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ABSTRACT

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This paper explores the experiences of people from evangelical Protestant backgrounds in Northern Ireland who have opted out of their religious identity. We are interested in how far it has been possible for people to leave their evangelical faith, and how this extends to a crossing of ethno-national, communal and political boundaries in Northern Ireland. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted during 2007, the paper analyses how former evangelicals negotiate the formidable barriers to exit constructed by friends, family and wider society. Our aim is to understand more about how structure and agency operate in divided societies, including how individuals negotiate and ultimately establish alternative religious, ethnic and political identities in this context. We argue that most people remain constrained by the culture and social structure of division, and that alternative beliefs and identities remain unrepresented in a society still divided along ethno-religious lines. At the same time, we show how individuals creatively edit and reshape their identities within these boundaries.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Originally from Zimbabwe, **Sara Templer** is a PhD student in Anthropology at Queen's University Belfast. She is interested in interdisciplinary approaches to understanding conflict and transition from violence, with an emphasis on ethnographic methods and the value of linking academic and policy-oriented research. Her current project explores how victims' voices contribute to national/public conversations around transitional justice processes.

Gladys Ganiel is a lecturer in Reconciliation Studies at the Belfast campus of the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin. She is the author of *Evangelicalism and Conflict in Northern Ireland,* published in 2008 by Palgrave, and has published articles in journals such as *Journal of Peace Research, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, Sociology of Religion, Journal of Religion in Africa* and *Irish Political Studies.*

Claire Mitchell is a senior lecturer in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast. She is author of *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief*, published in 2005 by Ashgate, and has published articles in journals such as *Sociology, Sociology of Religion, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Nations and Nationalism* and *Irish Political Studies.*

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IDENTITY CHANGE IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES

In all divided societies the literature on oppositional identities vastly outweighs that on alternative or "other" identities. Significant attention is paid to the ways that individuals construct and reproduce salient socio-political boundaries, whilst the role individuals play in ignoring and transforming those boundaries is often neglected (important exceptions include Todd, 2005, 2006; Todd, Rougier, O'Keefe and Cañas Bottos, 2009). This emphasis is of course understandable, as it is groups in conflict that must be understood if divisions are to be resolved. However, individuals that attempt to do unconventional identity work in divided societies are just as important as those who reinforce the norm. Whilst they may be small in number, and lack political clout, those that opt out of traditional identities can challenge the thinking and practices of the mainstream in quite powerful ways. They can critique taken for granted practices, and they may provide neutral spaces for cross-community interaction. Analysing those with "other" identities in divided societies can tell us a lot about human agency—people's creativity and capacity to forge out alternative social and political practices.

On the other hand, analysing the experiences of those who try to opt out of dominant oppositional identity groups can reveal a lot about the power of traditional structures. Opting out comes at much personal cost to individuals (Todd, O'Keefe, Rougier and Cañás Bottos, 2006). Moreover we find that many of those who identify as "other" inhabit this space only partially and find themselves pushed and pulled back into the oppositional identifications that they may have one time held (Mitchell, 2005). The journey to "otherness" is halting, partial, full of obstacles.

Of course some identifications are easier to change than others. Berger (1967, 1995) argues that in modern pluralistic societies religion is no longer ascribed to individuals, but is now a matter of choice. He argues (1967) that modernity brings individuals into contact with other perspectives and erodes religious certainties. To change one's religious identity is at one level quite possible—we all know someone who has converted to religion, has left their faith or has changed their beliefs. But choosing a religious identity is not just a cerebral matter. It involves social relationships—familial and communal—that may not be so easy to alter (Baston, Shroenrade and Ventis, 1993). The decision to leave the faith may demand a high price in terms of disruption of familial and social networks (Dillon and Wink, 2007; McKnight and Ondrey, 2008). Accordingly, for late modern societies in general, and divided societies in particular, increasing attention is being paid to the ways in which religion is not abandoned, but is appropriated, transformed, resisted, edited and used to make sense of the complexities of life (Thumma, 1991; Collins and Coleman 2004;

Harris, 2006; Mitchell and Todd, 2007). Ammerman (2003: 212) captures the dynamics of modern religious identity well when she says that our "[a]gency is located, then, not in freedom from patterned constraint but in our ability to invoke those patterns in nonprescribed ways".

