

Chapter 7

Christians and Gays in Northern Ireland: How the Ethno-Religious Context has Shaped Christian Anti-Gay and Pro-Gay Activism

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In the Summer of 2008 in England the Lambeth conference of the worldwide Anglican Communion politely tip-toed around the Communion's disagreements about gay sexuality. In contrast Northern Ireland was facing another marching controversy. Unlike the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s when the police had to contend with Orange (pro-British) and Green (pro-Irish) parades and counter-parades, the current controversy was pink. Northern Ireland had progressed to contesting the annual Belfast Gay Pride Parade.

In decades past inter-communal tensions around the so-called annual marching season, which culminated in the largest Orange Order parades on the Twelfth of July, were exacerbated by intemperate public comments. Preceding the August 2008 Belfast Pride parade the feelings of the LGBT community and of the Christian anti-gay¹ constituency had been stirred by public anti-gay comments in June by the politician Iris Robinson. Mrs Robinson MP, and wife of the new First Minister for Northern Ireland, in an extended interview on BBC radio described homosexuality as an 'abomination'.² She elaborated on this with adjectives describing homosexuality as 'vile', 'disgusting' and 'wicked' and offered guidance as to where gay persons might go to be 'turned round' with psychiatric help. She emphasised that she was speaking as a Christian and that she was 'defending the word of God'. The radio interview was conducted after a recent vicious homophobic assault on a gay man in Belfast (which she condemned).

The Belfast Gay Pride parades and the public comments about gay persons made by Democratic Unionist Party politicians are key events which precipitated public discourse in the mid 2000s about being Christian and gay in Northern Ireland. While that discourse has also been affected by the more secular national context of the United Kingdom, as described by Stephen Hunt in his chapter, I

1 The term Christian anti-gay is considered a useful description to distinguish those Christians who have spoken publicly to condemn homosexuality, who refer to homosexuality and gay persons in terms of 'abomination' and 'sodomy' and who demand celibacy of gay persons as a condition of acceptance.

2 *The Belfast Telegraph*, 10 June 2008.

propose that any account of Christianity and gay persons in the United Kingdom and Ireland needs to distinguish the particular experience of being Christian and gay in Northern Ireland. This is not simply because Northern Ireland is both one of the most religious and the most homophobic countries in Western Europe, which has heightened the tension in the society between being Christian and gay (Borooah and Mangan 2007). Rather it is argued in this chapter that the ethno-religious context and conflict between Catholics and Protestants has shaped both Christian anti-gay and Christian pro-gay activism. We will examine three ways in which this is so.

First, we examine the sectarian *divisions* and comment on the cross-community and denominational composition and organisational alliances of both Christian pro-gay and Christian anti-gay organisations and trace the continuity with earlier activism. Secondly, we examine the use of *language* by Christian anti-gay activists and commentators and reflect on how it has been shaped by outspoken evangelicalism. Thirdly, we examine ways in which the sectarian legacy is evident in contests around *parades* and which has now shifted to the Belfast Gay Pride parade. Before this it may be helpful to the reader to describe briefly the general situation as regards both homosexuality and religion in Northern Ireland.

The situation as regards the acceptance of gay and lesbian persons in Northern Ireland is different from that in Britain. Homosexuality was only made legal in Northern Ireland in 1982, much later than its achievement in England and Wales in 1967. Jeffery-Poulter (1991) describes how the conservative moral attitudes of both the Catholic and Protestant Churches together with the sectarian violence mitigated against even the establishment of pro-gay campaigning groups in Northern Ireland. A breakthrough on reform was only achieved through the successful court case in 1981, initiated in 1975, brought by Jeff Dudgeon to the European Court of Human Rights. This put sufficient pressure on the British government to extend the legalisation to Northern Ireland.

The level of local political and societal acceptance of gay persons continued to lag behind that in the rest of the UK. When same-sex Civil Partnership was introduced in the UK in December 2005 it was only made possible in Northern Ireland by 'direct rule' from the British government at Westminster – the regional government in Northern Ireland was suspended at that time. Indeed, the first Civil Partnership at Belfast City Hall was marked by Christian anti-gay protests. There are higher levels of homophobic attitudes in Northern Ireland than in any other Western country (Borooah and Mangan 2007). However, this is not to deny that progress has been made with the development of an LGBT community sector, a lively gay social scene and increased visibility of LGBT individuals and organisations in the wider society.

