

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Alice Dobie

'Religion's never mentioned here,' of course.

'You know them by their eyes,' and hold your tongue.

'One side's as bad as the other,' never worse.

Christ, it's near time that some small leak was sprung.

Seamus Heaney, *Whatever You Say Say Nothing*

(Finlay 1999: 1.6)

Dual-nationality, naturally, implies the influence of two cultures upon an individual and often such individuals draw comparisons between their two countries. In my case, I am Scottish/Northern Irish and continually compare the two. What has interested me most is the different ways in which my brothers and I living in Scotland perceive religion in comparison to our cousins in Northern Ireland. Although we were all raised in religious environments (with religious parents and regular church attendance) our religious beliefs and participation within the Church itself differ greatly. I believed this was due to the different attitudes in wider society towards religion in our respective countries thus I was keen to explore the influence of religion within the everyday lives of young people in Northern Ireland. My initial aim was to investigate to what extent the Church is involved within the social lives of young people in Northern Ireland and my interview questions were focused on this aspect. However, through extensive reading and information from my informants, it soon became clear that to focus on the social life of religion alone would be to reduce the importance of religion as a part of people's identity in Northern Ireland. History plays an important role in the construction of culture and Northern Ireland's particular past has had a significant impact on its present. Therefore, this project will not only look at the way religion is linked with social life and education, but also how religion is part of identity regardless of faith. Finally this project will examine whether

the divisions between the Protestant and Catholic dominations of Christianity are still as prevalent in the present day as they were in The Troubles.

In terms of my field-work method, I decided interviews were the best option as participation observation was difficult due to the lack of time I would be able to spend in Northern Ireland. The aim of participation is to immerse oneself into the lives of the people you are studying and, although time to do so as part of fieldwork was unavailable, I realised I have been doing this unknowingly in Northern Ireland throughout my life. I visit Northern Ireland roughly five times a year for a week or two at a time which has given me extended experience of its religious dynamic. I interviewed three young people (none of whom experienced The Troubles), and I possess a different degree of familiarity with each - my cousin (Rebekah), my friend (Olivia) and a friend of a friend (Caroline). Conducting interviews with these individuals was particularly enlightening in terms of my own perspective of religion in Northern Ireland as they challenged some of my previously held views and this made our discussions all the more interesting.

Part 1 - Daily Life

This section of the ethnography will focus on the everyday lives of young people by looking at the various social activities they partake in, as well as any particular influences that my informants identified.

However, it is firstly useful to consider how the Church as an institution is often viewed and the particular impact it is said to have had. When examining the Church as an institution, I follow Hodgkins' definition of the Church as a 'particular pattern of behaviour within the social process, one which is continuous and enduring and... an established amalgam of social habits which governs the relations between individuals and groups' (Hodgkins 1960: 164). Religion and the Church answer, in many forms, an individual's desire and need for a sense of a locatedness and provide a foundation for reconstructing identity (Seul 1999: 558). Rebekah echoed this when she said that her religion "is like the basis of it", 'it' being her identity, as "from what I say and what I do people will be able to go oh she's a Christian." The Church in Northern Ireland is very strong as a culture with one of the world's highest

rates of religious devotion, whereas, generally, in the rest of Britain religion is 'very much a minority taste' (Badham et al. 1988: 55). The Church services themselves, however, are not always particularly well received by young people. Both Olivia and Rebekah attest that it is sometimes hard to pay attention and listen due to the traditional and, perhaps old-fashioned, nature of the services. However, both acknowledge and appreciate the positive impact it has had on their lives as Olivia reflected, "I know I get drunk and stuff but I have good morals and I think that's because I went to church and spent a lot of time there." Moreover, if she has children she has the desire to send them to church, "not because I necessarily want them to be religious, I just think it instils good values."