In contrast, ethno-national identities have usually been seen as rather resistant to change (Connor, 1994). Whilst one can convert from Christianity to Buddhism, one cannot easily change nationality from British to Afghani. But just because it is difficult to change one's ethno-national identity, it does not follow that nationality is frozen. As all nationalisms are invented, there is clearly scope to change their nature and form (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1992). As Brubaker (1996) shows, changes in social and political context can provoke national identity change. Much recent debate on ethno-nationalism has focused on decoupling the category from the content of identity (Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Ruane and Todd, 2004; Todd, O'Keefe, Rougier and Cañás Bottos, 2006). In other words, one may retain a certain ethno-national identification, whilst changing the ideas and assumptions associated with that identity. In this way it is possible to understand individual agency, and the redefinition of ethno-national identity, within a structural context.

In this paper, we explore how people from evangelical Protestant backgrounds in Northern Ireland have exited their faith. We conceive of Northern Irish Protestantism as an identity in which both religious ideas and ethno-national political affiliation has been significant (Mitchell, 2005; Ganiel, 2008). We are interested in how far it has been possible for people to opt out of their evangelical faith, and how this relates to their crossing of other ethno-national and political boundaries in Northern Ireland. Our aim is to understand more about how structure and agency operate in divided societies, and how individuals negotiate and ultimately establish alternative religious, ethnic and political identities in this context.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with former evangelicals, we find that there are considerable barriers to exiting the faith. But as this process is undertaken, many people's political as well as religious identifications break down. This is not straightforward. People still encounter significant barriers in negotiating Northern Ireland's wider political structures—which are designed to manage a "two traditions" society. We argue that it is extremely difficult for people to exit their community altogether, for they face both political irrelevance and formidable traditional social networks in a society still divided along ethno-religious lines. However, we also find individuals exercising a significant degree of agency over their own identifications, creatively redefining their religious and ethno-national identities, albeit within this bounded context.

RELIGIOUS DISAFFILIATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

There is no research, to our knowledge, about former evangelicals in Northern Ireland. But some work has been done on those with "no religion". We sketch out this literature briefly here.

In the 1961 census in Northern Ireland, just 384 people identified themselves as atheists, free-thinkers or humanists (Rose, 1971: 248). By the time "no religion" was introduced as a tick box option in the 1991 census, it was selected by just 3.7% of the population. More recently, between 8-13% say they have no religion—the figure gently fluctuating each year in both directions (NILTS, 1998-2008). Religious disaffiliation is concentrated in urban areas, particularly Belfast (Mitchell, 2005). We also know that the "no religion" group is comprised of more people who used to identify as Protestants, than as Catholics (Hayes and McAllister, 2004). For most people, identification with "no religion" represents a change of identity, as 95% of people in Northern Ireland have been raised as Catholic or Protestant, whilst only 2% have been raised with no religion (NILTS, 2007). Interestingly, once an individual has identified as "no religion" there is scarcely any movement back to religious affiliation (Hayes and McAllister, 2004).

Most of what has been written about this group quantitatively maps political attitudes (Hayes and McAllister, 1995; Breen and Hayes, 1997; Fahey et al, 2005). From this it has emerged, perhaps unsurprisingly, that those with "no religion" are much less likely to identify with communal politics in Northern Ireland and are associated with a lack of political identity (Breen and Hayes, 1997). They are more likely than those with an active religious affiliation to support a non-sectarian party such as Alliance (Hayes and McAllister, 1995). Only 18% identify as unionist and 8% as nationalist, compared with 74% who identify as neither (NILTS, 2007).

But whilst some of those with "no religion" could be described as politically "other" or non-communal, others seem to share some of the political attitudes of their community of origin. In terms of national identity, only 23% of people with "no religion" opt for the most neutral sounding "Northern Irish" (similar to the figure amongst Catholic and Protestant identifiers), whilst 27% opt for Irish and 41% opt for British (Mitchell, 2005: 29). As those with "no religion" are disproportionately ex-Protestants, it seems as if many are continuing the national identity categories of their religious community of origin. Moreover, whilst 49% of those with "no religion" express a lack of identification with any political party (answering "none" or "don't know"), and 10% with a "neutral" political party,[1] another 40% say they would vote for a unionist or nationalist party (NILTS, 2007). When we look at one's community of origin, or religious background, we find that there is hardly any crossing of the political divide, with only 2% of ex-Protestants supporting a nationalist party, and 2% of ex-Catholics supporting a unionist party (Breen and Hayes, 1997: 231).