Northern Ireland scores highest of all the UK regions in terms of religious affiliation, and is known for its high levels of religiosity. A snapshot indicator from the past 30 years shows that in 1998 Protestantism was still the majority faith – 38 per cent of the population reported an affiliation to Roman Catholicism, 39 per cent to mainstream Protestantism (21 per cent Presbyterian, 15 per cent Church

of Ireland/Anglican, 3 per cent Methodist) and 12 per cent 'other' Christian, for example, Baptists, Free Presbyterians, and independent house churches (Brewer 2002). Both the Presbyterian Church and the Church of Ireland present in Northern Ireland are more conservative than these denominations are in Britain. Mitchell (2006) also contrasts Catholics for whom she claims religion is primarily important in its social and institutional forms with many Protestants for whom its theological and ideological dimensions are more pressing. She also reminds us that in Northern Ireland even persons who no longer go to church tend to reproduce stereotypes of 'them' and 'us'. This brings us to the discussion of our first theme, that of the context of ethno-religious division and sectarianism.

Societal divisions

Northern Ireland generally can be described as being religiously and socially segregated to an unusual degree, in terms of the Catholic and Protestant ethno-religious groups. This division extends to varying degrees to all areas of society – affecting where you live, type of schooling, membership of social organisations, and wariness of intermarriage (McGarry and O'Leary 1996; O'Leary 2001). It is a society deeply marked by sectarianism, with a history of distrust and negativity between many Catholics and Protestants and which in the past has escalated into serious prolonged violence. While this tension and ethno-religious separatism has eased since the political peace settlement, it has not disappeared.

In contrast to the wider society the LGBT community and the gay social scene in Northern Ireland is widely regarded as being remarkably less divided and sectarian. During the violent period of sectarian conflict from the late 1960s until the mid 1990s, Catholic and Protestant LGBT persons formed and maintained mixed religion LGBT community organisations and a social scene of gay pubs and club nights at a time when the wider society retreated into religious segregation.

The violent conflict, the peace settlement and its aftermath has however impacted on the LGBT community in various ways. On the one hand it has benefited on the back of measures introduced to tackle sectarianism, for example, the Equality and Human Rights Commissions and 'hate crime' legislation which have been accompanied by measures to address racism and homophobia. Indeed, anti-discrimination legislation pertaining to homophobia has arguably been somewhat ahead of public opinion. On the other hand, in the period following the signing of the peace settlement in 1998, the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, while sectarian incidents have decreased, homophobic incidents have persisted and in some years increased (Select Committee on NI Affairs, Ninth Report;³ Jarman and Tennant 2003). Jarman has commented on the contributory factors unique to the culture and history of Northern Ireland describing a 'suspicion of difference'. He

³ The increase in the number of recorded homophobic incidents may reflect some actual increase and some increased willingness by victims to report such attacks.

added that 'violence is broadly tolerated because people have been used to it'. He described how 'there is a very strong sense of hostility toward the gay community coming from some religious quarters and this really does have an impact on how people think and behave'.⁴

As regards homophobic attitudes the research by Borooah and Mangan (2007) found that in Western countries persons who attached importance to religion were less bigoted than non-religious respondents towards minorities such as Muslims and immigrants, but they were more likely than non-religious respondents to be bigoted toward homosexuals. Crockett and Voas (2003) for Britain also found that Christians are more conservative about gay sexuality than the rest of the population. However, the high levels by international standards of homophobia in Northern Ireland cannot simply be reduced to the religiosity of the society as the levels of homophobia are higher than that in the Republic of Ireland, which is no less secularised. For example, in the research above it was found that while 36 per cent of the respondents in Northern Ireland would not like neighbours who were homosexual, this was lower at 27 per cent in the Republic of Ireland (Borooah and Mangan 2007).

