processes to the structural and political changes ushered in by the Belfast Agreement (Ganiel, 2008a; Mitchell, 2006; Mitchell and Todd 2007, Todd 2008, Todd et al 2008).

Our previous work and indeed some of the data presented in this paper will link changes within Northern Irish evangelicalism to wider macro-level political processes that have been unfolding since the Belfast Agreement. But the relationship between macro-level political processes and individual evangelical identity change is not so straightforward. Rather, we have found that the “lived religion” of Northern Irish evangelicals is an important and overlooked catalyst of change (see Maguire, 2008; Ammerman, 2006). The everyday lived religion of Northern Irish evangelicals is embedded in an overarching subculture in which socio-political issues are not the only or even the main concern. That subculture provides evangelicals with a variety of tools which they can draw on to justify changes in their identities and beliefs. This paper explores how macro-level political changes and micro-level negotiations of the evangelical subculture intersect in complex and unexpected ways, pushing and pulling change in a variety of directions. We argue that the non-political elements of evangelical subculture have been overlooked by most analysts, and that for a fuller understanding of religious change they must be taken into account.

In the next section, we draw on our data to establish the core elements of a Northern Irish evangelical subculture.¹ We then discuss the main directions of change described by the participants in our research. Next, we present examples of evangelicals' stories of change, demonstrating how they frame their explanations both in terms of the macro-level political and the micro-level subcultural. Finally, we discuss possible policy implications of: 1. evangelical variety and change, 2. the politicisation and/or de-politicisation of evangelicals, and 3. the development of a religiously-plural public sphere in Northern Ireland.

NORTHERN IRISH EVANGELICALISM AS A RELIGIOUS SUBCULTURE

Northern Irish evangelicalism is an expression of a world-wide religious movement, sharing many of the characteristics of American, British, and Canadian evangelicalism, in particular (Ganiel, 2008a, 2008b). Up to 25 per cent of Protestants in the US, Northern Ireland and South Africa can be classified as evangelical (Noll, 2001). The charismatic and Pentecostal movements—numerically the largest expression of Christianity in the world today—share some of the defining features of evangelicalism (Jenkins, 2002). There is considerable debate about those defining features. Bebbington (1989) has developed a four-point definition that includes the beliefs that one must be converted or “born again”, that the Bible is the inspired word of God, that Christ’s death on the cross was an actual historical event necessary for the salvation of the world, and that Christians must exercise their faith through social action and evangelism. It is worth pointing out that most scholarship on evangelicalism has defined it in terms of beliefs.

But Smith’s (1998) work on American evangelicalism demonstrates that evangelicalism relies not just on intellectual assent to a set of beliefs, but on social relationships and networks. Smith calls this a distinct “subculture”. Smith developed his subcultural theory to explain the “vitality” of American evangelicalism. For him, evangelicalism thrives because its adherents construct a subculture that provides “satisfying morally orienting collective identities” (118). At the same time, that subculture is strong because it uses “the cultural tools needed to create both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant subgroups, short of becoming genuinely countercultural” (119). So, evangelicalism thrives in modern, plural contexts in which it is able to carve out a distinct identity for itself. Wellman’s (2008) later work on evangelicalism in the Pacific Northwest confirms this finding. For Wellman, evangelicals’ religious ideas, networks and relationships produce spiritual capital which they then draw on to engage with a wider secular, plural culture.

Our research indicates that Northern Irish evangelicalism also can be considered a distinct subculture. Although Brewer and Higgins (1998), Jordan (2001), Thomson (2002), Ganiel (2008a) and others have spent considerable time teasing out the va-

¹ We conducted these interviews between 2002-2007. We would like to thank Sara Templer for her assistance with interviews in 2007.

rieties of Northern Irish evangelicalism, that they have a subcultural identity is implicit and assumed in works such as Jordan's *Not of this World* and Porter's *Changing Women, Changing Worlds*, books published by the organization Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI, now known as the Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland or CCCI). This subculture includes what Ingersoll (2003) has called "material culture", including the books, CDs and trinkets available in Northern Ireland's evangelical bookshops, the magazines published by various evangelical organizations (including CCCI's *Lion and Lamb*, Evangelical Alliance's *Idea*, the Evangelical Protestant Society's *Ulster Bulwark*, and so on), and annual events such as Summer Madness for teenagers, music festivals, and conferences. The subculture also includes connections with American evangelicals. These include visits from members of the fundamentalist Bob Jones family to Free Presbyterians, and visits from left-leaning leaders Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo to Northern Ireland's left-leaning evangelicals.

Doubtless, during the Troubles and now in Northern Ireland's post-conflict transition, that subculture has included ideologies and patterns of behaviour that created and reinforced boundaries with Catholics, and legitimated violence. But that subculture also has included an array of resources centred round the beliefs and material resources outlined above. While there are important intertwinings of religion and politics within this subculture (as there is in the American evangelical subculture), it has five other significant features: 1. the centrality of conversion experiences, 2. supernaturalism, 3. wrestling with existential questions, 4. the importance of the "advocate" (someone who encourages an individual in their faith), and 5. the practices of everyday life such as prayer meetings, daily bible readings, and networks of relationships. These features are prominent in evangelicals' narratives as they explain their faith, their actions, and changes in their lives.

