

2. Religion in Nationalist Conflicts

“Roman Catholicism, for better or worse, is so much part of the atmosphere of Ireland that Irish national identity can seem inseparable from it. The Pope himself [John Paul II] apparently assumed it was inseparable...”¹ (Robert Kee)

“...Protestants adopted a siege mentality, characterized by the belief that the Catholic threat from the South was compounded by the Catholic enemy within. This was symbolized in the slogan ‘For God and Ulster’; a principle that the Protestant faith and the State were indivisible.”² (Martin Dillon)

2.1 Introduction

Sustaining nationalism, there are institutions that support it.³ Religion or those institutions that hold a religious ideology are the most widespread examples of institutions that reinforce the rationale of a nationalist ideal or movement. A correlation between national identity and religion is a recurrent subject not only in societies or groups in conflict, but sometimes a necessary condition in nation-building and national consciousness. For example, today the Irish people could hardly be imagined without the Catholic religion, or England without Protestantism or Muslims countries without Islam.

Conversely, religion as a separate concept plays a defined role for humankind. It dwells on the psychological processes of men similar to those generated by self-identification with the nation. The nature of religion is personal as well as social and universal; it has to do with the supernatural and the divinity, with beliefs and rites, with the sacred and the profane.⁴ In Durkheim’s work elements of the nature of religion are enclosed in his definition: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart

¹ Robert Kee, *Ireland* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1982), 53.

² Martin Dillon, *God and the Gun* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 168.

³ Kellas, *Politics of Nationalism*, 33-34.

⁴ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1965), 37-63.

and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them [...] by showing that the idea of religion is inseparable from that of the Church, it makes it clear that religion should be an eminently collective thing.”⁵

Because religion is an element present in every society or individual (whether acknowledged or not), and part of our existence, it has been considered first of all as a cultural rather than political institution.⁶ As an institution, religion has mainly an ideological character, i.e. it provides a system of signification/ideas/beliefs to understand the world we live, and accomplishes social functions such as social solidarity. Furthermore Spiro adds “a religious system have the same ontological status as those of other cultural systems: its beliefs are normative, its rituals collective, its values prescriptive. [...Nevertheless...] religion can be differentiated from other culturally constituted institutions by virtue only of its reference to superhuman beings.”⁷

2.2 Religion, A Symbol of the Nation?

The main question that arises from the correlation of national identity and religion is how an individual belief does becomes part of a collective identity, and how does the collectivization of such beliefs stand as symbol of a broader community which is the nation? The importance of this question relies in the fact that it has wider sociological implications for the workings of a given society and its institutions. Religion and national identity, together or independent, both can interact as “personal cults,” but also as part of the collectivity to which they belong. In this respect, Durkheim states that the interplay of the individual and the collective is necessary not

⁵ Ibid., 62-63.

⁶ Melford E. Spiro, “Religion: Problems of Definition and Explanation,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (London, England: Tavistock Publications, 1966), 96.

⁷ Ibid., 97.

only to form a society but thanks to this to determine what variety of religion gets to exist. “[...] society cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is not in action unless the individuals who compose it are assembled together and act in common. It is by common action that it takes consciousness of itself and realizes its position...Then it is action which dominates the religious life, because of the mere fact that it is society which is its source.”⁸

Consequently religion (like nationalism) is the product of social causes; e.g. unity, social organization, search of personal and collective strength, the threat of external physical and moral forces.⁹ This is to say, religion is dependent on the interactions of the collective life. Moreover it is in the collective where the individual achieves its realization.

...the collective force is not entirely outside of us; it does not act upon us wholly from without; but rather since society cannot exist except in and through individual consciousness, this force must also penetrate us and organize itself within us; it thus becomes an integral part of our being and by that very fact this is elevated and magnified.¹⁰ [...] Thus the collective ideal which religion expresses is far from being due to a vague innate power of the individual, but it is rather at the school of collective life that the individual has learned to idealize.¹¹

The dichotomy of individual-collectivity is also reflected in the idea of nation. This means that nations as well as the church are the collective representations of two kinds of identity, religious and national. Whereas for the devotees the church is the depository of its cults and beliefs, national identity and loyalty is bestowed on the idea of nation. Thus:

We all seek some measure of self-transcendence, and enlargement of the self beyond its narrow boundaries, an escape from the isolation and insignificance of singularity. Group membership offers an accessible mode of self-transcendence...¹²

⁸ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 465-466.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 408.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 470.