There is also some evidence that in fact the religious attitudes of the "no religion" group are not as straightforward as one might think. Brewer (2002) points out that at least some of the "no religion" group share many religious beliefs with Christians, for example in life after death. In fact 40% say they believe in God and a further

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[1] The 2007 survey found that 10% of "no religions" preferred the Alliance Party, and 6% preferred a party not mentioned by name in the survey. Given the recent rise in fortunes of the Green Party, at least some of this 6% could be added to Alliance's preferences, pushing up the number of those identifying with a "neutral party".

26% believe in some higher power (Mitchell, 2005: 28). 14% believe that the Bible is the "literal word of God" (a measure often used to identify conservative evangelicals in surveys), and 25% believe it is the "inspired word of God" (NILTS, 2004). 35% agree that there is a "God that concerns himself with every human being personally", whilst only 25% disagree (NILTS, 2004). So there is variety within the "no religion" group. It contains convinced secularists as well as those who retain some religious beliefs.

Examining political and religious attitudes of the "no religion" group suggests that religious disaffiliation in Northern Ireland may not be straightforward. Whilst some certainly wish to opt out of both religious and political groupings, others may leave their religion but retain communal political attitudes. Some also retain elements of religious belief. Given this complexity, as well as the dearth of research on this group, there is certainly a compelling case for exploring the processes of opting out of religious identification in more depth.

THE STUDY

The article draws on ten semi-structured interviews conducted in 2007. Respondents were selected on the basis that they identified themselves as former evangelicals. This was a sub-sample of interviewees for a wider project on religious identity journeys amongst Protestant evangelicals. The wider project focuses on how and why people change their religious beliefs over time, and draws on interviews with 100 individuals at various stages of their religious journeys (Mitchell and Ganiel, 2010). By evangelical we mean a sub-group of Protestants who believe that one must be "converted" to a personal relationship with Christ, consider the Bible literal and/or infallible, believe that Christ's death on the cross is necessary for salvation, and are committed to expressing their faith through evangelism or social action (See Bebbington, 1989). There is a strong overlap between this group and born-again Christians (Woodberry and Smith, 1998; Mitchell and Tilley, 2008).

Initially we found respondents through snowballing, using three different researchers' networks as departure points. Whilst this method did generate respondents, we found after three months, and eight interviews, we had hit a brick wall. We then placed adverts in a number of local newspapers, which helped us top up our sample, if only by two more interviews. Between us we have conducted over 200 qualitative interviews in Northern Ireland over the last 10 years, and this has been the most hard-to-reach group we have encountered. Partially this is because they are a hidden population, not organised around any organisation or activity. We also found that many people we approached were not comfortable with describing themselves as fully having left the evangelical tradition behind—many still had loose forms of belief and our categorisation of "former evangelical" seemed too rigid. Some others, we found, were embarrassed about their past involvement in evangelicalism, which may have added to difficulty in finding research participants.

Of the ten, six were men and four were women. Two were over 65, three were in their forties and fifties, four were in their thirties, and one was 21. Six had children

at the time of interview. Nine lived in Belfast, and one, from a rural Northern Irish background, now lives in Dublin. Six work as professionals, for example as designers or teachers, although some of these come from working class backgrounds. Three of the women would be described working class in the present, for example they are shop assistants or clerical workers. Another is an artist.

The questions we asked explored how individuals' religious journeys had unfolded over time, in relation to their social and political experiences. This draws on both semi-structured interviewing, and life-history methods of research (See Wilson et al, 2007; Ryan, 2006; Roberts, 2002; Lentin, 2000; Foddy, 1993). We initially allowed respondents to develop their stories freely, consistent with a life history approach, and then probed around a variety of hypotheses regarding the role of family, other social groups and experiences. We were interested in analysing processes of change, including dramatic turning points as well as slower cumulative changes (Flick, 1998). Interviews were analysed on a thematic basis—for this paper looking at different dimensions of identity—by the three authors individually and then together. As our sub-sample for this paper is relatively small, we have tried to provide information about all of the respondents in each theme we discuss, and have selected representative quotations to illustrate our arguments.

EXITING EVANGELICALISM

Our findings highlight diversity within the ex-evangelical group. Only three of our "ex-evangelicals" say they have absolutely no religious belief whatsoever. In contrast, whilst happy to identify with the label of "former evangelical", three interviewees suggested that they would still like to find a church that they could "feel at home" in. Respondents' processes of leaving evangelicalism behind were just that—gradual processes, with a variety of experiences acting as turning points along the way. For some it took many years to disengage. For others, leaving was triggered by a traumatic event, but was always as the culmination of other processes of change. The two most common reasons for exiting the faith were doubts about the existence of God and the breakdown of relationships with people in their congregations. Others described a gradual drift out of evangelicalism as they became either less comfortable with the shape and tenor of worship activities, or doubtful about the relevance of their congregation's rules and expectations.