Below, we explore how evangelicals utilise their analyses of political events as well as the resources from their subculture to make sense of change in their religious lives. We have identified six major trajectories of change: converting, conserving, privatising, moderating, transforming and exiting. As people described their journeys on these trajectories, we found that those who were privatising, moderating and transforming talked more about the impact of politics. Those who were converting, conserving and exiting talked more about elements of the evangelical subculture. We cannot claim that these patterns are representative of evangelicalism as a whole, given the focused nature of our sample. Further, most people talked about both politics and the subculture. But what this data demonstrates is the complexity of change, and the importance of understanding both macro and micro level factors. First we will provide examples of narratives that focus on the macro (people who were privatising, moderating and transforming), then those that focus on the micro (converting, conserving, exiting.)

PRIVATISING

Our first interviews took place in 2002, and there were initially indications that the Belfast Agreement had provoked a religious response. Trudy became born-again

just after the advent of the Agreement. A group of three working-class men who had been on the fringes of loyalist paramilitarism, but had become born-again in the late 1990s, described the summer of 1998 as one full of loyalist conversions. They spoke about how seven out of eleven members of their loyalist flute band got saved that summer, but did not offer any explanation of this. Paralleling their story was the assertion of a revivalist preacher in a different county of Northern Ireland who also talked about the conversions of 1998. This led us to surmise that there was perhaps some connection between the political changes of 1998, so negatively received by many Protestants, and the apparent flurry of religious conversions. We hypothesised that experiencing such a dramatic change in political circumstances, seen by many as a devastating loss, had led to a religious reawakening. Otherwise secular Protestants, we thought, were perhaps despairing of the temporal climate and were seeking religious answers.

As we continued with our fieldwork it became clear that there was indeed an important relationship between political and personal religious change since 1998, but it was not in the direction indicated by the early interviews. When we asked other interviewees, including religious ministers and pastors, if they had observed a rise in religious conversions around this time, most they said they had not. Instead, as we progressed we found much more evidence of a privatisation of faith amongst those who were already saved, in response to their political disillusionment. In particular we found a belief in some circles that, due to unfavourable political circumstances, that the “end times” were drawing near and that saving souls was now more important than trying to change earthly society. In fact, this change in religious identity often had the corresponding effect of loosening once strongly held ethnic and national identifications (see also Mitchell and Todd, 2007).

Bill’s narrative is typical of religious privatisation after 1998. Bill’s politics were staunchly unionist throughout the Troubles, he liked the DUP’s “hard line” and at times he played an active role “hitting back” at republicanism. In fact he joined the “Third Force”, a pseudo paramilitary grouping in the 1970s, and “would have marched around the street in balaclavas”. He says “I even considered doing time to kill. Now Gerry Edwards was the man I wanted”. But now he feels sorry for Gerry Edwards because he is “lost”. This change for Bill did not happen overnight, but was rather a “gradual” process where he “trained” himself to think differently. In his words, “this oul body, this flesh was used to being one way, of doing one thing on its own, because you are born in the spirit of the Lord then, it takes a while for you to start to train it not to be doing these things”.

It is perhaps unsurprising that developments in Northern Ireland would be interpreted in an apocalyptic context. As Trudy sees it, in the last days “you will have tribulation and there is no doubt about it, not only is it getting harder, I’m talking about the Protestant tradition, it is getting harder as a Christian”. She says the “green [nationalist] victory” in Northern Ireland is “a sign of the times”. For her, the presence of “murderers” in the Northern Ireland Assembly ties in with predictions in the biblical book of Revelation that in the last days evil men will rule the earth. Bill says that “providential circumstances are being created in Northern Ireland to bring about evangelical testimony”. These evangelicals felt that things were becoming

more difficult for evangelical Protestants in Northern Ireland, who had to endure constant challenges to their faith as well as their culture.

Trudy and Bill were interviewed separately, but at a later stage happened to be in the same room when the tape recorder was running. Trudy was at one time extremely politically active and vocal. As she said during an exchange with Bill:

That's why politics—it is nothing. It certainly doesn't fire me up any more, I mean X said to me why don't you get involved with politics, speaking out for us. I have absolutely no desire for it at all. The only desire now is to warn people, that Armageddon is definitely coming, that the apocalypse is not far off [...] the fact is that Christ is coming back, he's going to come back and sort out this mess [...] That belief becomes stronger with each passing day. There is not a morning I don't get out of bed and, I think Bill's exactly the same, when your feet touch the floorboards, your first thought is Christ—whether he is coming back. ... You can't change it—it's all foretold. This is prophecy being fulfilled.

