

6 Ethnicity and religion

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Religiously informed conflicts have become increasingly prominent throughout the world – conflicts surrounding immigration in Europe, conflict at religious interfaces, the Islamicisation of ethnonational movements from Palestine to Malaysia. Steve Bruce (2003, p. 2) estimates that three quarters of the conflicts since 1960 have a religious component, where many of those involved ‘explain or justify their causes by reference to their religion’. This opens a whole terrain for inquiry. Is religiously informed conflict distinctive in form and dynamics? Do specific religions incline towards specific forms of group identity and conflict? Are religiously defined groups-in-conflict different from ethnic groups-in-conflict? How far does the historic sequencing of state-building, nation-building and confessionalisation affect the ways ethnicity and religion intersect? What specific resources are associated with ethnic and with religious solidarity? What happens where ethnic and religious boundaries coincide? In such cases, how are ethnicity and religion distinguished or merged in interaction and everyday understanding? Does religion provide specific resources for conflict resolution?

One approach posits a new phase of ‘religious’ or ‘civilisational’ conflicts (Huntington, 2002). Much of the recent ‘terrorism’ literature sits within this paradigm, detailing the ways religious belief is used to legitimate terrorist activity and suicide bombing (for critical analysis, see Stewart, 2009). However, the multiplicity of theological positions and religious practices within each of the world religions means that we cannot read off political views from religious commitment: Norris and Inglehart (2004, pp. 133–55) demonstrate multiple differences in political culture within each of the world religions and many overlaps between them. Quantitative study shows no significant difference between nominally religious and nominally secular conflicts in degrees or forms of violence (Stewart, 2009). Before attempting to generalise about ‘religious’ conflicts, we need more nuanced and detailed comparisons of the forms of religious and ethnic identification, group formation and conflict.

This task is hindered by the relative isolation of scholarship on ethnicity from scholarship on religion. The sociology of religion, for example, is a rich mine of analyses and models relevant to the study of ethnicity: models of culture change (secularisation), identity change (conversion), the emergence of new religious movements, and the impact of religious groups and ideas on political culture and political organisation (Davie, 2007; Demerath, 2001; Snow and Machelek, 1984). The historical-sociological tradition traces interlinkages of religious practices, elites and values, on the one hand, and sociopolitical development on the other, showing how religious movements – early Calvinism and its impact on the values and habitus of the elite – came to inform European capitalist development (Weber, 1930) and early modern state formation

(Gorski, 2003); others have traced the role of religions in nation formation (Greenfeld, 1992; Hastings, 1997; Van der Leer and Lehmann, 1999; Marx, 2003; Ihalainen, 2005). An important strand of recent research focuses on popular attitudes, tracing key periods when political elites use religious values to mobilise or control populations, to broker new ethnopolitical alliances, to frame concepts of nationhood, or to compensate groups for their increasing distantiation from the state (see variously Gal, 2007; Brown, 2010; Shenhav, 2006, pp. 46–76; Kinnvall, 2002; Bruce, 1994, pp. 22–31).

The classic studies of ethnicity, ethnonationalism and ethnic conflict did not pay particular attention to religion, with one exception: the ethnosymbolist perspective associated with the work of Anthony D. Smith. Smith (2003) emphasises the self-conceptions of some ethnic groups as ‘chosen peoples’. He distinguishes the expansive ‘missionary peoples’ with a sacred mission of proselytism or exemplary profession of faith, and the bounded ‘covenantal peoples’, whose religiously informed obligations and expectations intensify their will to ethnic solidarity and survival (see also Cauthen, 2004). Correlatively, as D. H. Akenson (1992) has shown in his comparative study of three ‘covenantal’ settler peoples, Ulster Protestants, Afrikaaners, and Israelis, the political context and the interests it generates also affect the forms of religion that become dominant.