Due to the high proportion of elderly congregation members, my interviewees often feel like a minority within their Church itself. Thus it became clear that the influence of family, friends and activities run by the Church or religious groups had a much larger impact and influence than actual Church services. All three of my informants emphasise the influence their families had upon their religious beliefs. They had all been brought up within a religious environment where family members were heavily involved in the Church or encouraged Church attendance. Indeed, Rebekah described the way her Granny would read extracts from the Bible to her after school when she visited. From these discussions, family appear to be the initial stepping stone into a religious life. However, in my brothers' and I's case, we were similarly brought up within a religious family, yet our religious beliefs differ from my informants: this divergence is most clearly exemplified by the influence friends have had on my brothers and I, in contrast to my informants. For Rebekah friends were an essential part of the development of her faith and she "wouldn't be the same without them." She discussed at length the way in which she and her friends regularly talk about their beliefs particularly when "someone's like I'm having real problems with my faith at the moment like I'm finding it really hard to talk to God and we talk about it." Olivia made a similar observation when she discussed the way in which she would visit her friends' different Church youth clubs, and she commented that even as they got older and started to go out at night, they would still all attend Church in the morning.

Social activities run by the Church appear to be the greatest influence as such activities bring people together and thus friendships are created. The Church provides numerous activities and unique opportunities such as Olivia's church trip to Zambia. With such a variety of social

activities organised by religious groups, it is understandable that religion permeates into the lives of Northern Irish young people. Olivia claims that Church youth clubs are not necessarily the only option but rather the easiest option for meeting up due to lack of funds to go elsewhere and particularly as "like with your parents if you're going to church [youth clubs] then they're fine with it." The youth clubs and other Church organisations often organised retreat weekends where activities and religion were combined, as Olivia put it, "like let's do fun stuff and also pray." Caroline discussed with me the details of her work at a Christian Summer Mission describing it as a summer school with children from 4 to 18 years of age. She spoke of the structure of the day with different morning, afternoon and evening activities and detailing the various games that the children played and also the activities provided for the volunteers with their own worship and speakers brought in. Rebekah described at length her school Scripture Union that met every Friday and there was worship, games and often a speaker. When I asked if this influenced her faith and made it more engaging for her, she described it as a release and said "yeah because all of us basically are Christians, you don't have to tone it down or anything, you can just be completely you." My interviews highlight the extensive variety and number of activities and social events provided by the Church and its various affiliations. Through the social lives of young people the Church manages to continually draw attention to its existence in a way that is almost non-existent in Scotland. In terms of my own Scottish experience, all extra-curricular activities are not only unrelated to but also sometimes incompatible with Church attendance such as my brothers' rugby club's regular training practice on a Sunday morning—something unheard of in Northern Ireland.

In this section, I have attempted to illustrate the many different avenues in which the Church and religion interact with young people in Northern Ireland. For most young people, social activities are extremely important and tend to fill the bulk of their free time. Thus as the religious foundations put in place by family are continually revived and encouraged through social events, it is hardly surprising that religious belief amongst young people in Northern Ireland is so prevalent.

Part 2 - Religious Identity

The initial purpose of my project was to study the social influences on a young person's religious identity in Northern Ireland. It was not my intention to adopt a historical focus upon the impact of The Troubles that occurred in Northern Ireland from 1968-98. However, it soon became apparent through my interviews that, despite not asking any specific questions on the matter initially, religion, identity and The Troubles are all linked through the labels of "Protestant" and "Catholic."

To begin, I will look at Seul's psychological study on inter-group conflict and the contribution of religion. He discusses an individual's need to construct a 'secure sense of self' (Seul 1999: 554) which is created in various ways. One such way is through identification and the adoption of the behaviour of another person or group, and in doing so they participate in another's pre-established identity and thus 'often gain a sense of power and status that as individuals they lack' (Seul 1999: 555). In this process, groups create collective goals and a collective identity that tends to reflect the goals and identities of the individuals within the group (Seul 1999: 556). As a result, threats to a group are often taken as threats to individual identity and vice versa and consequently in a more personal conflict between groups (Seul 1999: 557). Through his study, the individual aspect of group identity is very clear and thus the degree of intensity to which group conflict can arise is often due to the personal feeling of being attacked. This can apply to any group conflict, in particular to The Troubles due to the sectarianism that was apparent during and after the conflict with varying degrees of violence.