For Trudy, the second coming of Christ is an all-encompassing belief. But her response, to withdraw from politics, is not matched by a withdrawal from all other arenas of life other than evangelism. Trudy is a keen home decorator, and although she says that now if she is doing anything in the house she will “hurry up and get something picked” before Armageddon, she continues to be enthused by home improvements, saying she is “absolutely mad into it”. Whilst we should not make more of this comment than was intended, it is interesting that Trudy continues to improve those temporal things around her that she has control over, such as her home, and does not attempt to change things in areas of life where she feels powerless, such as Northern Ireland politics.

In sum, in these narratives people frame the privatising of their faith as a response to political events, especially those associated with the “losses” of Protestants after the Belfast Agreement. What is striking is the absence of belief in their own political agency. Drawing on the tools of the evangelical subculture, they turn to supernaturalism, presenting God as an active agent who is judging the world. Privatisation also embeds them deeper in the networks and relationships of the evangelical subculture.

MODERATING

By moderating, we mean people who have moved from a conservative to what would be considered a more liberal or moderate evangelical stance. This was by far the largest group of people we interviewed, due to the fact that we were interested in this type of change and sought a significant sample of people who categorized themselves in this way. This group had been under-represented in studies of evangelicalism during the 1980s. People in this category shared a number of reasons why they believed they had changed, including study (particularly at university level), increasing interaction with Catholics (which often happened for the first time at university), spending time away from Northern Ireland (which often included experiencing ethnic and religious pluralism), the influence of people who advocated

moderating change, and disillusionment with the churches in Northern Ireland. This disillusionment came in two broad categories: what was seen as the churches' approaches to Northern Irish politics (usually characterized as withdrawing or lending support to unionist politics), and the unnecessary or hypocritical trappings of the evangelical subculture.

Larry, a 52-year-old doctor, became frustrated with what he saw as the Northern Irish churches' inability to address the Troubles. Coming from a traditional evangelical background, he became involved in the charismatic renewal movement. In Ireland, crucially, the charismatic renewal involved both Catholics and Protestants and was sympathetic towards ecumenism:

My journey started with a rejection of what I saw as a rather superficial and meaningless form of Protestant church life in Northern Ireland. I was disillusioned with that. I then encountered the charismatic renewal which in Ireland has always been ecumenical, and has always embraced both traditions. I saw it as first of all personally relevant because God became meaningful to me in a personal way. And secondly culturally relevant because it addressed the main social and political issue of Ireland historically. That was really the fertile ground that my faith grew up in. Then I moved on and lived in London for seven years, moved back here then to Northern Ireland, and experienced a second great disillusionment. I felt that Christianity, an evangelical faith, wasn't really going to address the issues, ... [or] provide the necessary answers for our communities here. And so there came a disillusionment with the more traditional, conservative evangelical background. Not so much a disillusionment with charismatic Christianity because I still feel that is personally highly relevant. But feeling that something more was necessary in order to address the political and cultural and moral difficulties that our society was facing. I found the evangelicals who were exploring political alternatives and who were involved on a social level with deprived communities, I found that they were having more impact on addressing some of the societal problems. ... So that marriage of a more experiential Christianity with a more involved social activity in community seemed to me to be the best of both worlds.

During this time Larry also began to re-evaluate how he thought about the bible. Previously he had taken a literalist position, but now found that inadequate as well. This allowed him to relax his prior position on only working with people who shared his theology:

My faith was shaken a bit because some of the things that I had believed in scripture didn't seem to work out as I had thought they would. So I tend to be a little bit less inclined to just take the sort of literalist position ... I feel that issues are more complex and more grays, a lot of it has got more gray than black. I still have a great affection for the church I'm involved in, and the people who are in it, but again I'm more aware the shortcomings. The fact that we are not meeting all the needs or addressing all the issues, that we're not coming close to addressing some of the issues. ... I suppose I realized that actually I don't have to agree with people. It used to be that you had to work with those [who agreed with you], now actually I've realized that it doesn't matter that much. If you can cooperate together on issues that you feel are important and where you agree theologically is really not that important.

For Larry, then, the churches' lack of meaningful response to political violence during the Troubles was a significant catalyst of change. He also thought that churches had not been doing enough since the Belfast Agreement to heal the divisions of society. Observing this religious inaction then spurred him to political action. Other significant aspects of Larry's narrative are the way he uses some of the evangelical subcultural tools to frame his story. There is a strong element of supernaturalism as he describes his charismatic experiences, as well as wrestling with existential questions as he critiques evangelical approaches to the Bible and to politics.

Donald is from a working class family and was raised in what he described as a closed, separatist Baptist church. He said his horizons expanded as a teenager when he did evangelistic work with a group of friends in Donegal during the summers. He says that he was fortunate to pass an exam which allowed him to attend a grammar school, and then university. At university, he studied the sociology of religion and this gave him the tools to critique the way he had been raised, even going so far as to name the religious environment in which he grew up an evangelical subculture:

When we were doing sociology of religion I found my world being taken apart in a very articulate kind of way. I also discovered that so much of what I had taken for granted was actually part of a whole subculture that could be seen as part of one subculture among many. ... We were sort of a coherent little subculture, as opposed to actually any great bastion of God's truth in the world. So that was a profound experience and probably was spiritual for me. [I would sit in church on a Sunday night] and think if I brought folks from the course here this would just be the classic illustration of everything that we were talking about in our sociology textbooks. ... The tools of sociology are very useful in understanding how it (the subculture) works and I need to take that on board. I mean that's good working knowledge ... but it doesn't help me unpack this key issue ... about who Jesus Christ is.