Having noted that the LGBT community is considered to be less sectarian than the wider society, and that the Christian population is markedly more homophobic, we proceed with an account of Christian pro-gay organisations and activists in Northern Ireland. The region, in contrast to the rest of the UK, does not have a history of visible Gay Christian groups. Despite the regionally higher levels of religiosity, and probably because of higher levels of homophobia, the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM), which has existed for over three decades in Britain, was never established in Northern Ireland. Instead until 2007, with the foundation of Changing Attitude Ireland, we can only trace the existence of a few small, largely non-public, Gay Christian groups. The most significant of these were the Northern Ireland Council for Religion and Homosexuality (NICRH) pioneered by Sylvia Sands in the late 1970s/early 1980s, succeeded by the Gay Christian Fellowship (GCF) during the 1980s/early 1990s and resumed by The Gathering from 2005.⁵

There are two characteristics of all of NICRH, GCF and The Gathering to which we wish to draw attention.⁶ Firstly, they were all cross community in membership i.e. composed of Catholics and Protestants. Furthermore, among their activities which included both religious and social events there were occasions of ecumenical worship, and at least since the 1980s eucharistic sharing. While in their mixed religious composition they resembled the broader LGBT community

⁴ Interview reported in 'Fear and Loathing' by Mary O'Hara, *The Guardian*, 29 June 2005.

⁵ A gay men's spiritual group which meets monthly, with a predominantly but not exclusively Christian outlook.

⁶ The following account is based on interviews with former or current members of these groups.

(in contrast to the wider society) what is more remarkable is that they participated in ecumenical worship at a time when this was uncommon in Northern Ireland. Their early participation in eucharistic sharing is especially significant as this practice has been viewed as a symbol of reconciliation between the divided ethno-religious communities (O'Leary 2000). In 2008 Changing Attitude Ireland held a public eucharistic service at St George's, a Church of Ireland church, at which there was eucharistic sharing. The ecumenical dimension of these groups is even reflected in the places where they had meetings and events, for example, GCF met at the ecumenical Corrymeela centre. The Gathering has met at a Roman Catholic monastery.

Secondly, these groups were all multi-denominational, drawing on the full wide range of denominations i.e. Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist and others. Again, this may be seen as an achievement as even within Protestantism in Northern Ireland, there was a tendency for the denominations to operate separately.

The above characteristics are even more evident in the composition of the newest, largest and most public of the Christian gay/pro-gay groups – Changing Attitude Ireland (CAI).⁷ CAI describes itself as a Christian network of persons gay and straight, lay and ordained, working within the Churches for the full affirmation of lesbian, gay bisexual and transgendered persons in the Churches. Originally formed within the Church of Ireland (and modelled on the Anglican, Changing Attitude in England) it quickly became ecumenical and includes Church of Ireland, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Non-Subscribing Presbyterian members on its Committee.

The individual activists and supporters most associated with Changing Attitude Ireland also reflect continuity with earlier activism in Northern Ireland around issues of anti-sectarianism and ecumenism. The co-founder, Church of Ireland clergyman the Revd. Mervyn Kingston, was known for his work on anti-sectarianism and ecumenism. Committee member and NI spokesperson Canon Charles Kenny was a founder of Catalyst (set up in 1996 to promote the healing of sectarian divisions in Ireland). The current Chairperson of CAI, the Revd. Chris Hudson, a non-subscribing Presbyterian clergyman, was known nationally in Ireland in the late 1980s/1990s for his work with the anti-violence 'Peace Train' campaign. One of the Patrons of CAI is the retired Church of Ireland Dean Victor Griffin, who was known in Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s for his national leadership in anti-sectarian and ecumenical activities.

Changing Attitude Ireland was not only new in being a public and campaigning Christian pro-gay initiative but it shows the type of engagement with secular society described by Stephen Hunt in his chapter. As a network of persons gay and straight, it is signalling its strategy of mobilising the wider straight society. Furthermore, it has affiliated to the secular pro-rights umbrella groups the Coalition on Sexual Orientation (CoSO) and the Equality and Rights Alliance. CAI in its

⁷ <www.changingattitudeireland.org>.

press statements has called for support for gay rights in the civil and not just the religious spheres.