Contemporary scholarly interest in ‘everyday life’ and the everyday manifestations of ethnicity (Brubaker et al., 2006; Jenkins, 2008) opens a wide field for research into the intertwining of ethnicity and religion at the everyday level. Some studies show the complexities of the intersection in peaceful, multi-ethnic societies (for example, Levitt’s (2008) study of religion as a source of everyday activism among immigrants in the United States). There are also studies of the interrelation of ethnicity and religion in conflict situations, for example Kakar’s (1996) study of Hindu and Muslim rioters in Hyderabad, Brewer’s (1998) study of anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland. Such research can help answer important theoretical and explanatory questions. Where ethnicity and religion are intertwined, is religion a legitimacy tool for other interests, constantly trumped by ethnicity? Or does religion – in Walter Benjamin’s terms – act as the puppet master pulling the strings of seemingly secular groups (1969, pp. 253–55)? When religious and ethnic motivations cross-cut, in what circumstances is one or other distinction highlighted? What theories and approaches can help us to synthesise the increasing numbers of case studies? As we show below, attempts to answer these questions have required some reframing of concepts and theories of ethnicity.

Concepts of religion and ethnicity

Classical scholarship on ethnicity and ethnonationalism carefully distinguished religion from ethnicity. Anthony D. Smith defined ethnicity as involving each of the following six features: a common name; a myth of common ancestry; shared historical memories; elements of common culture; a link with a homeland; a sense of solidarity (Smith, 1986, pp. 21–31). Definitions are contested in the wider literature, but there is some consensus that central to ethnicity is perceived territorially based descent, which in turn tends to generate quasi-kin feelings of solidarity (Conversi, 2002). Religion may be defined substantively as beliefs and practices concerned with the sacred, with particular religions identified in terms of institutionally based and bounded sets of such beliefs and practices, and religious (confessional) groups those who participate in them. On Smith’s definition of ethnicity, religion may form the common culture that partially constitutes the ethnic,

but ethnicity requires also a territorial and descent-related emphasis. On other accounts, ethnic solidarity is a function of (perceived) descent (Connor, 1994), or even simply of group boundaries, rather than of any particular cultural or religious content.

The conceptual distinction is clear, but its usefulness in analysing actual movements and conflicts is less obvious. When we ask which groups or conflicts are 'ethnic' and which 'religious' we find that elements of the ideal types of religion and ethnicity are mixed in practice. Smith (2003) has shown how religion informs and on occasion defines particular ethnic groups. Jews, Copts and Sikhs are, for example, at one and the same time ethnic and religious groupings, and religions like Hinduism, Judaism and Shintoism are sometimes categorised as 'ethnic religions' as contrasted to 'universalistic religions' (Coakley, 2002). In other cases, religious and ethnic distinctions coincide in the conflict region. So, for example, in Northern Ireland the conflicting groups are distinct in ethnic origin (seventeenth-century incomers from Scotland and England versus Gaelic Irish and 'old English' twelfth-century incomers), in religion (Protestant versus Catholic), in nationality (British versus Irish) and in state loyalty (unionist versus nationalist). While the religious distinction does not totally coincide with the ethnic, national or political distinctions, the overlaps are extremely significant (Whyte, 1991, pp. 65–93). Religiously derived concepts inform political views, although the precise nature of religious beliefs and the relative emphasis on religion or ethnicity as a basis of communal identification vary from subgroup to subgroup, and even from individual to individual (Mitchell, 2006, pp. 91–132).

Similar overlaps of religion and ethnicity occur in many conflict regions, with varying degrees of strength and salience of the religious and ethnic components (see Bruce, 2003, pp. 43–57). In Macedonia the Albanians are Muslim and the Macedonians Orthodox; in Sri Lanka the Tamils are Hindu and the Sinhalese Buddhist; in Cyprus Greeks are Orthodox and Turks Muslim; in Israel-Palestine there are Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs (mostly but not exclusively Muslim); in Lebanon the different 'ethnies' are distinguished in part by religion (Sunni, Shia, Druze, Christian Maronites and Orthodox) and organised and administered by religious authorities; in ex-Yugoslavia, Bosnian Muslims were pitted against Croatian Catholics and Serbian Orthodox; in Malaysia, Malays are Muslim while Indians are Hindu and Chinese a range of religions; in Canada the Catholicism of francophones, as distinct from the Protestantism of the traditional anglophone community, was an important element in the historical construction of a French Canadian identity (Bouchard, 2004); in Iraq, internal conflict has a religious dimension in the Sunni versus Shiite distinction; one dimension of the Sudanese conflict is religious, between Muslim Northerners and the rest. In other cases, religion is officially nationalised so that the Greek Orthodox Church is distinct from the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Tibetans have a distinct form of Buddhism, and the Church of England was and is a national Church.