As Cairns identifies, sectarianism, in its most general sense, is 'used to describe attitudes, belief systems, symbol and practices through which one group of people sets itself apart from another within an otherwise shared culture' (Cairns 2000: 439). Looking at this idea of division between two groups, the nature of The Troubles as a conflict is often debated. Initially it would appear to be a religious conflict particularly as the sectarianism that still exists is based upon religious labels, however, the likes of Cairns consider the 'essentially human nature of the phenomenon' (Cairns 2000: 438) where 'it is not religious systems which are in conflict, but their membership' (Cairns 2000: 438). Instead, this conflict and division has arguably 'built itself upon religious and doctrinal schism' (Cairns 2000: 438). These religious labels become intertwined with political and national labels of "Northern Irish," "Irish," and "British." The Troubles created a confused mixture of identities to the

point where to be "Irish" also means to be "Catholic" and to be in favour of a united Ireland whereas to be "British" means to be "Protestant" and to favour the union with Great Britain. This link between religion and politics was echoed by informants particularly by Caroline who believes that "there's a lot of people who identify about being Protestant or Catholic rather than actually counting themselves as religious so they'll choose an affiliation depending on what their families have been in the past." Olivia shares this sentiment, stating that if questioned about whether one is Protestant or Catholic, everyone in Northern Ireland will have an answer to that question whether they have a faith or not. Many argue that Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society as these two factions support different political parties, have different cultural activities and sports and their respective schools have dramatically different ethos (Badham et al. 1988: 48). Olivia expresses her dismay at her lack of interaction with Catholics but claims plainly "it's not deliberate, just the way it works out, it was just where I lived and where I went to school... it's just the way Belfast is cause there's east and west and one's Catholic and one's Protestant." Her discussion of Belfast was particularly interesting as it highlighted the physical division between the two religious affiliations summarised by her analogy of the "black taxi" whereby "normal" taxis would go to east Belfast and "black taxis" to the west and there was very little cross over. It has been discovered that so ingrained and pervasive are these divisions, perhaps helped by such physical splits, that children as young as ten or eleven are able to easily identify members of either side (Dowds et al. 2007: 464).

This leads me on to a discussion of the concept of "Telling" (named as such by academics rather than informants), a method used when strangers in Northern Ireland meet to ascertain one another's religio-political identity (Finlay 1999: 1). To do so, people have developed an acute sensitivity to subtle signs of one's identity such as name, area of residence, speech idiom and style of dress (Finlay 1999: 1.4). This hidden sectarianism is believed to use in order to avoid embarrassment, or for safety purposes, and occurs in everyday interactions - it is this insidious and subtle nature of "Telling" which Finlay believes is what makes sectarianism so difficult to escape as it becomes second nature to most who live in Northern Ireland (Finlay 1999: 1.24). Olivia, in particular, was very conscious of this process despite not particularly understanding it and expressed her confusion as "it's hard to explain cause like you just know most of the time like if you ask them where they live and

their name and you can just tell... if they're Catholic they'll say things to do with Ireland whereas you'll never get a Protestant talking about the Republic like that." She also commented that it was common for people to joke about religious identity, however, this was subtle ploy with the underlying intention of finding out someone's religio-political identity.

To look at the influence of the Church on religious views, it is impossible to escape from the impact of The Troubles and the way in which politics and national identity are so intertwined within religion and daily life in Northern Ireland. Many social events are organised by the Church, however, which particular Church determines one's national identity and therefore a whole range of political and cultural differences. My informants were very clear that religion was part of the basis of their identity particularly because it was so closely linked with their nationality.

Part 3 - Present Day

This section will briefly discuss attempts by officials to diminish the sectarian issues within Northern Ireland and will then consider the differences my informants who now live in Scotland have noted. Doing so will provide the opportunity to identify some *generalised* contrasts between Northern Ireland and Scotland as although there are undoubtedly religiously related issues in Scotland, these have not been experienced by my informants.