¹² Jeff McMahan, “The Limits of National Partiality,” in *The Morality of Nationalism* ed. Robert McKim and Jeff McMahan (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 119.

Every nation has a collective identity shared by a set of values, tradition, history, myths and cultural attributes that make of the nation a defined cultural entity and in certain circumstances prone to be politicized. However, not all of these attributes hold the same importance in the history of the nation. The fact that religion is a primordial element of the nation means that it is essential to the cultural identity of the people, and as a consequence it is above other cultural markers such as language, race, color, territory or other traditions. However, it is important to mention that not every nation-state or nation see religion as a necessary condition of their distinction. The French language in Quebec, for instance, is more compelling in suggesting a Québécois identity than it is Catholicism. Moreover, not all religious institutions support or approve nationalist movements or nation-building processes.

In the Balkans, for instance, the Orthodox Church was reluctant to promote a secular nationalism by fear of loosing its clerical power:

Despite its effectiveness, the process of nation-building through the imaginative construction of a sense of ethnic community brought to the fore the fundamental [...] antinomy between Orthodoxy and nationalism. The ensuing conflict in moral values dramatized the essential incompatibility between the imagined community of religion and the imagined community of the nation [...] The Orthodox Church in the Balkans did contribute to the preservations of the collective identity under Ottoman rule by institutionalizing and safeguarding the distinction of the Christian subjects from the Muslim rulers. But the distinction was religious, not national, in content.¹³

The diversity of religious denominations in the same territory is another determinant in whether an all encompassing national movement can be religious-based or not. In Albania the “communist leader Enver Hoxha could not have used religion as a means of social solidarity

¹³ Paschalis Kitromilides, “Orthodoxy and Nationalism,” in *Ethnicity* ed. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 202-203.

since the Albanians were divided between two forms of Islam and two forms of Christianity.”¹⁴ According to this fact, most nationalisms with a religious basis are likely to develop in countries where the national religion belongs to all its members and produces a sense of homogeneity.

2.2.1 The Idea of Nationalist Protestantism

The result of religious beliefs being used as national symbols is that national identification can be equated with religious identification as well. As a consequence the nation can be predestined to have an ally God. Or in words of Kellas: “When ‘God’s people’ have a national church of their own this gives a strong institutional support to national identity and nationalism.”¹⁵

The idea of nationalism and religion is a twofold variable that relates God and the State; God and the nation; or God and His people. When “God and Ulster” is used as a nationalist slogan in Northern Ireland, it is usually taken as a given; God and nation are an indivisible symbol of the collectivity from which the individuals owe it self-transcendence. This correlation is a very complex process and the Northern Irish Protestants owe this ideal to the genesis of Britain. Great Britain was forged out of Protestantism, in times of European wars of Empire when King and God were a fusion of absolute power and legitimate government.

Linda Colley vividly explains this historical as well as ideological construction of the British political imagery:

From the Act of Union to the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, Great Britain was involved in successive, very dangerous wars with Catholic France. At the same time and long after, it was increasingly concerned to carve out a massive empire in foreign lands that were not even Christian¹⁶ [...] The struggles of

¹⁴ Steve Bruce, *Politics and Religion* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2003), 43.

¹⁵ Kellas, *Politics of Nationalism*, 33.

¹⁶ Linda Colley, *Britons* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 18.

the Protestant Reformation had not ended, but were to be fought out over and over again. How could Britons hope to survive? How were they to snatch victory out of peril? And what did this incessant battle with Catholicism tell them about who they were and what purpose served? For the answers to these questions, they turned to the Bible, to sermons and homilies¹⁷ [...] An apocalyptic interpretation of history, in which Britain stood in for Israel and its opponents were represented as Satan's accomplices, did not fade away in the face of rationalism in the late seventeenth century¹⁸ [...] as long as a sense of mission and providential destiny could be kept alive, by means of maintaining prosperity at home, by means of recurrent wars with the Catholic states of Europe, and by means of a frenetic and for a long time highly successful pursuit of empire, the Union flourished, sustained not just by convenience and profit but by belief as well.¹⁹