This picture of the Gay Christian and Christian pro-gay groups and individuals has been presented because it may be contrasted with the profile of the most prominent Christian anti-gay groups and individuals in Northern Ireland in the past three decades. The most prominent Christian anti-gay campaign was led by the fundamentalist and evangelical Christian pastor and politician, the Revd. Ian Paisley of both the Free Presbyterian Church and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). While Paisley had long been hostile to homosexuality, it was Dudgeon's European Court action that in 1977 spurred him and DUP⁸ and Free Presbyterian supporters to launch their campaign to 'SAVE ULSTER FROM SODOMY' (Jeffery-Poulter 1991, 151). In February 1978 they handed in a petition to the government buildings at Stormont, Northern Ireland, which they claimed had been signed by 70,000 persons.

Although homophobia was widespread at the time, and endemic in all the major Christian denominations, the largest Protestant denominations in Northern Ireland – the Presbyterian Church, the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church – did not associate themselves with Paisley's campaign. Therefore, the Christian anti-gay campaign failed to form a cross-denominational Protestant organisational alliance despite the fertile ground of widespread homophobia. Similarly, he did not form a cross-community Protestant-Catholic alliance of conservatives, although he playfully alluded to this in the 1981 debate in the House of Commons where he denounced the measure and said 'I thought this House would encourage such unity, because I have heard it said often "Why can you not get it together? Why can you not agree on something?" Here is something on which they agree' (Jeffery-Poulter 1991, 153).⁹

The failure to form cross-denominational and cross-community alliances around the 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' campaign may be seen largely to reflect the theological extremism of the Free Presbyterian Church and the political extremism of the DUP which repelled mainstream Christian conservatives. However, it also reflects the Free Presbyterians' own anti-ecumenical stance – for in its view even other Protestant denominations were in error in doctrine and in behaviour. An alliance with the conservative Roman Catholic Church was of course unthinkable, given both the Free Presbyterian antipathy to the Catholic Church and the DUP's opposition to Irish nationalism.

The Free Presbyterian Church has organisationally been the consistently most vociferous opponent of homosexuality. It has, for example, maintained protests at the annual Belfast Gay Pride parades. It was the Sandown church of the Free Presbyterians which in August 2008 placed a controversial advertisement in a

⁸ Supported by Mr Peter Robinson, now in 2008 the DUP leader and First Minister of NI and husband of Iris Robinson.

⁹ Although it was claimed that some individual Catholics signed the 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' petition (Bruce 1986, 151).

local daily newspaper opposing the Belfast Parade. However, even in 2008 the Christian anti-gay protesting groups at Pride did not form a single united protest issuing separate denouncements and being physically separated between the Free Presbyterians at one location and the persons from a Congregational Reformed church at another.

All the mainline Protestant denominations, including the Church of Ireland, have large conservative evangelical constituencies and which include some anti-gay opinion.¹⁰ Evangelicals have been identified as prominent in Christian anti-gay activism in Britain and other countries (Hunt 2003a). This became even more apparent in Northern Ireland when on the same day as the Belfast Gay Pride parade in 2008, the Evangelical Fellowship of the Irish Clergy (EFIC) within the Church of Ireland printed in the *Belfast Telegraph* newspaper a stinging criticism of the Church of Ireland Primate, Archbishop Alan Harper. The Primate, in a talk after the Lambeth conference, had shown some openness to reflection on the issue of gay sexuality.¹¹ The EFIC declared that 'We are saddened that one who is to protect the faith and those committed to his care should so confuse, hurt and divide the people of God over the issue of human sexuality'.¹²

There are differences of opinion about gay sexuality within the Church of Ireland and the other mainline denominations. However, it is significant that no conservative clergyperson from these mainline denominations is known to have joined either of the anti-gay protests at Belfast Pride. Furthermore, the potential of some of Northern Ireland's conservative evangelicals to shift to more moderate opinions should not be dismissed as is evident in Ganiel's (2008) examination of how evangelicals have responded to the recent seismic political changes in Northern Ireland.