Half our respondents expressed doubts about the existence of God. For Mike—retired in his 60s, raised in the Gospel Hall and Brethren and now an atheist/humanist—and Eoin—a designer in his forties, raised Free Presbyterian and now an atheist/nihilist—these doubts began in childhood. By the time they were teenagers they had rejected evangelical religion. These choices were based on intellectual processes of questioning and rejecting, and resulted in radical changes of identity (see also McKnight and Ondrey, 2008). James, an arts professional in his late thirties, raised Presbyterian and then part of the charismatic movement, now agnostic/atheist, found his belief in God challenged in his early thirties. He says his final "anti Damascus Road moment" was watching Derren Brown, the hypnotist and illusionist, on TV. Seeing the power of memory, suggestion and psychological ma-

nipulation in a non-religious context, for James, was the culmination of a long period of growing doubt.

Five respondents talked about negative experiences of church. They describe feeling judged and ultimately abandoned when facing key personal issues, such as divorce, alcoholism in the family, or having a child outside of marriage. Others pointed to evangelical restrictions on lifestyle that they felt hemmed them in. All interviewees said that in some way guilt and fear of judgement characterised their experience of religion. Five talked about their disillusionment with the churches in Northern Ireland in a socio-political context, for example in perpetuating division and not doing enough to promote peace.

In these cases leaving evangelicalism was very painful, and it did not come without personal sacrifice. For four interviewees, the pain that they caused their parents as a result of their leaving the church came to the fore in the interview. For example, Ben, a retired teacher in his seventies, raised Brethren but now agnostic, explained that although he ceased to believe in the church teachings at the age of 17, he had so dreaded upsetting his mother that he had let himself be carried along by the machinery of church life until he was 25. In his words:

> When I started not to believe, I knew this would be the worst thing in the world that I could have told her [...] So I went on and on and got more and more involved with the Brethren, even preaching, but I didn't believe a word [...] I had to go on for years, until I was 24 or 25, when I eventually broke my mother's heart by leaving.

Ben acknowledged a sense of sadness at now being "cut off" from the friends and family that had constituted his world for all of those years. Eoin also knows that his lack of belief upsets his family. He says he cannot talk about his religious choices with his father as there could be no compromise, and as a result "we live pretty much separate lives". The extended family too is often affected. Two more interviewees whose grandparents had been the main religious influence in their lives as children described how relationships had become strained and awkward as they grew up and changed their ideas about religion. How people coped with this pressure varied, with some feeling terribly guilty, while others were perhaps aware of but not overly concerned by—or at least able to rationalise and "manage"—the upset caused by their difference of opinion.

But not everyone had consistently negative experiences of leaving evangelicalism behind. Sarah—an artist in her thirties who was raised as a Presbyterian, and Grace who is 21, both retain an interest in Christianity. Sarah said her experience of liberal Christianity made her question the evangelicalism with which she was raised, whilst Grace also has come to conceive spirituality in pluralist terms. She now finds meaning in crystals which she sometimes incorporates into her spiritual life—a creative addition to conventional Christianity. Grace enjoyed her teenage experiences of evangelicalism. Raised as Elim Pentecostal, she began to attend a Methodist youth group at 13, which "was so easy-going and we all had fun and stuff". She says, "I left [church] when I was about 17. Not because I wanted to stop, it was more because we'd reached the end of the youth age and everyone was kind

of moving on to do their own thing and so it was kind of a natural end to it". Similarly, David—who joined the charismatic house church movement in his teens and twenties and is now agnostic—describes a gradual drift out of evangelical beliefs as well as practices as he got older and left certain friendship groups behind.

For most people, breaking away from evangelicalism involves exiting or at least changing certain valued relationships with family and close friends. Whilst the choice to leave the church was on the whole a positive and liberating experience for all of the interviewees, the majority acknowledged a range of feelings of vulnerability and isolation associated with that choice early on in their process of exit. But the people we talked with eventually devised strategies to sustain these relationships at some level. 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. It is interesting that those individuals who now identified as atheist were also those who experienced most difficulties with their family relationships. It seems that the more wholesale the identity change, the more serious the personal consequences. For many of the others, who identify as agnostic or still Christian, there is more a sense of creativity within established religious boundaries.

EXITING ETHNO-NATIONAL IDENTITIES?