Coupled with this, Donald began to develop more liberal attitudes about dress and mannerisms. He describes the first time he wore a blue shirt to his parents' church:

I remember the first Sunday I wore a blue shirt to church. Oh wow, they made me take it off. So our model was you dressed a certain way to go to church, and that was always a white shirt under a suit. That would have been taken as part of what mattered. ... Alcohol is another issue, cinema going is another issue.

This was accompanied by a certain disappointment, even disillusionment, because evangelicals were focusing on dress and cinema rather than what he considered more important issues, such as divisions between Catholics and Protestants or social justice issues.

Donald's narrative demonstrates very clearly dissatisfaction with some of the material elements of the evangelical subculture, such as dress codes. Although not all evangelicals in Northern Ireland observe these codes, which are common amongst some Baptists and Brethren, Donald's stories highlight the importance of relationships and networks in maintaining various codes and thus boundaries. Violating those codes was often part of the moderating process. This more often than not

overlapped with the moderators social and political critiques, which were especially important to this group.

TRANSFORMING

People who we characterise as “transforming” would at one time have considered themselves evangelicals, but now see their faith in very different ways. They were once embedded in Northern Ireland’s evangelical subculture, but their religious journey has seen them interrogate, critique and leave that subculture. They have varying degrees of attachment to evangelical institutions, networks and friends. These interviewees form a unique subset in that they have created for themselves a new religious network or community, which is centred round the Belfast-based “post-evangelical” or “emerging church” groups Ikon and Zero28.

These former evangelicals provided a number of reasons for leaving that faith, the most common of which was disillusionment with the way that the churches in Northern Ireland—especially their own evangelical churches—responded to the Northern Ireland conflict and the peace process. They also were disappointed with what they perceived as shortcomings in the more distinctly religious aspects of the evangelical subculture, ranging from evangelical attitudes towards money and romantic relationships. Other reasons included the evangelical churches’ failure to recognise and engage with global social justice issues such as unfair trade. A few talked about a rather high-level intellectual process that included reading post-modern philosophers, and becoming convinced that evangelicalism does not have the resources to address post-modernity.

What is interesting about these interviewees is that they did not abandon their faith altogether. This seems to come down to two main factors. First, they saw their faith as the motivating factor behind their critique of evangelicalism. They did not necessarily critique evangelicalism because they had severe doubts about God’s existence or goodness. Rather they were disappointed with evangelicalism for neglecting what they had come to see as the most important aspects of living with integrity. Second, Ikon and Zero28 provided them with a community—almost a support network or alternative subculture—of others who were going through a similar process.

Disillusionment with the churches’ responses to Northern Ireland politics was by far the most common theme of these interviews. It is possible that the prominence of this reason is exaggerated in this group. These interviewees were all university educated and keen to participate in social and political activism. Zero28, an organisation that lasted from 1996-2007, was predominantly concerned with promoting social and political activism.

Geoff, a 31-year-old journalist, grew up in a large town outside of Belfast. He says he was “born again a few times” as a child, was taken to church several times on Sunday, and had a traditional evangelical upbringing. For him, going to university was a catalyst for starting to think about how the churches in Northern Ireland had demonised Catholics and contributed to the Troubles:

[In Northern Ireland] evangelical Christianity is tied up a lot with unionist politics. It might be the same with Republican politics in the [United] States, but for a lot of people it's linking one thing with another. If you are Christian you should support this party. And I guess it's things like that that disillusioned a lot of people, all these things that you couldn't fit into all these boxes. ... But then you suddenly realize that it's not like that, it's actually quite hard, you need a much bigger faith, a much bigger God. ... I was brought up hearing sermons about how evil the Catholic Church is. You know the exposition of Revelation where you have the beast in Revelation as being the Catholic Church, and the Ian Paisley preachers who talk about the Church of Rome as the whore of Babylon. You have this being driven into you for years and when actually you get to university it's probably the first time that you meet a substantial number of people from the other side ... The first time you meet people from the other side and you think well actually, they're not as bad as I thought and you meet Catholics who perhaps have a more real faith than you have. You think there must be something wrong. Maybe I should go and check this out.

Ellen also talks about being weighed down by the "baggage" evangelicals in Northern Ireland have accumulated because of the conflict and perceived threats to their religious identity. She says that this baggage has caused many of her friends to leave the church:

I think Zero28 and Ikon wouldn't necessarily exist in other countries because it's definitely something that's borne out of being Protestant evangelical in Northern Ireland. And I think it's some of that baggage comes from the division and the victim mentality. If you feel that your point of view is under threat you're going to defend it more fiercely, so that's why you've got so many people handing out tracts in the streets of Belfast. It's not just about getting to heaven, it's about defending Protestantism. ... That puts Zero28 in context a wee bit. The fact that we're just trying to work through our angst over all that. I think a lot of my friends who've grown up in the same background as me would have just completely walked away from church and any expression of faith. ... I think Zero28 is at least a chance to say well hold on, all isn't lost. That might have been a painful and difficult experience but let's try and look at some of these things that you still connect with very deeply.