On the other hand, liberals within the mainline Protestant denominations have been reluctant to publicly adopt a Christian pro-gay stance.¹³ In this respect they contrast with the many liberal Christians in Britain who have publicly affirmed gay and lesbian Christians and even joined Christian pro-gay organisations. Indeed in Ireland the mainline denominations are arguably 20 years behind their counterparts in Britain and North America who have been openly addressing this issue. The liberals in Ireland appear to be wary of incurring criticism from conservatives within their own congregations and denominations. As was observed

¹⁰ Evangelicalism is a broad orientation within Irish Christianity ranging from the fundamentalist Free Presbyterianism to small conservative churches to strands of the largest mainline denominations of Presbyterianism and Anglicanism (Church of Ireland) through to small liberal groups like Zero28 (Ganiel 2008).

¹¹ Report in the *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 11 July 2008, 'Archbishop of Armagh calls for return to heart of Anglicanism to resolve contemporary issues'.

¹² Letter in *The Belfast Telegraph*, 2 August 2008, 'Archbishop should reconsider his position'.

¹³ A rare expression of support by Christians for gay persons was that of the theologically liberal and small evangelical Christian group, Zero28, which in 2005 called on fellow Christians not to object to the Belfast Gay Pride Parade.

by one religious commentator 'When Iris Robinson went on radio within a day or two of a violent homophobic attack to reiterate her view that homosexuality is an "abomination" ... no public Christian leader was initially found to challenge her comments in the media where she made them'.¹⁴

Another possible explanation for the relative silence and inaction of the mainline denominations is that they may feel that they have been so scarred by the divisions around sectarianism, that they are reluctant to open up new wounds on the issue of gay sexuality. There was some suggestion of this in a sermon on 'Anglican Wars – GAFCON and Lambeth 2008' by the Church of Ireland Dean of Belfast who wrote 'According to the standard script, the current war in Anglicanism over sexuality, scripture and authority is one between "traditionalists" and "revisionists", "liberals" versus "evangelicals" ... and whilst these labels and tribes have been represented in the Church of Ireland, many of us have refused to identify with any party because we have felt that in a church of our size, we cannot afford such luxuries of division – and especially when we had to witness to a sectarian riven society both north and south'.¹⁵

Similarly, the Church of Ireland Bishop of Down and Dromore, the Rt. Revd. Harold Miller who describes himself as a conservative evangelical and is opposed to what he refers to as homosexual practice has said that 'The Church of Ireland has kept together through the Troubles and the divisions on this island, and it would be a tragedy if this situation led to a splitting. I don't think this will happen unless someone jumps off the deep end, and a Bishop decides to bless a same-sex union. The other difficulty would be if the General Synod decided to open a debate on the issue'.¹⁶

Most of our attention has been on Protestant anti-gay activism, as this is the most vocal in Northern Ireland. However, this is not to deny that there is also Catholic anti-gay activism.¹⁷ Apart from occasional statements from the Vatican and from the Irish Catholic Bishops, which restate traditional conservative Catholic doctrine on sexuality and the family, there has been less visible activism on the Catholic side. The latter appears mainly in the publications of small right-wing Catholic groups. For example, a monthly newspaper *The Hibernian* (dedicated to 'faith, family and country') has appeared. In May 2006, the website of *The Hibernian* is reported to have carried a supportive account of a protest in Dublin against the introduction of civil unions for same sex couples. That account of the

14 Dr Gareth Higgins, *The Church of Ireland Gazette*, 3 October 2008.

15 Sermon given by the Dean of Belfast, Sunday 6 July 2008 at the Choral Eucharist at St Anne's Cathedral Belfast. Accessed at <www.belfastcathedral.org> on 15/07/08.

16 *The Belfast Telegraph*, 08/07/08, 'What will the Church of Ireland decide about gays?'

17 Survey data indicates that Catholic respondents are slightly more liberal than mainline denominational Protestants on homosexuality, with 50 per cent of Catholics in 1998 replying that it is 'always wrong' compared to 68 per cent of mainline denominational Protestants (Brewer 2002).