Even where religion appears to be irrelevant to ethnonational conflict, there may be religious resonances to that conflict. So, for example, the Basque conflict with the Spanish centre took its most acute form in the mid-twentieth century with the conflict of (anticlerical) Basque socialists against clericalist Francoists, and this memory persists in the one-time Francoist stronghold of Navarra. In Nigeria, Biafran mobilisation was coloured by the conflict between Hausa Muslims and Ibo Christians, and religion is becoming more important in contestations over the nation in contemporary Nigeria (Igwarra, 2007; Stewart, 2009). Indeed, ethnic divisions shorn of all religious resonance are much less common than may be imagined: in Europe, most of the internal French

national conflicts (Basques, Corsicans and more problematically Bretons versus the French centre) and some residual northern European conflicts lack a religious dimension; in Africa, conflicts in Rwanda, Burundi, the Congo, Angola and Mozambique do not have a religious dimension.

In the many cases where religion and ethnicity appear to coincide, there is much variation in the way religion informs ethnic division. Fox (2002) argues that religion is no more than a 'marker' of a primarily ethnic identity and set of interests, and this is certainly true in some cases: in ex-Yugoslavia, for example, weak religious identities took on salience as markers of group identification in the course of ethnonational mobilisation (Bruce, 2003, pp. 47–50). In other cases, religion helps form the identity in question. Zionism used religious symbolism to identify Jewishness with an Israeliness sharply distinguished from more general Arab belonging, despite the strong Arab culture and historical belonging of many 'Arab Jews' (Shenhav, 2006, pp. 77–109). Indeed in some cases, an identification that begins as primarily ethno-territorial (Palestinians) can take on stronger constitutive religious content (Lybarger, 2007).

Much of the recent literature on ethnicity, conflict and violence bypasses these questions by definitional fiat, including in the category of ethnic group those groups defined by religion.¹ If the benefit of this approach is to extend the range of comparative quantitative analysis, the cost is to preclude comparison of religion and ethnicity as contrasting sources of identity, community and conflict. The 'inclusive conception of ethnicity' implicitly allows our understanding of ethnicity (with its strongly territorialised and descent-based resonances) to impose an ethnicising vision on highly complex social realities. By including all ways of constructing 'peoplehood' (populations with a sense of historic community and solidarity (see Lie, 2004)) under the heading of 'ethnic', we lose the conceptual capacity to see the variety of meanings and solidarities that religion may bring to the sense of peoplehood.

An alternative strategy is to investigate empirically the different ways that 'peoples' construct themselves, exploring how religious beliefs, practices and memories, or ethnic histories, myths and associated values, affect group formation. Where religion and ethnicity coincide, this lets us investigate the relations between the factors. Are the effects of religion and ethnicity additive, with ethnic and religious distinctions each reinforcing the other? Are they complementary, with each contributing a distinct set of attributes and functions to group belonging? Do they coexist in tension, and if so, which is the stronger? Or are there interactive effects with dynamic and emergent properties producing a much more complex field of relationships where the ethnic and the religious cannot easily be separated out? When are the effects additive, when complementary, when conflicting, when interactive?

In exploring these issues, we focus on three areas of current research on ethnicity and religion:

- *Geopolitical and geohistorical research* maps the formation of different types of historic communities through processes of ethnogenesis/nation-building, confessionalisation, state formation and territorial formation. It explores how the sequencing of these processes affects the ways peoplehood is defined and the ways in which religious and ethnic factors intersect.
- *Ethnographic and sociological analysis of group solidarities and resources.* What specific resources (institutional, ideological, personal, political) are associated with ethnic and with religious solidarity and how do these vary in combination?

- *Cultural and symbolic research into everyday meanings, motives and identities.* How are ethnic and religious divisions merged or distinguished in interaction and everyday understanding?

Geohistorical sequences and the creation (and change) of peoples

The roots of many of today's 'ethno-religious' conflicts lie in large-scale historical processes: the formation and collapse of states, empires and civilisations, the growth of world religions and their diffusions and internal splinterings, the voluntary and involuntary movement of populations, the intersection of culture and religion with class and caste, and in the more recent period the emergence of modern concepts of state, nationhood and ethnicity. One possible outcome of these processes is a nation-state in which religion and national identity are fused (Bruce, 2003, p. 43). Much more common are state and territorially based conjunctures of conflicting cultural and religious identities.