Whilst Britishness has always been a complicated category for Protestants in Northern Ireland (Nelson, 1984; Mitchell, 2003), it has nonetheless been an important identity for the vast majority, particularly since violent conflict erupted in the late 1960s (Moxon-Browne, 1991). However, in line with research on those with "no religion", our former evangelicals did not identify strongly with the Britishness that characterises their community of origin. Only two expressed positive identification with Britain, whilst four more said they were "technically British". A further three said they were comfortable identifying as either Irish or British, and one identified as Irish. Again this highlights the diversity of identification within the ex-evangelical group. But it also points to the limitations of identity change. Most of our respondents' redefinition of ethno-national identity takes place within a bounded space. There is experimentation and flexibility, and a clear weakening of traditional ethno-national content. However, there is also very little crossing of the dominant communal boundary.

Four of our interviewees articulate an idea of being "technically British". Eoin, David and Sarah say that they have a British passport and therefore consider themselves at one level to be British. However, they simultaneously distance themselves from strong national identity. David and Sarah say they never really define themselves in terms of national identity—they do not think about it in their daily lives. James reflects that he does not think he feels Irish, and "for a long time would have said that I was the softest of soft unionists, for the simple reason that I think the BBC is a fantastic institution, far far better than RTE. But that's all it is, I don't really give a monkey's either way". This is a very soft form of ethno-national identity. Britishness

is officially ascribed but is not really a meaningful self-identification (Todd, O'Keefe, Rougier and Cañás Bottos, 2006). It does not reflect "traditional" reference points for British identity—no world wars, or monarchy, no mention of British political institutions, culture or way of life—just access to passports and a sense that the BBC make good TV. Our two eldest respondents were the only ones that expressed a real affinity with Britain and Britishness, talking in positive terms about the Union and British culture.

Other of our interviewees showed more "identity hybridity". Todd, O'Keefe, Rougier and Cañás Bottos (2006: 329) describe this as a "functional variation in the use of identity categories, with different categories used in different situations, for different purposes". In terms of the British and Irish identifiers, Wendy and Liz both say that when they are in Northern Ireland they say they are British, but when on holiday they say they are Irish. Wendy, an office worker in her forties, raised as Brethren and now agnostic, says—"when you go away, and people love the Irish, you're really happy to be from Ireland". On the other hand, she prefers being a UK citizen from the point of view of public policy and services. She concludes, "I suppose it's sort of an interchangeable thing, really". However Wendy's hybrid of Irishness on holiday and Britishness at home does not imply a fluid to-ing and fro-ing between identities—each has a clear and contained context. In such a way, Todd, O'Keefe, Rougier and Cañás Bottos (2006: 329) distinguish "identity hybridity" from identity change, because they found that functional hybridity "coexisted with very precise, distinct and stable referents for each category and sometimes an insistence that categories acceptable in one context not be transferred to another".

Only one of our interviewees—Gavin—changed his ethno-national identity from British to Irish. Gavin draws on his reading of Irish history to argue that a British identity in Northern Ireland is "a very recent thing in Ireland,"

> because at the turn of the century Irish unionists saw themselves as exactly that, Irish unionists. And I think the British thing was made up some people in Stormont or something to try to make us feel different but it's a load of crap the British thing.

He goes on to argue that most Protestants in Northern Ireland have not lived in Britain and have not realised that they do not really "fit there". Gavin drew these conclusions after an extended period living in England, where he came to realise that he did not identify with "mainland" Britishness, and that they did not identify with him. For Gavin, change from British to Irish identity is underpinned by a range of practical life experiences as well as his work to provide an intellectual foundation for change, in this case years of close reading of Irish history. Ammerman (2003: 208) refers to this as "active identity work" or "intentional work". This represents a radical change of identity. However, as Todd, O'Keefe, Rougier and Cañás Bottos (2006: 330) point out, wholesale ethno-national category change is rare. Making the change involves a high level of effort and thought that most people do not invest in their ethno-national identity.

We cannot make strong claims about the extent to which our respondents' exit from evangelicalism caused, or was caused by, a weakening British identification. For

most, these processes occurred simultaneously and cannot be separated from each other. People did not have much to say about their ethno-national identities. They did not accompany their sense of being "technically British" with expected reference points or content. In Todd, O'Keefe, Rougier and Cañás Bottos's words (2006: 228) ethno-national identity emerged as very "thin" for most of our respondents. At the same time, there was very little concrete identity change. Only one respondent crossed over to an Irish identity, whilst a few others expressed a compartmentalised sense of Irishness, mainly when abroad. At one level this demonstrates the enduring power of ethno-national structure, making radical change rather difficult. But at the same time, the over-riding thinness of the ethno-nationalism speaks to the ability of individuals to choose and transform the content, if not always the category, of their identity.