Catholic protesters described how 'We contend that the farce in regard to so-called civil unions for homosexuals is merely a prelude for the introduction of adoption "rights" for practicing sodomites'.¹⁸

With the cessation of violence between the ethno-religious communities, and the semblance of more normal politics, the question arises whether a new alliance could emerge among conservative Protestants and/or between conservative Protestants and Catholics.¹⁹ One indicator of this possibility and its limitations is suggested by the responses in 2006/7 of various Christian organisations and denominations to the Northern Ireland Sexual Orientation Regulations. A group of seven conservative Christian organisations, including the anti-gay Christian Institute and the Caleb Foundation sought a judicial review. They were not joined in this action by any of the four main Christian denominations, indicating the limits to alliance building between the most conservative organisations and the four main denominations. Jordan (2001, 156) has reflected on the relationship between evangelicals and Roman Catholicism in the new peaceful situation and has concluded that based on how evangelicals understand spirituality and the centrality of the Scripture it is unlikely that in the near future wide scale cooperation would be possible.

However, senior representatives of the four main denominations – the Presbyterian Moderator, the Methodist President, a Church of Ireland Bishop and a senior Roman Catholic priest – together met with the relevant British government minister to discuss the regulations. The Presbyterian Church's Information Service issued a statement on behalf of these four senior church representatives expressing their shared concerns. They stated that while

... all our Churches respect and would seek to protect the civil, political, social and religious rights of all persons irrespective of their sexual orientation ... we were not adequately assured that our concerns in relation to services provided by our Churches as part of our Christian witness were fully met. These include the provision of faith-based adoption services, care of older people, education and marriage counselling.²⁰

That these three main Protestant denominations were able to pursue joint action with the Catholic Church, on this occasion in relation to the Sexual Orientation Regulations, shows a degree of consensus and the potential for more joint action in the future.

18 Reported in Searchlight Magazine, August 2006 – 'Ex-Provo gives new life to Irish clerical fascism' <www.searchlightmagazine.com> (accessed 30/07/08).

19 The author was told about a recent public meeting about community matters during which a RC priest called for increased cooperation in the new peaceful political situation between the DUP and the RC Church on common causes such as opposition to gay rights.

20 Press statement issued 20 December 2006 by Stephen Lynas, Presbyterian Information Service (accessed at <www.bbc.co.uk>).

Inflammatory language

We continue with a consideration of our second area of the sectarian legacy – that of language. Public discourse in Northern Ireland about the subject of gay sexuality can be more emotional than that heard in other parts of the UK or Ireland. Two possible sources of this may be the emotional charge of evangelical Christianity and the legacy of inter-group communal tension.

Michael Vasey, writing about Anglican evangelical Christian protests about homosexuality described how their ‘Evangelical protest has carried a high emotional charge’ (Vasey 1991, 4). He elaborates how ‘Much of the emotional power of these protests has drawn on a powerful perception in Western culture of the sodomite as an unnatural person who poses a threat to the religious and social order’ (Vasey 1991, 5).

Vasey’s observation about the exaggerated threat perceived by conservative evangelicals as being posed by homosexuality also appears evident in Mr Paisley’s denunciations. In 1977 Paisley decried ‘The crime of sodomy is a crime against God and man and its practice is a terrible step to the total demoralisation of any country and must inevitably lead to the breakdown of all decency within the province’ (Jeffery-Poulter 1991, 150).

The emphasis and repeated use of the word ‘sodomy’ is also consistent with the interpretation by Aune in her chapter in this volume that anti-gay evangelicals were preoccupied with male rather than female same-sex activity. Indeed her suggestion that what is at stake for conservative evangelicals is not so much genital sexual activity but their concern for strong, traditional, heterosexual male sexual identities would seem to be especially relevant to Northern Ireland. This is a society which has had its masculinity shaped by the macho culture of street violence and paramilitarism and threatened by de-industrialisation and the recent social progress made by women.