Negative experiences within the evangelical subculture also contributed to the transformation of these interviewees' faith. These experiences overlapped with and reinforced their disillusionment with the churches' responses to politics. Ellen linked her transformation to negative experiences of church. These negative experiences happened in Northern Ireland, but her disillusionment accelerated when she worked in the United States as an intern in a Christian school:

I ended up being given a lot of freedom when I was there on my own. Because of that freedom that I'd never had before I started to explore things more for myself. I was in a church that was a very difficult place to be. ... The kind of ideas that were being communicated to people were if you pray and read your Bible enough you'll be a millionaire by next year. I was really struggling with all this stuff. ... I'd always had little problems with the church in Northern Ireland because it's very closed minded. But I started to see that it's not just the church in Northern Ireland ... there's just something fundamentally wrong with the church. I summed it up at that time in a very sort of angry way by saying churches lie to people. And that was just my experience at that point. And that doesn't mean that everyone in churches is a liar, but on the

whole I was very uncomfortable with what was being communicated to people in churches.

These narratives highlight the importance of the Northern Irish political context in contributing to individual religious change. These interviewees had come to see evangelicalism as a political and a loaded term, one that hindered their participation in the public sphere. They believed evangelicalism had become bound up in perpetuating division and conflict, and felt if they were to lead authentic lives they could no longer identify with it.

CONVERTING

Given the centrality of conversion to evangelicalism, it is not surprising that “conversion” was itself a prominent theme in our interviews. Despite some of the early indications that the Belfast Agreement might spark a spate of religious conversions or a “revival”, very few of our interviewees linked their conversion to recent political events (a handful of people spoke of being converted to evangelicalism after initial contact with Ian Paisley’s politics, although this happened during the early part of the Troubles). As Rambo (1993: 17) has explained, conversion is best described as a process rather than an event—“a series of elements that are interactive and cumulative over time”. Often it is a process begun in early childhood, where socialisation provides familiarity with religious ideas. It almost always involves contact with other believers, or “advocates”, whether these are family members, colleagues or friends who introduce individuals to evangelical ideas and networks. It also almost always involves a deeply personal, religious dimension where individuals describe emotional and sometimes supernatural experiences that Geoff out a religious turning point. Despite having these emotional elements, individuals often engage in highly rational processes of deliberation when considering conversion.

For participants in our study, the conversion process entailed some or all of these elements. We were struck by the variety of the narratives relating conversion experiences. For a number of people, conversion happened in childhood, often before the age of ten. Sometimes this was reneged upon in people’s teens or twenties, and conversion entailed a recommitment in later adult life. Some people were recent converts, who had some religious reference points as children but no prior active commitment. Due to the retrospective nature of our interviews, the majority were recalling their conversion from many years ago. Most of our interviewees were able to describe the occasion of their conversion. Many remembered the date, the context and how they felt. However, some of those who had been raised in evangelical households were less sure that they could pinpoint a definite moment of change and described an accumulation of small decisions over time. Some others who were brought up as evangelicals experienced multiple conversions, particularly throughout childhood, as if topping-up each previous attempt.

Bill’s narrative illustrates how people can draw on a variety of resources from the evangelical subculture to make sense of their individual conversion. We shared some of Bill’s story in our section on privatising. The fact that at one point he was

on a converting trajectory highlights how at one point in an individual's life political factors can be at the forefront of their understandings of personal change, while at other times more relational or subcultural elements are more important. A security guard in his 50s, Bill comes from a medium sized town in Northern Ireland and became saved 8 years ago. Bill's mother did not attend church, but she sent Bill to Sunday School when he was a boy. Bill found church "very boring" and stopped going in his later teens. Although he said he did not have "a clue what they were talking about", he also says that "there was other times that yes, something registered, and that part that registered always stayed with you". When Bill was having serious marital problems later in life, his daughter, who was born-again, talked to him about her faith and eventually persuaded him to go along to a local Pentecostal church. She said it would help him "get away from problems [and] to get things right" in his marriage. This is one of many examples from our interviews where children influence their parents' beliefs, a process highlighted also by Sherkat (2003). In fact, Bill's other two children joined suit and also became born-again shortly afterwards.

Bill describes how he felt "a draw towards the church" after attending with his daughter and felt "that there must be something to all this that everyone's speaking about". But it took quite a number of visits to church before Bill made a commitment. For Bill, the decision to become born-again was made slowly and only after a long period of rational deliberation. On the one hand he says that in church his "spirit started coming alive", he would feel a "tremendous heat [...the] presence of the spirit" which was an "absolutely gorgeous, beautiful" experience. On the other hand Bill says he was afraid: "even I knew I was supposed to hand myself to the Lord, there was still this part of me—you know you can't do that 'cos once you do, you'll not be able to go out here, you'll not be able to go out to a nightclub if you want, you'll not be going out for a few drinks and all if you do that. And, what are your mates going to say at work ... they'll laugh at you and all".