EXIT FROM THE "PROTESTANT COMMUNITY"?

Even when our respondents had exited evangelicalism and had a very thin conception of ethno-national identity, it was much more difficult for them to construct a new relationship with the wider Protestant community. Seven out of ten expressed mixed feelings when asked if they still feel that they "identify with the Protestant community in Northern Ireland". They were reluctant to pigeonhole themselves and expressed frustration with the monolithic identity groups which have come to characterise Northern Irish society. But they also said that they cannot be part of the Catholic community. In a society still dominated by communal opposition, they feel that this means they are part of the Protestant community by default. This echoes research on "mixed" marriages in Northern Ireland, where most couples "choose" which community they will identify with. This means that the relationships and social networks of the other partner are generally lost or continued in a weaker or less meaningful way (Lee, 1994). In other words, communities are often perceived as mutually exclusive.

Only two of our interviewees continued to identify strongly with the Protestant community. Interestingly, these were our older interviewees, both over 65 and now retired. Shirlow and Murtagh's (2006) research shows that older generations in Northern Ireland may be less divided than their younger counterparts, which at first may seem to jar with our finding. But in fact, older people may have forged identifications in the context of a relatively peaceful, if unequal, society, and may not define themselves so sharply against the polarised communities that characterise violent conflict. In other words, being a Protestant community member may not have such oppositional connotations for older people. Mike explained, for example, that although he is a humanist and atheist, he still identifies with the Protestant community because of the "simple fact" that his own and his wife's family are all Protestants, which for them means that they will always feel that they "have a kind of a link back to the Protestant community". Ben was the only interviewee to articulate his sense of belonging in political terms. He says he would call himself a unionist as well as a Protestant.

Several people expressed embarrassment about the Protestant community, especially when it is associated with militant Orangeism and loyalist paramilitarism. Wendy says:

> No, I don't really strongly identify with the Protestant community [...] I find some of it quite embarrassing, really, you know, especially having been away and come back. The kind of Orange Order, 12th of July and bonfires and that, I suppose the very loyalist side of it, no I wouldn't identify with that at all [...] it just didn't feel like a proper culture, really.

Similarly, Sarah says she does identify to some extent with the Protestant community, but there are things that she does not like—"things like loyalism, loyalty to the crown, the whole thing of national anthems and the 12th, all of that".

Others recounted how their upbringing has provided them with a vocabulary and a range of ideas and reference points that leave them no choice but to continue to define themselves "in opposition" to Catholics. In a society still overwhelmingly segregated in terms of education, marriage, residence, sport and culture this is unsurprising (Whyte, 1991; Shirlow and McGovern, 2006). For example James, who now describes himself as an agnostic/atheist, says:

> I'm permanently made aware of the Protestant culture [...] I share an office with two Catholics at the minute and you know really quite a large proportion of the people I work with are Catholics, and I'm sort of constantly aware of the cultural anomalies...I mean...Who follows Gaelic football? Jesus! They do! And I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but it's just not something that's in my world! And then suddenly you got him going 'Arh! Did you see that match in Cavan?' and this, and I'm just like fuckin' hell this is weird! And I could be just as non-religious from a Catholic background and I would be from that different culture and I would have that different…set of experiences.

Similarly, Sarah says she cannot imagine "growing up in a different way of life". Wendy says that she "still would have that little in-built thing that everyone has who grows up here, that if you know someone is from your community, maybe you are slightly more comfortable". This demonstrates the continuing power of in-group preferences, even amongst those who are embarrassed by more extreme community members.

Only one of our respondents said he had no sense of relationship at all with the Protestant community. Eoin explains that he sees Protestantism and unionism, Catholicism and republicanism, as equally bad and that he wants to disassociate himself from all extreme religious and political beliefs. Eoin's life has been shaped by his experience of having a "Catholic" name, whilst coming from a Protestant background. He explained that this had not only caused him trouble and annoyance, but it had also given him reason to reflect on the inappropriateness of the assumptions of communal belonging that pervade Northern Irish society. In his words:

> From the point of view of being called Eoin, it meant I got picked on from both sides of the religious divide. And I just began to see them as the same. You know, it's ridiculous, it's the same. I'm getting the same stuff from people who are supposed to

be on my side, you know, and I just thought this doesn't make any sense to me, I can't make sense of it, it's just illogical.