From this statement, we can imply that religion as a national symbol is useful as long as it helps to differentiate the group from others, and at the same time make the group stronger. The "us versus them" perception has its roots in religious identification as well. According to Steve Bruce one of the characteristics of religion that can be adapted to nationalism is the "dual feature of dividing without and uniting within."²⁰ It creates a clear division of those who adhere to the truth faith and the heathen. Thus, when religious beliefs have been internalized by the individual, a cult and a rite might precede distinguishing the sacred from the profane;²¹ the loyal from the infidel.²²

Whatever the group might perceive as sacred²³ or national, both appreciations are likely to become axiomatic forms of the group's identity. Protestantism, for instance, became a symbol of identification but also a boundary against those beyond their principles and values; either in the public sphere or in the private.

¹⁷ Ibid., 25.

¹⁸ Ibid., 31.

¹⁹ Ibid., 54.

²⁰ Bruce, *Politics and Religion*, 79.

²¹ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 52.

²² Bruce, *Politics and Religion*, 79.

²³ Spiro, "Religion," 89.

2.3 Religion and Conflict

Even though religion is related to the culture of the group by way of personal identity and collective identity, it also has a social function within the society it works; such functions as we shall see can be used for the benefit of nationalist causes as well. According to Jonathan Fox's *General Theory of Ethnoreligious Conflict*, religion performs four main social functions:

1. it provides an interpretative framework, or belief system, for understanding the world;
2. it contains rules and standards of behavior which guide the actions of believers;
3. religions are generally associated with institutions that transmit religious frameworks from one generation to the next;
4. religion can legitimize all forms of actions and institutions.

As a matter en passant, it should be noted that although “ideologies also serve this functions, they are different from religions because religions are usually believed to have divine origins while ideologies are accepted as the creation of man.”²⁴

In his theorizing, Fox underlines that when this functions are undermined that can generate conflict and violence. Although religion by its nature is not directly related to political affairs, it is subject to be politicized by the content of its religious beliefs and hence by the goals set by the religious institutions that yield them. These institutions can be directly involved in politics in two traditional ways: not only in the nation-building and behavior of nations, but also involving themselves in party politics; therefore becoming pressure groups within modern states.²⁵

When religious beliefs and rituals are put in action as a matter of “religious” expression, since they come from a religious institution they are expected to be spiritual or at least moral in

²⁴ Jonathan Fox, *Ethnoreligious Conflict in the Late Twentieth Century* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002), 29.

²⁵ Bruce, *Politics and Religion*, 94.

content. However, religious expressions could not exactly be part of Durkheim's²⁶ *positive cult*, which is expected to bring about "impressions of joy, of interior peace, of serenity, of enthusiasm which are, for the believer, an experimental proof of his beliefs."²⁷ In reality, spirituality based on moral grounds, is not always the aim of many so called religious institutions, despite the existence of religious beliefs in its principles.

When religion is used to achieve other purposes than those of religiosity, its participation in political affairs is very open to scrutiny. Religion and its attributes, in a given contested society, are likely to become tools of its own interests or in ultimate cases, allies of the state. The Church or other religious institutions, e.g. The Orange Order, can be directly associated with other realms as opposed to those of the divine. "Religion and politics" then, happens to be an association that is much part of this mundane world. What appears complex in the surface, could be just a matter of *interests*.

That is to say, by breaking the morality of religion, religious institutions can come into being depictions of the Machiavellian state's power, a prerogative of the sovereign; or by the same token part of the Hobbesian human egoism. Today, in a modern context Bruce distinguishes two main goals –not religiously oriented– behind what he calls *religiously inspired movements*, such goals unravel the inherent duality of most religious institutions:

- ...while their inspiration is religious, their goals are primarily secular.
(religious → secular/political)

²⁶ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 366.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 464.

- On the contrary, although some movements often use secular language to promote its goals, they are narrowly religious in intention.²⁸

(secular/political \longrightarrow religious)

In the former, religious institutions rely on their beliefs systems to persuade its brethren of certain secular/political goals, e.g. support for a given political party. In the later, political lobbying might represent the only means available to get religious concessions. In the case of the Orange Order the first interpretation is the one that better addresses the problem of Protestants' goals. In Northern Ireland most of the orthodox religious frameworks provided, are mainly used to pursue Protestant oriented goals. Therefore, the overlapping of religion with national identity, or with state's policies is not just coincidence.