Around this time, Bill met an advocate. He was working as a handyman at the time, and after his unsaved work partner retired, an evangelical man came to help him out for six weeks. This man sat and "read his bible every day at dinnertime" and also in the van while Bill was driving. Bill describes how he used to go home at night and compile lists of questions to ask his work partner the next day. Usually these questions would revolve around what he would and would not be allowed to do if he were to become born-again. This is a fascinating insight into how individuals deliberate and come to religious decisions. Bill had to balance whether his feelings of warmth and of his spirit coming alive were worth the sacrifices he would have to make in his lifestyle. Eventually Bill decided that the sacrifices were worth it and he describes the final decision to become born-again as an uncharacteristically emotional experience. Although he did not "hear any trumpets blowing", a change in him took place "that was a great turning point". Bill's conversion combines a number of elements of the everyday, lived religion of the evangelical subculture: supernatural experiences, pondering existential questions, the importance of the advocate (his workmate), and the religious practices of family members who opened him up to wider evangelical networks.

CONSERVING

In the social scientific literature, evangelicalism (or fundamentalism) often is presented as a “reaction” to social and political changes that threaten old ways of life. Given the far-reaching social and political changes ushered in by the Belfast Agreement, it seemed plausible that many evangelicals would remain or become politically, socially and morally conservative in these circumstances. But we identified a variety of conserving patterns, very few of which were linked to macro level politics. Some people did report that political events catalysed their faith and set them on a conservative trajectory. Others have been saved since childhood and described a gradual process of faith deepening over time. Others focused on personal crises that led to a deepening of their faith. These evangelicals described a surprising array of what could be called strategies to promote a deeper faith, including almost total immersion in their subcultural networks. They adopted a highly regulated approach to social contact to avoid contamination. They talked about how non-evangelical company could lead to temptation and make their faith more difficult to maintain. Most evangelical churches offer a staggering variety of activities. This gives people the opportunity to participate in something every day of the week. Understandably, this can have the effect of reducing individuals’ contact with non-evangelicals, which in turn can deepen their faith. A congregation or extended religious network can come to feel like a family for some people, often replacing or structuring actual family life.

For example, Mandy, a civil servant in her 30s from Belfast, attends her Free Presbyterian Church at least seven times a week:

Currently I would go to the Tuesday morning prayer meeting, on Tuesday evening I would do the outreach with the church, there’s a Thursday morning prayer meeting that I would go to, and Thursday evening we have a prayer meeting, and then Friday afternoon I would go, if I’m not working I would go with some of the congregation to [a picket] in X street. We would hand out gospel tracts and literature concerning X. On Sunday I would go to the early morning prayer meeting and then I would attend the services on the Lord’s day.

Another Free Presbyterian couple, Michael and Liz, describe their weekly routine, and show how this religious immersion structures family life and is passed on to the next generation. In Michael’s words:

Sunday is a special day, obviously [...] So there is Sunday school, church in the morning, often a meeting in the afternoons and church again in the evening. As [the children] get older, they will be at youth rallies and things like that after church on Sundays. On a Monday evening the children go to the children’s meeting in the Gospel Hall just down the road. And they are having a special week this week, so they are going every night. On a Wednesday evening it’s our midweek Bible class and prayer meeting, and one or other of us will be at that. On a Friday evening it’s the children’s’ meeting, which I lead in our own church. So we all go to that as well. So that is the pattern of the week. It’s a way of life, very much so.

Michael and Liz's children also attend a small faith school. It is clear from their description that their faith is the main focus of their lives and church activities take up practically all of their spare time. This total immersion in church was described by quite a number of participants whose faith was deepening, and it was usually accompanied by a regulation of social relationships outside the church as well. People made the quite logical assessment that it would be easier for them to maintain their faith if they surrounded themselves with like-minded people. This prerogative was usually couched in theological as well as more mundane and logical terms. In many cases this entailed actively cutting unsaved groups and individuals—former friends—out of their lives. Turning down party invitations initially would be a source of guilt and embarrassment, but eventually the invitations would stop coming, which lessened the need to make difficult social decisions.

Mandy tightened up her social networks almost immediately after becoming saved. At this time she shared a house with two other women who were “nice” but “worldly”, and whom she considered to be “good friends”. Initially she said she wanted to keep them as friends, and that she would simply not do certain activities with them, such as go out for a drink. When she was faced with their weekly Friday night outing just two weeks after being saved, Mandy describes herself as having a dilemma. She considered going out and not having a drink, however she ended up not going at all that night, or ever again—because she says she soon “realise[d] that this was not going to work”. She says “I realised being in that company that especially when drink starts to flow that I’m in company where God is being dishonoured and his word is being dishonoured”. She says that she has learned as a Christian that “you don’t pull people up as quickly as they’ll pull you down”, and now she does not even consider going anywhere where the “Lord is dishonoured”.