Eoin goes on to tell us that his early attempts to correct people's assumptions, to explain that he was not a Catholic, were met with bafflement at best, and accusations of deception or betrayal at worst. Indeed it seems as if these experiences have been crucial in the development of Eoin's understanding of communal politics in Northern Ireland, and lie, at least in part, behind his refusal to identify with either group.

In terms of feelings of belonging to the Protestant community then, we found that most individuals remain constrained by the culture and structure of division (See also Jenkins, 2008; Todd, Rougier, O'Keefe, Cañas Bottos, 2008). Only two held positive, relatively uncomplicated identifications with the Protestant group. Despite the rest of respondents' lack of strong identification with the Protestant community, there was also a sense that they remained defined by difference, that they were not Catholics, so at some level felt that they had to be Protestants. However, as Ammerman (2003) has argued, agency is not to be understood as unbridled freedom to choose one's identity, but is located in individuals' ability to invoke dominant social patterns in nonprescribed ways. Thus our respondents' re-appropriation of Protestant group membership as being "slightly more comfortable" around other Protestants, whilst simultaneously finding Protestantism embarrassing at its extremes, is significant. It shows the persistence of group identification, but in a much weaker form.

POLITICAL IRRELEVANCE?

In addition to negotiating the formidable social networks discussed above, people in Northern Ireland who attempt to opt out of traditional identities struggle with feelings of political irrelevance. All of the participants in the research wanted to express their opposition to sectarian, either/or politics. But they felt that as politically "other" in Northern Ireland, their voice was constantly drowned out by dominant unionist/nationalist narratives.

People had different strategies for political participation. Four said that they usually voted for the Alliance Party. This is a centrist and non-sectarian party in Northern Ireland, comprised of both Catholics and Protestants, that usually receives around 5% of the vote (Whyte, 2008). David says that he has always been an Alliance voter, and argues that "the confusion of religion and politics seen in the other main political parties is inappropriate for national politics". Wendy is also an Alliance voter, but says she does not "know a great deal about them, except that it's a party that both Protestant and Catholic can vote for, so that's sort of me making a statement by voting for them". That a vote for Alliance is seen as making a non-sectarian statement is important, but it is also interesting that Wendy says that she does not know what their policies are. Similarly, when asked whom he identifies with politically James says:

> Probably Alliance. But they initially seemed to stand for being neither one side nor the other, but that isn't anything either. There are certain political characters who would stand for more than that. I think Naomi Long has done a fantastic job. I think there are certain Alliance councillors...But I mean what is their agenda, what is their manifesto? Do you know what I mean? There's no identity there. I'd like some real politics please.

Alliance is therefore seen as one of the only viable political options for those who want to opt out of communal politics. But it seems that it is chosen simply because it is not unionist and not nationalist, not because of what it is. Whilst it is not a wasted vote in the sense that it makes a non-sectarian statement, there may also be a feeling that in James's words, it represents a lack of identity, and does not count as "real politics". This feeling of political irrelevance was extended to the other small parties. Grace says that:

> I always like to vote for the ones that aren't political, like the Socialist Party or the Green Party—just to be awkward. Because you know they're never going to win but you don't want to be seen to be supporting any hard-line political party.

So the Socialist and Green parties, which each receive a tiny share of the overall vote, are seen by Grace as not political. Even though they are political parties that fight elections, they are seen to be outside the process. Politics is seen to be the preserve of unionists and nationalists whilst other views do not count.

Grace goes on to say, "I suppose if I was to go for a political one, I would go for the SDLP, because I would like to see a united Ireland but not by means of violence, and with no association to the IRA or anything". Grace and Gavin were the only two respondents who crossed the political divide when voting, and expressed a variety of nationalist sentiments. Gavin also prefers the SDLP.

Most of our respondents participate in politics in Northern Ireland, although they wonder whether this makes any difference. In contrast, just two of our respondents said that they do not vote, albeit for very different reasons. Liz says that because she does not have strong political views, it does not matter to her who is in power. She says all governments promise "the sun, moon and stars" at election time, and all fail to deliver what they promise. Eoin on the other hand wants to vote, but says, "every time an election comes up, I have a look at who's in my area, but I have yet to find a person that I could have any faith in and who I would give a vote to". But he is keen to stress that "just because I'm not interested in participating in politics, it doesn't mean I don't know what's happening". Interestingly Eoin does not feel powerless as some other respondents seem to. He maintains that "some people think that if you don't vote you don't have a voice, but I think that's nonsense". In fact, Eoin gets his voice heard in other ways. His environmental activism has earned him the nickname "Captain Planet" from various colleagues and friends.