The very strong language about homosexuality used by anti-gay evangelical Christians like the Revd. Ian Paisley and Mrs Iris Robinson was not uniquely applied to gay persons but was also used against other targets. For example, in 1986 the World Congress of Fundamentalists of which Paisley and the American Bob Jones were co-chairmen, wrote of ‘Recognising the Roman Catholic Church as revealed in Scripture as “mother of harlots and abominations of the earth” ...’ (Cooke 1996, 41).²¹

Such strong views can be powerfully conveyed by pastors with exceptional rhetorical skills. The Revd. Ian Paisley possessed such skills and they were employed publicly and dramatically to denounce various enemies including homosexuality. A master of inflammatory language and publicity stunts, his

21 For accounts of Paisley’s anti-Catholicism, and criticisms of apostate Protestants and the ecumenical movement see D. Cooke (1996). For example, The World Council of Churches was denounced as ‘the great ecumenical assembly of Baalism and a wicked chamber of corruption’ (Cooke 1996, 70).

‘Save Ulster from Sodomy’ campaign had a familiar slogan and resonated with an audience who were familiar with the ‘Save Ulster’ format – Save Ulster from Rome, the papacy, Catholicism, a United Ireland. For Paisley, ‘We’ are the patriots, they are the heretics, the apostates, the rebels. The inflammatory language of anti-ecumenism, of sectarianism and political extremism was easily transferred to the verbal assault on homosexuality and gay and lesbian persons, or sodomites as he preferred to call them.

There is even intergenerational continuity in the use of offensive language. In 2007 the Revd. Ian Paisley was joined in the government of NI by his son Ian Paisley junior, as his father’s junior Minister in the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and with responsibility for equality issues. In a press interview in 2007 Ian Paisley junior described how gay and lesbian people ‘repulsed’ him. Ironically, the equality section of the OFMDFM later that year awarded grants to the LGBT sector administered through the Coalition on Sexual Orientation.

However, it was Iris Robinson MP who made the most recent and most inflammatory statements about gay and lesbian persons. She first gave an interview on BBC radio following a local homophobic assault on a young gay man (an attack which she condemned) before proceeding to describe homosexuality as an ‘abomination’. Mrs Robinson’s use of a strong word such as ‘abomination’ is not exceptional, given her evangelical Christian background. She elaborated that homosexuality was ‘vile’ and ‘wicked’, strong language but the sort of language which was widely used during the period of violent sectarian conflict to refer to killers.

Mrs Robinson told the BBC ‘that I have nothing against any homosexual. I love them, that is what the Lord tells me, to love the sinner and not the sin. And just as a murderer can be redeemed by the blood of Christ, so can a homosexual. And that’s the message. It’s the word of God’.²² That Mrs Robinson should make a comparison between persons who are gay and murderers is not exceptional in Northern Ireland. A gay interviewee is recorded as once telling the evangelical Christian Jeremy Marks that in Northern Ireland he felt it was more acceptable to be a murderer than a homosexual (Marks 2008, 34).

Mrs Robinson compounded the offence by adding that she had ‘a very lovely psychiatrist who works with me in my offices, and his Christian background is that he tries to help homosexuals trying to turn away from what they are engaged in’.²³ She later that month told a House of Commons Committee that ‘There can be no viler act, apart from homosexuality and sodomy, than sexually abusing innocent children’.

As Mrs Robinson is an elected politician as well as a Christian, her comments both on radio and at the House of Commons held wider significance. Sinn Féin’s Martina Anderson said the anti-gay comments called Mrs Robinson’s

22 *The Belfast Telegraph*, 10/06/08.

23 *The Guardian*, 21/06/08, ‘In bed with the DUP?’.

position as chairman of the Assembly's Health Committee into question.²⁴ One political commentator suggested that the timing of her anti-gay comments was not coincidental and wrote that 'The DUP was put in power largely by people who loved the old Paisley. Iris has reassured them that something of the old bible bound thinking survives still'.²⁵ Since Ian Paisley and the DUP had appeared to some of its supporters to have undertaken a *volte face* by entering into coalition government with their long-time political enemies of the Sinn Fein party, these supporters may have been reassured by a reiteration of traditional DUP views.