These narratives illustrate quite clearly how everyday practices within the evangelical subculture, such as multiple meetings and strategic relationships, can be a source of change in a conservative direction. This is often accompanied by existential angst, including giving up old relationships. Politics is not necessarily a part of this process. But conserving is not privatising, either. Conserving evangelicals often described their political involvement, including their thoughts on nationalist vs. unionist issues and the Belfast Agreement, as well as their objections to homosexuality and abortion.

EXITING

We also spoke with individuals who at one time considered themselves evangelicals, but who no longer do so. Leaving one's faith is usually a gradual process, with a variety of experiences acting as turning points along the way. For some it took many years to disengage - Edward, now in his thirties, says his leaving the faith was “a very very very slow end”. For others, leaving was triggered by a traumatic event, but was always as the culmination of other processes of change. For many respondents, intellectual questions and doubts about their faith had arisen. They describe a process of allowing themselves to engage with these questions, aware of what the consequences might be. Most people's narratives show a layering of

these experiences and processes. These interviews were sometimes difficult because some people found their experiences with evangelicalism too painful to speak about in detail. Some interviews contained sections that were “off the record”. Some people were worried about the consequences of being identified, at the hands of their former religious communities. Others described a deep embarrassment, being “mortified”, that they had been involved in evangelicalism. Whilst our interviewees were unfailingly generous in telling us their stories, what follows must be interpreted in this light.

Intellectual questions and spiritual doubts played an important role for most of our sample. Existential questioning is not unusual for evangelicals, as has been illustrated in previous sections. But these respondents highlighted difficulties and doubts about the existence of God. These intellectual processes of questioning were usually combined with other influential factors, such as negative experiences of church.

Edward, an arts professional, found his belief in God challenged in his early thirties. Raised Presbyterian, he was then part of the charismatic movement for twelve years, and is now agnostic/atheist. Whilst his narrative is of a slow disengagement with evangelicalism, he highlights two key turning points, which he calls his “anti Damascus Road moments”. Both of these critical moments are highly logical and involve allowing himself to question his faith.

Edward’s first anti-Damascus road moment was watching Derren Brown, the hypnotist and illusionist, on TV. Derren Brown, himself a former born-again Christian, now uses hypnotism, illusion and the power of suggestion in a non-religious context to perform impressive experiments and tricks. Watching Derren Brown’s “Mind Control” TV series, Edward describes his ideas, “suddenly”, as being challenged. It now seemed possible that the things he could not explain in his own life were not necessarily down to God, but could have resulted from more “human” phenomena. But Edward did not immediately cast off this faith in response to this new idea. Rather, he describes allowing himself to ask the “what if” question. He says, “it was from that point on that I really started to engage with the fact that ‘what if it is all bullshit?’ And as soon as I started to do that I really started to run with it. It was weird. As soon as I had kind of crossed that threshold of ‘what if?’—what if I really engage and run with this? What if it’s even right?” This is an interesting process that also emerges in other interviewees’ narratives—granting oneself permission to question. It speaks to the agency of individuals, who, aware of the possible consequences of such questioning, actively decide to allow themselves to open Pandora’s box.

Edward’s story highlights a process of existential questioning coupled with anti-conversion experiences. For others, disillusionment with the evangelical subculture loomed large. Allison was left reeling by her experiences with church, and it is these negative experiences that seem to be the primary reason for her disengagement. A single mother and administrator in her forties, Allison grew up with different religious emphases, ranging from Methodism, which she describes as “loving” and “caring”, to Brethren, which she sees as “harsh”, “rigid”, “punitive”. She now sees

herself as agnostic. For Allison, it was having a child out of wedlock that incurred a harsh disapproval and a lack of understanding from which her faith could not recover. In fact Allison says that this is a “bit of a shame, because if I hadn’t of had that negative experience, I might have been someone who would have quite liked to have gone [to church]”. When she had her son and decided to try church again, she found herself at a Methodist church where they sang a hymn which included a line about “all the poor single parent children who Santa wasn’t coming to visit”. Being a single mother, Allison describes how this made her feel “awful”, “very small” and she did not go back.

Allison also cites feelings of guilt as a source of some of her bad experiences of church. She poetically describes the Brethren influence growing up as “a big wet blanket on life”, going on to say that:

No matter what, whenever life or enjoyment of fun sprung up there was something wrong with it. And they say that Catholics have A Level guilt, but I think like, actually, if you are brought up in something like the Brethren tradition it’s more like sort of PhD guilt, you know? No matter what it is, you feel guilty about it. I mean, we didn’t have a TV for most of the time we were growing up because it was considered such a corrupting influence, and that kind of thing. And so when we did get one, you felt responsible for what was on it, as if it was your fault. And even, say, if a male and a female had been on the screen together and it was all completely innocent, you were still sitting there terrified in case they might kiss, or say something. Especially when it came to sexual matters.