The lack of political options for those who do not wish to identify with nationalist or unionist parties is compounded by the consociational structure of Northern Ireland's devolved Assembly. Consociationalism works on the principle that formerly opposing groups will share political power equally, and is accompanied in Northern Ire-

land by a strong programme of equality legislation in all areas of life from policing to language provision (O'Leary, 2004). However consociationalism requires dividing resources between competing groups, in this case nationalists and unionists (Tonge, 2006). This tends to exclude "other" voices, who have no Executive (cabinet) seats and whose votes do not count when establishing cross-community consent for an Assembly vote (Dixon, 2001). This helps explain why those who hold non-nationalist, non-unionist "other" political beliefs can feel that they cannot participate in "real politics".[2]

Respondents' frustration at non-communal politics being irrelevant in Northern Ireland perhaps helps explain the lack of coherent alternative identity narratives emerging from the data. Gavin was alone in mentioning a European identity as meaningful. Eoin says he sees himself as a "citizen of the planet", uninterested in borders or specific political regions. James mentioned a variety of sub-cultures, such as "professional or environmental" that he identifies with, as well as those that relate to his taste in music. Sarah talks about the importance of planning permission issues for rural areas. Aside from expressing a preference for non-sectarian political parties, and being happy about the decline of conflict, no interviewee expressed clear political ideals about the future.

CONCLUSIONS

Our interviews with former evangelicals in Northern Ireland demonstrate just how impervious the dominant social structure is to change. The individuals we spoke with exerted a significant degree of choice and a clear ability to reshape their identities. But almost all of these changes occurred with reference to the deeply entrenched social divisions in Northern Ireland. For the most part, creativity and agency operated within established boundaries.

Some identifications seemed more amenable to change than others. Nearly all respondents were happy to change the category of their religious identity from evangelical to some form of atheism or agnosticism. A minority wanted to maintain some form of Christian identity, but were comfortable with no longer defining themselves as evangelicals. Often people are prepared to make the decision to leave their religion at great personal cost. It also seemed that the more radical the change—the further one travelled from their original religious identity—the more serious the personal consequences. Despite this, however, all of our respondents exercised a great deal of control over their religious identities. In a society overwhelmingly segregated along religious lines, the former evangelicals we spoke to were able to carve out new religious spaces and meanings for themselves.

Similarly, whilst all of our respondents grew up in homes that favoured unionist political parties, all but one had come to see themselves as politically non-unionist. For the vast majority this meant changing one's political identity category to "other",

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[2] See also Gorenburg (1999) on how state institutions can shape identity choice and change.

as non-sectarian Alliance, Green or Socialist Party voters. Again this suggests that political identity is an arena where a considerable amount of free choice may be exercised. However, choosing an "other" political identity was usually accompanied by a sense of resigning oneself to political irrelevance. In a post-conflict society trying to balance power between former unionist and nationalist enemies, it is unsurprising that alternative political voices feel sidelined. But it is significant that this relative freedom in choice of political identity is not accompanied for most by a sense of contributing to meaningful political change. It is more of a choice to reluctantly sit on the benches.

There were two arenas in which identity choice and change emerged as much more difficult—communal and ethno-national identities. In both these cases, most respondents tended to maintain traditional identity categories of Protestant and British, whilst demonstrating substantial change in the content of these identities. Most respondents felt that they were not Catholic, and therefore indicated they were Protestant by default. Similarly, many articulated a feeling of being technically British. Although they maintained notional identifications, most struggled to articulate positive notions of belonging to the Protestant community and of British identity. All, except our two oldest respondents, were much clearer about what they did not identify with than what they did identify with. In these cases it seems, in line with Todd, O'Keefe, Rougier and Cañás Bottos's (2006) findings, that the category of identity is extremely sticky and difficult to radically change. But the content of identity—what it means to be Protestant and to be British—is more flexible, often dislocated from traditional reference points and meanings.

Whilst former evangelicals demonstrate significant agency in choosing the content, and in some cases the categories, of their identities, it is significant to underline how little crossing of the communal divide emerged. Nobody converted to Catholicism. Only one came to feel more Irish than British, and only two would consider voting for a (mild) nationalist party. All felt that they were excluded from the Catholic community. Considering this group represents a small minority, politically alternative and religiously non-traditional, this only reinforces how dominant the social divide is for the majority of the population of Northern Ireland. Therefore as devolution develops and the DUP and Sinn Fein work ever more closely together, it is worth remembering the depth of social division upon which the process rests.

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