

Claire Mitchell, *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. ix + 178, £15.99, ISBN 0-7546-6415518 (pbk).

Claire Mitchell offers a sociological study of the role that religion has played in Northern Ireland and argues, in contrast to a number of observers who think the conflict is primarily due to ethnonationalism or political differences, that religion has a fundamental role to play in Northern Ireland because it gives meaning to identities and communal boundaries, which, in turn, is often used by various groups to perpetuate differences and conflict.

This book consists of eight chapters. In chapter one, the introduction, Mitchell sets the stage for her book by setting up the tension regarding the roots of the conflict in Northern Ireland. This chapter provides a brief, but adequate methodological discussion that stems from her work in the sociology of religion. This discussion leads to the central thesis of her book; that is, that boundary, identity and social difference are socially constructed in Northern Ireland and that religion influences these identification processes. Chapter two draws on survey material—specifically the Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys—to assess the relationship between religion and politics in Northern Ireland. Although Mitchell recognizes that survey-based approaches to measuring religious meaning are limited, she uses the data from these surveys to map trends in religious affiliation, practices and beliefs, which she then appeals to in later chapters to analyse and assess the social and political significance of religion in Northern Ireland.

The remaining chapters of the book offer critical, yet sensitive, sociological analyses of the various ways religion forms an important dimension in constructing identity and community in Northern Ireland. Using survey evidence and ethnographic secondary research, chapter three focuses on the role religion plays in providing institutional support for the various boundaries that exist in Northern Ireland. Mitchell notes that, despite official separation between church and state, there remain strong institutional connections between them that profoundly influence public life and politics. Chapters four to seven contain primary research in the form of interviews, conducted by Mitchell, supplemented by secondary sources; such as ethnographical research and community literature from workshops and conferences. Chapter four examines religion as an identity marker and a boundary maker. Religion in Northern Ireland is both organizational and a relational shaper of different identities, contributing to social segregation. Then, chapter five examines the rituals and practices of religion that construct identity and reinforce community membership, while chapter six focuses on religious ideology and the role religious ideas play in politics. Finally, chapter seven offers an analysis of theological beliefs that sustain and perpetuate boundaries and divisions. This conclusion offers a thorough summary and points to future studies on the role religion can play in identity creation and the political realm in Northern Ireland.

This is an excellent contribution to the study of the role religion plays in Northern Ireland. Because of the clear writing style, the well-organized chapters and the pedagogical tools that introduce each chapter, this book would work well in an introductory course in the sociology of religion, religion and secularization or religion and conflict resolution.

My primary concern is that the book fails to address the ‘ambivalence of the sacred’ (to use Scott Appleby’s phrase). That is, although Mitchell has demonstrated how religion has been socially constructed and deployed to negotiate power imbalances, she does not adequately interrogate how religion has provided avenues to peace, even in Northern Ireland. In her attempt to refute the claim that the conflict in Northern Ireland is primarily about ethnonationalism or political differences, she has, perhaps unwittingly, overstated the case that religion plays a facilitating role in the conflict. Mitchell states, ‘this book challenges assumptions that conflict is essentially ethnonational and argues that religion gives meaning to group identity in a variety of ways . . . I argue that religion does not just mark out the communal boundary in Northern Ireland, but that it gives structures, practices, values and meanings to the boundary’ (p. 2). In so doing, her argument tends to uphold the work of authors such as Samuel Huntington and others, who contend that modern conflict stems primarily from religious divisions that define civilizational boundaries. To be clear, Mitchell does state that religion is not simply a marker for what is really an ethnonational divide and ‘that religious beliefs cannot be viewed as the *cause* of conflict’ (p. 34 original italics). However, without a discussion of the peaceful tenants of the religious traditions, or a discussion of the dialectical tension between violence and nonviolence in the Christian tradition, some interpreters may conclude that Mitchell is feeding into the claim that religion is essentially violent. Still, despite this weakness, the book makes an important contribution towards an understanding of the complexity of the Northern Ireland conflict and the role religion plays in the creation of identity and boundaries.

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