Usually, nationalist institutions like the Orange Order and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt behold a set of religious principles or values, which are strongly encouraged to keep a dominant position regarding the group's worth and its welfare. Bruce sums up this argument by saying that "religiously inspired moral pressure groups exist to promote the status of a particular set of values, and the campaigns they pursue are generally for the benefit of some other groups of people."²⁹

Finally, if we consider Fox's social functions of religion, we might conclude that each of those can be easily, if that would be the case, adapted to promote secular/political endeavors. Of the four functions previously cited by Fox, all of them seem suitable to explain the politics and religion of the Orange Order if we assume that the Orange Order is a religious institution that provides its own *religious frameworks* although it is subscribed to the Protestant faith, but at the

²⁸ Bruce, *Politics and Religion*, 128.

²⁹ Ibid.

same time independent from any Protestant Church. Hence, we need to point out that the religious and political structure of the Order deviate from “Protestantism” and they should be treated independently.

According to Fox, religious frameworks “provide their adherents with a basis for understanding reality which enables these adherents to comprehend the real world and to function in it.”³⁰ Moreover, such frameworks “usually provide rules and standards of behavior for their adherents.”³¹ Consequently, this would mean that “standards of behavior included in religious frameworks are often interpreted as requiring actions, such as holy war, which are in and of themselves conflictive in nature.”³²

With respect to Fox’s social function number three, it is argued that “religion’s adherents tend to build formal institutions around their frameworks.” Here, religious institutions can perform two basic tasks in a given situation: “They can be a very useful resource for mobilizing their adherents for political action, thus facilitating conflict; and they can also be strong supporters of the status-quo...”³³ This argument is summed up in the following proposition:

Any type of grievance among any type of group can lead to the use of religious institutions in the mobilization of that group, thus facilitating conflict, unless the elites in control of the institution have a greater interest in supporting the status quo.³⁴

A final function of religion cited by Fox is its ability to legitimize actions and thereby institutions. For example, many of the actions and origins of the Orange Order are due to Protestantism. Moreover its support stems from the interests of the Protestant community not only in Northern Ireland but also in the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, it can be implied that the

³⁰ Fox, *Ethnoreligious Conflict*, 104.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

³² *Ibid.*, 109.

³³ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

Protestant religion legitimizes the Orange Order as well. The idea that religion is a legitimate force has strong conflictive connotations since it is usually legitimizing one side. Moreover, its significance varies on the target of its legitimization. Religion can be either legitimizing a state or an opposition movement.³⁵

When religion supports the state its goals become secular in content. When the state is undergoing a crisis of legitimacy, the “moral authority” of religion can support “nonreligious causes including promises of freedom, economic prosperity, and social justice.”³⁶ These relationships can be illustrated, again, in the creation of Great Britain as a legitimate authority for England, Wales and Scotland:

Protestantism was the foundation that made the invention of Great Britain possible [...] Protestantism, broadly understood, provided the majority of Britons with a framework for their lives. It shaped their interpretation of the past and enabled them to confront their enemies.³⁷

As a conclusion, Fox suggests that the relation between religion and religious institutions dwells in two propositions:

- Religious frameworks can be used to legitimize grievances and mobilization efforts that are not religious in nature.
- Religious frameworks can be used to bolster the legitimacy of governments and other ruling elites and institutions.

The fact that most religious institutions have a secular/political dimension is important to the understanding of religious based conflicts which in reality are moved by non-religious

³⁵ Ibid., 123.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Colley, *Britons*, 54-55.

motives. The case of the Orange Order is revealing in this aspect. The Orange Order or the Loyal Orange Institution is a religious as well as political organization that makes use of both secular and religious reasons to protect the interests of the Protestant community that they want to see. Accordingly, the religious frameworks beholden by the Order usually are seen as institutional principles which may seem rather orthodox or even “fundamentalist”³⁸ to the outsider.

³⁸ Fundamentalism will be understood the tendency of a group to preserve traditions as a distinctive identity that are believed to be at risk in a modern secular world. Fundamentalists fortify their identity “by a selective retrieval doctrines, beliefs, and practices from a sacred past.” See Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms and the State*, ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3 quoted in Jonathan Fox, *Ethnoreligious Conflict in the Late Twentieth Century* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002), 21.