The process has been mapped for Europe by Stein Rokkan (Flora, 1999). Successive waves of conquest and occupation, penetration and retrenchment produced a complex distribution of ethnic-linguistic groupings across Western Europe. On this were superimposed the divisions of the Reformation, setting the scene for more than a century of religious war and for a still longer period of religious persecution. Three major zones of confessional relations emerged: a majority Catholic/minority Protestant crescent, from Poland through southern Europe to Ireland; a majority Protestant/minority Catholic region, largely in northern Europe; and mixed interface regions between these (Martin, 1978). Religious understandings were embedded in state institutions and practices, became part of elite and everyday understandings of how the state functioned (Gorski, 2003) and were imposed, to the extent possible, on the wider population. In the first two zones, nation (in the pre-modern sense) and confession became tightly intertwined, leaving religious minorities such as the Huguenots of France, the Protestants of Bohemia, the Catholics of England, struggling to affirm their claim on full membership of the nation. The third zone was one of confessional rivalry that later extended to the definition of the nation and the form and boundaries of the state (see Wolff, 2003). In all three zones minority religions could take on some of the attributes of ethnicity, including a sense of grievance/superiority, a particular world view, a sense of solidarity (Smith, 2003).

English and British state-building exemplifies many of these processes. It was greatly eased by the success of Protestantism throughout Great Britain. This allowed political-territorial and religious-constitutional compromises to be put in place in the late seventeenth century (Pocock, 1989) and led to the centrality of Protestantism to British national identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Colley, 1992; Hastings 1997). Correlatively, English Catholics were marginalised in Great Britain well into the nineteenth century (Duffy, 1982) and Irish Catholics politically marginalised in Ireland under the Union and in Northern Ireland until the end of the twentieth century. Religiously informed ethnonational tensions characterised the British–Irish relationship until the latter part of the twentieth century.

The settlement colonies of North America and the southern hemisphere that all but destroyed the pre-existing social order tended to reproduce European intersections between ethnicity and religion: they did so with a different dynamic determined by an immigration-based state and society. Much more complex patterns emerged where

imperial rule formed an overlay on an older social and cultural world that it profoundly modified but did not replace. There the ethnic and religious mix was reshaped in successive phases of colonial settlement, missionary activity and free or directed population movement. Colonialism introduced new groups that were religiously as well as ethnically distinct, who came as settlers (South Africa, Zimbabwe) or as workers or slaves brought in by the colonial power (Malaysia, Kenya and the Caribbean countries). Missionary activity went hand in hand with the process of colonisation, though with limited success in the areas of the old world religions. Ethnicity and religion provided colonial states with alternative or complementary resources for strategic management. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa, state emphasis was on ethnic rather than religious distinction. Still today, religious distinction continues to be personally salient, often more so than ethnic; but it is ethnic distinction that is seen as crucial in public life, in party politics and in the distribution of public offices (Langer, 2010; Stewart, 2009). A different historical and contemporary distribution of resources in South Asia led states to give higher public salience to religion and religio-caste distinction (Van der Leer and Lehmann, 1999; Kaviraj, 2007; for internal variation in India see Varshney, 2003).

Religion and ethnicity as sources of group solidarity and as political resources

Some groups are distinguished from their 'other' solely by their ethnicity, others solely by religion. But very often religion and ethnicity are co-present and the practices and resources associated with each sometimes complement and reinforce each other, sometimes conflict with and counteract each other. The scholarly literature contrasts the resources associated with each domain. Benedict Anderson (1991, p. 6) has contrasted the difference in concepts of time and space developed with the rise of nationalism from earlier religio-political world views: while the latter take a messianic notion of time, where radical shifts are possible, and an unbounded notion of space, the former thinks in terms of homogeneous clock time with very clear territorial boundaries.

There may also be dramatic differences in degree of formalisation and organisation. Pre-politicised ethnicity tends to be inchoate and immediate, associated with neighbourhoods and family ties, open to radically diverse modes of articulation (see for example Chong, 2007). It may coexist with a highly organised and institutionalised religion, with an elaborated and universalistic ideological (theological) perspective, developed conceptions and practices of authority, and established repertoires of mobilisation and contestation. Tensions may arise between the universalistic, transterritorial and sacred aspect of many world religions and the particularist, bounded character of ethnicity (Coakley, 2002, pp. 212–13). There may also be a sharp conflict of priorities. Rokkan has argued that the supranational outlook of Roman Catholicism in early modern Europe set it in opposition to the development of state-centred nationalisms in the Catholic states of that period (Flora, 1999, pp. 163–65). Sometimes such tensions may be exploited to provide a politically radical role for religion (for one example, see Ganiel, 2008, pp. 139–55). On the other hand, in many cases ethnicity and religion comfortably coexist, reinforcing each other's identity, with national origin myths, values and ideologies informed by religious ideas (Smith, 1986; 2003, pp. 166–217) and sustained by religious organisations and institutions. In this sense, Protestantism and Britishness were historically mutually reinforcing (Colley, 1992).