The major movement introduced within education and communities is known as the "Contact Hypothesis," first put forward in 1940 and continued to develop until the 1990s when major education reforms were undertaken (Dowds et al. 2007: 461). It proposes that inter-group conflict can be reduced by increasing contact between the two groups and bringing them together (Dowds et al. 2007: 461). In doing so, positive perceptions of the other can emerge through these various activities and replace previously held negative associations. This appears to have worked as Rebekah comments "a lot of my neighbours are Catholic like we used to share things with the Catholic school down the road and there was bit of a difference from us but no one really bothers." Similar results were yielded from integrated schools by Maurice Stringer who discovered higher levels of social contact with

members from the other community and more liberal views on the likes of mixed marriage here than from non-integrated schools (Dowds et al. 2007: 460).

The same can be said for those who experience life in a different country such as Caroline. She has begun to question some aspects about her faith such as contemporary issues of homosexuality and is now focusing on exploring her faith rather than blindly accepting the preaching of a minister. Both Caroline and Olivia recognise the dramatic decrease in attention to religion paid in Scotland vis-à-vis Northern Ireland. They believe this is due to the lack of a similar recent conflict like The Troubles in Scotland thus there was not the same focus on religious labels as is illustrated by Olivia's comment "like I haven't had one person here ask me if I'm religious in the two years that I've been here whereas like as soon as you meet someone in Northern Ireland they know." In Northern Ireland, not only is there the question of having a faith but also of which religion (i.e. Protestant or Catholic) whereas they found this was less pronounced in their experiences of Scotland.

In the present day in Northern Ireland, the process of religious "othering" amongst young people appears to have partially reduced. Whether this is due to government educational policies or due to a distance in time from the conflict itself, is not clear. However, what is clear is, regardless of its vigour, sectarianism is still prevalent in Northern Ireland due to the way it has seeped into everyday practices.

Conclusion

Through my project I have attempted to illustrate the complicated nature of the Northern Irish identity whereby religion and politics are continually intertwined. By conducting fieldwork in this area I have come to better understand the way in which religion and identity work in Northern Ireland and discovered the importance of not isolating one factor, such as social life, as it removes it from the larger, temporal picture. Not only do I now understand how my cousins were perhaps more influenced by religion than myself but I also understand why, as Seamus Heaney, quoted at the outset, says in his poem: "*Religion's never mentioned here, of course.*(Finlay 1999: 1.6)" because it does not need to be mentioned. It is something that is always present in Northern Ireland and subtle processes

have been developed to discover the religion of others without actually discussing it. Religion is integral to Northern Irish society and identity and links its present to its past. It is perhaps likely that such divisions will continue to be present for some time to come as these differences define people's individual and group identities and the way in which they relate to their country as a whole.

Bibliography

- Badham, P., Wells, R. A., McForan, D. W. J. 1988. 'The Contribution of Religion to the Conflict in Northern Ireland'. *International Journal on World Peace*, 5,1: 45-67.
- Cairns, D. 2000. 'The Object of Sectarianism: The Material Reality of Sectarianism in Ulster Loyalism'. *Royal Anthropology Institute*, 6: 437-452.
- Dowds, L., Hayes, B. C., McAllister, I. 2007. 'Integrated Education, Intergroup Relations and Political Identities in Northern Ireland'. *Social Problems*, 54, 4: 454-482.
- Finlay, A. 1999. "'Whatever You Say Say Nothing": An Ethnographic Encounter in Northern Ireland and Its Sequel'. *Sociological Research Online*, 4, 3: 1-26.
- Hodgkins, W. 1960. *Sunday: Christian and Social Significance*. London: Independent Press LTD.
- Seul, J. R. 1999. "'Ours Is the Way of God": Religion, Identity and Intergroup Conflict'. *Journal of Peace Research*, 36,5: 553-569.