Indeed guilt about sex and relationships loomed large in our respondents’ narratives. They lamented not being allowed to date outside their evangelical circle as well as being made to feel like sexual relationships were “dirty”. Allison articulates this well when she explains how this makes transition to adult life difficult outside the religious context. Edward says he always felt a “a bit of sort of inferiority, I could never measure up”. Now that he has left evangelicalism, Edward speaks about feeling “a great liberty”, a “great sense of relief that there’s no God”.

For some the decision to leave evangelicalism had serious personal consequences, particularly insofar as it made relationships with parents and other family members difficult. But the individuals we talked to eventually learned to devise strategies to sustain these relationships at some level. Notably, despite these personal costs, our respondents retained a great deal of control over their religious choices. This is interesting because it shows us that, even in divided societies where religious belonging is a central part of social life, some individuals are able to make creative and brave choices to opt out religiously. But when this happened, people also tended to opt out politically, saying that neither unionist nor nationalist political parties represented them or their interests (Ganiel, Mitchell and Templer, 2008). For our purposes, what also is interesting is that people still framed their narratives in ways that resonated with the evangelical subculture they had left behind: they critiqued that subculture, engaged with existential questions, and even had anti-conversion experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

This conference is focusing on the impact of devolution on everyday life in Northern Ireland. Our research amongst evangelicals demonstrates that macro-level political changes have indeed impacted on some evangelicals' everyday religious lives. These evangelicals interpret political events through a religious lens. Some are disillusioned with developments and their faith has become privatised. They have withdrawn socially and politically from Northern Ireland's increasingly plural public sphere, and their daily relations with Catholics are limited. They express pessimistic views about the future. Their aspirations are focused on the second coming of Christ as a kind of "get out of jail free" card. Other evangelicals express dismay that their churches have, as they see it, withdrawn from the public sphere. They either accept or welcome pluralism, and advocate a deeper engagement with political issues, including peace building and dealing with the past. They either have or are pursuing more regular and meaningful relationships with Catholics, seeing this as an intentional and important aspect of peace building. Their aspirations are for a "shared future" in which religious groups can participate freely in a plural civil society.

But one of the major findings of our research was that changes in evangelicals' perceptions of their religious lives (religious "journeys" was a term some used to describe this) were not prompted simply by the political changes brought about by devolution. Rather, there was a complex interweaving of macro-level political and micro-level subcultural factors that interacted with each other, prompting change in a variety of directions. Most previous research on Northern Irish evangelicalism has ignored or underplayed the importance of these subcultural influences, assuming that evangelicalism is a fixed and rigid religious identity without the internal resources that can spark change.

Evangelicals are often viewed as a problematic sub-group by scholars of the conflict and by policy-makers, who have judged their influence in Northern Ireland as largely malign. Some of our data may appear to confirm suspicions that evangelicals are not interested in participating in a modern, plural society—with the implication they are best suppressed and ignored. But this was not the dominant trend within evangelicalism, and even if it were, there was no indication that the dissatisfied and disillusioned evangelicals are plotting rebellion or even civil disobedience.

Given the depth and breadth of evangelical variety and change, it is worth reflecting on what our research might say to policy makers. First, we would draw particular attention to the very simple observation that although they share an overarching subculture, evangelicals have vastly divergent political goals and aspirations. After 10 years of devolution, some evangelicals are politicised, others have become de-politicised. The most politicised evangelicals actually appear to be the ones who share many of British and Irish policy-makers' assumptions about the desirability of pluralism and peace building. Those who do not share these assumptions have either withdrawn from the public sphere or begun to focus on "moral" issues such as homosexuality and abortion (Ganiel, 2008b, 2006). There is also a small but significant group of former evangelicals who no longer identify with any religious faith, but

feel left out of Northern Ireland's "two communities" public sphere. What this means is that evangelicals should not be dismissed or treated uniformly. But neither should policy makers limit their interaction only to those evangelicals who appear to agree with them. De-politicisation and feelings of political impotence are never signs of a healthy, functioning democracy. It is worth thinking about how the evangelicals who await Christ's second coming, as well as the former evangelicals who do not believe Christ is coming back, could become more deeply engaged.

Second, we would draw attention to the fact that the evangelical subculture has a number of internal features that themselves can contribute to change, in a variety of directions. This means that evangelicals are not necessarily unchanging and sectarian, as has often been supposed. Rather, some evangelicals have been adept at using the resources of their subculture to promote change in what might be termed "progressive" directions. These internal religious, subcultural resources should not be dismissed. In Western democracies, it has been quite common for policy makers to expect religious groups to participate in the public sphere on secular terms, suppressing their religious aims and religious language in order to gain access to public funding. While such policies may avoid offending those who are not religious or are from other religious faiths, they also may have the effect of sapping the dynamism of the religious groups who are already active in the public sphere. Many of the evangelical activists we spoke with—those on "moderating" or "transforming" journeys—said that their faith nourished their political activism, providing them with a moral vocabulary to justify their actions and strong relationships to sustain them in difficult times. It is worth thinking about how evangelicals (and other religious groups for that matter) might be allowed to participate in the public sphere on their own (religious) terms, recognising that it is possible for their religious traditions to contribute constructively to debate and making Northern Ireland a more robust democracy.

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