Although it is tempting to seek 'essential' characteristics of each domain, this insufficiently recognises the variability of each. Bruce (2003, pp. 4–9) argues that the

functions played by religion in distinction-making, group formation and politics are highly varied and given as much by historical context as by any essential characteristics of religion. Exactly the same can be argued for ethnicity (Wimmer, 2008). Nations, like ethnies, are living traditions of practice and distinction, which mutate with new needs. Religions also mutate (see Casanova, 1994). So too do the relations between them. Islam, for example, has sometimes been portrayed as antithetical to ethnonationalism because of its focus on the transnational community of believers. Yet Gerber (2007) and Lybarger (2007) show how Islam is used and transformed by believers to make it consistent with national aims, thereby in turn changing the dominant conception of the nation.

Where both religion and ethnicity are co-present in collective identity, their roles can be fused. Smith (1986, pp. 34–37; 2003, pp. 166–217) has noted that nations often take on some of the sacred character and temporality usually associated with religions. Equally, at times religious minorities take on the sense of history, of origin myth and even of territorial base usually identified as ethnic (Ruane, 2010).

In cases of overlap, a simple 2 × 2 diagram (see Figure 6.1) distinguishing the possible variations in strength of identity, degree of group solidarity and extent of institutionalisation of ethnicity and religion allows an initial mapping of the data. This allows us to show the trajectories of group development, so that a group (for example, Palestinians), move from segment 4 to segment 2 in the initial process of nationalist politicisation, with later movement towards segment 1, as they invest their nationality with religious meaning. The diagram of course is overly simple: actual analysis has to distinguish the unevenness in degree and type of identity, solidarity and institutionalisation. Very strong identifications may also be thin (relatively empty of content and narrative) with solidarity limited to small groups and with limited institutionalisation as contemporary secular working-class loyalism in Northern Ireland illustrates. Meanwhile, highly institutionalised religions and nationalisms may also be shallow in terms of public identification (as was Spanish nationalism in Catalonia in the Franco period) and may quickly change once the opportunity arises.

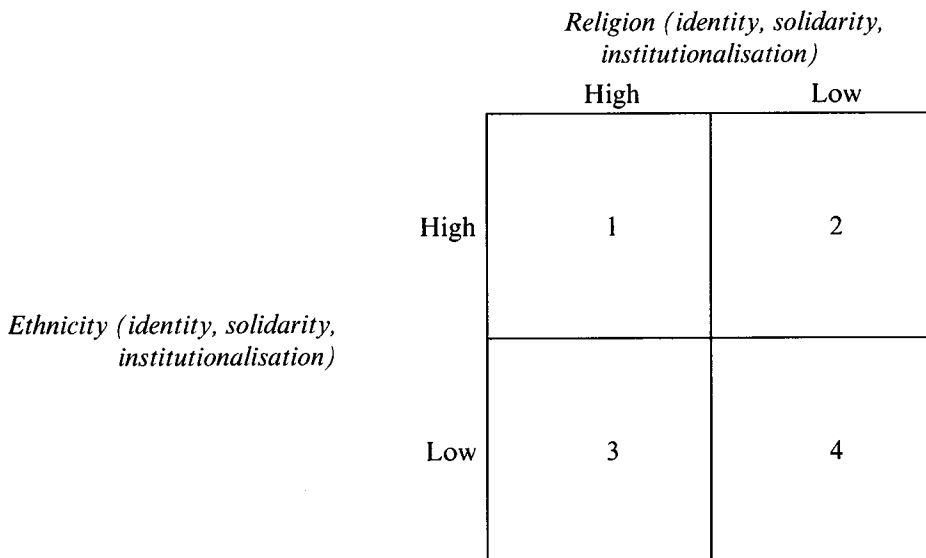


Figure 6.1

In short, the ways ordinary people construct and understand their sense of peoplehood are at once subtle, powerful and complex. Contemporary analysis has begun to deconstruct the sharp distinction between ethnicity and religion, but it remains to reconstruct more adequate and nuanced typologies and theories of the role of religious and ethnic distinction in group formation.

Everyday ethnicity and religion

Does it matter how groups define themselves? If we simply want to explain outbreaks of violence, it appears not (Laitin, 2007, pp. 13–22). However the study of ethnicity is equally concerned to understand the form of social divisions, tendencies towards social inclusion or exclusion, co-operation or conflict, and to identify dispositions for action whose actual manifestations depend on political opportunities and incentives. Even here, a long tradition has it that it is the boundaries of ethnic groups that matter, not the ‘stuff’ within them.² From this perspective, it might seem of little intellectual or practical value to pursue research into the ways ordinary people interrelate their senses of ethnic and religious identity.

However, contemporary research is moving towards a recognition of the importance of content as well as, and as partially constitutive of, boundaries (Jenkins, 2008, pp. 79, 111–12; Ashmore et al., 2004). The cultural content of identity – whether and which religious values or ethnic origins are emphasised in everyday distinction-making – is important in orienting action, framing felt grievances, limiting the forms of likely mobilisation, and acknowledging and accepting settlement opportunities. A whole range of qualitative studies have explored how the highlighting of religious or ethnic distinction and particular interpretations of that distinction may have major social consequences in drawing boundaries and making them more or less permeable, in brokering new alliances and in opening the way for actors to grasp new opportunities (McAdam et al., 2001, pp. 124–59). Research on the increasing politicisation of religious cleavages in Nigeria and Palestine, for example, shows how populations disappointed with ‘national’ leadership use religious resources to further their aims (Stewart, 2009, Igwarra, 2007, Lybarger, 2007).

Here, too, the study of religion provides interesting comparisons and models for the study of everyday ethnic and ethno-religious identification. The extensive research on different dimensions of secularisation and sacralisation (for discussion, see Davie, 2007, pp. 46–66) shows a thinning out of religious identity, movement away from traditional ‘set packages’ of belief, and a ‘vicarious’ identification whereby non-believers support believers in their belief and practice (Davie, 2007, pp. 126–28, 140–43). The parallels with processes noted in the field of ethnicity are striking: the lack of salience of ‘everyday ethnicity’ together with a (vicarious) unwillingness to give up on ‘nationalist’ politicians and movements, a ‘pluralisation’ of concepts of national identity, and related processes of boundary blurring and ethnic change (Brubaker et al., 2006; Keating, 2001). Research on religion as a source of values, expressed in ‘civil religion’ and religious ideology (Demerath, 2001, pp. 234–40) shows how state institutions and secular political movements may be permeated by assumptions deriving from religion. In such cases, communal mobilisation may be opposed as much to religio-cultural as to ethnoterritorial dominance (for the Irish and Northern Irish cases, see Ruane and Todd, 1996). How such religiously informed values become locked into nationally and ethnically specific judgements and solidarities, and how these change, is an important area for

contemporary research. Contrasting the successful histories of integration of religious minorities in some states (France and Czechoslovakia) and the relative failure of integration in others (Ireland) shows the importance of minority participation in constitution-building from a religious just as much as from an ethnic perspective (Ruane and Todd, 2009).

Some recent research, finally, suggests that religious commitment can aid conflict resolution precisely because it gives resources and legitimations for radical change (for the Northern Ireland case, see Ganiel, 2008). Reverend Dr Ian Paisley – First Minister of the reconstituted 2007 Northern Ireland Executive in partnership with Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin – may be taken as an example. A long-time critic of all political compromise, he commented on their respective political about-turns: ‘We were turned towards the darkness, now we are turned towards the light.’ For him, as for at least some ordinary people in Northern Ireland, religious beliefs and values allowed a reorientation of values and identities in a new political order.

Notes

- 1 For example, Horowitz (2000, pp. 17–18) includes in his category of ethnic groups those groups ‘defined by ascriptive differences, whether the indicium of group identity is color, appearance, language, religion, some other indicator of common origin, or some combination thereof’. He refers to this as the ‘inclusive conception of ethnicity’.
- 2 A view often attributed to Barth (1969), who himself qualified this position.

Further reading

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