Members of the gay community made a formal complaint to the Police Service of Northern Ireland about Mrs Robinson's comments requesting them to investigate whether her remarks constituted a 'hate crime'.²⁶ In response to the criticisms, Mrs Robinson insisted that she had a right to express her view 'I am defending the word of God. I think at the moment there is a witch-hunt to curb or actually stop or prevent Christians speaking out and I make no apology for what I said because it's the word of God'.²⁷

The recourse to the argument for free speech was to recur later in the Summer with another intervention by the Free Presbyterian Church. On the eve of Belfast's Gay Pride, Sandown Free Presbyterian Church placed an advertisement in the daily newspaper *The News Letter* which described homosexuality as an abomination, defined homosexuals as perverts, referred to the act of sodomy as a grave offence and called on religious followers to maintain a very public stance against the gay community.²⁸ Members of the gay community made a formal complaint to the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) about this advertisement in the newspaper. The ASA ruled that the advert breached decency codes, requested that the advert not be republished and advised that 'particular care should be taken to avoid offence on the grounds of sexual orientation'.

While liberals may disagree with what Iris Robinson actually said, or with the advert that the *News Letter* published, they may find themselves in agreement with some conservative anti-gay Christians in defending her right to speak as she did or for the newspaper to carry that advert. In this way what has happened in Northern Ireland on the subject of gay persons is part of a wider debate around freedom of speech which is taking place in the rest of the UK and other Western democracies. The difference in Northern Ireland is that the real life situations which precipitate the public debate are on the subject of homophobia rather than islamophobia or anti-semitism.

24 *The Belfast Telegraph*, 10/06/08.

25 Malachi O'Doherty, *The Belfast Telegraph*, 13/06/08.

26 At the time of going to press there has not been a conclusion to the police examination of this matter.

27 *The Belfast Telegraph*, 10/06/08.

28 Reported in *The Belfast Telegraph*, 6 August 2008, 'Anti-gay parade advert probed for breaching codes'.

Contested parades

Thirdly, we turn to ways in which the sectarian legacy is evident in the contests around Belfast Gay Pride *Parades*. According to Vasey, public portrayals of gay sexuality cause particular hostility amongst conservative evangelical Christians (Vasey 1991, 24). In addition we can point out that in Northern Ireland parades have historically been seen as a claim on public space and with connotations of dominance – and not merely as celebrations of culture.

Parading or 'the marching season' is part of the political and social culture of Northern Ireland, especially for the loyalist (politically pro-British and Protestant) community. In 1995 there were 3,500 parades in Northern Ireland of which 2,581 were classified by the police as loyalist events, 302 as nationalist (politically pro-Irish) and the remaining 617 were made up parades such as St Patrick's Day, May Day, the Salvation Army and others (Jarman 1997, Chapter 6). Among the loyalist parades the most prominent organisers are the Orange Order, which Jarman (1997) describes in terms of 'while nominally religious, is primarily about a collective national identity, constructed and maintained in the face of a threatening Other'. In Jarman's view since the mid 1990s the right to parade became a bigger political issue with an insistence on a civil right to parade bring counterposed with a right not to suffer unwanted parades.

A small number of parades at community interface locations were occasions of major inter-communal protest and violence. The most famous of these confrontations was the Drumcree Parade by Orangemen, which took place annually in early July in Portadown, Co. Armagh. In the late 1990s parades/attempted parades and counter-protests at Drumcree produced major civil unrest and the British government amended the legislation pertaining to the permission to hold a parade and set up a special Parades Commission to adjudicate on contested parades. Therefore, this regulatory framework was designed to manage sectarian conflict and a key consideration in permission was the police force's perspective on the potential for violence should permission be granted for a parade.

Gay Pride parades are very different parades from the single identity, male, uniformed ethno-religious parades of the organisations like the Protestant Orange Order. Gay Pride parades in Belfast are in most respects like Gay Pride parades in other cities in the UK, Ireland and elsewhere – they are occasions for celebration and fancy dress, combined with statements of LGBT visibility and calls for LGBT equality. What is noteworthy in Northern Ireland is that they draw in both sections of the Catholic/Protestant communal divide. Admittedly the first parade in 1991 was tiny and the participants were in fear of homophobic assaults, but by the mid 2000s, they attracted several thousand walkers. However, there was always a small protest by Christian anti-gay protesters who were largely ignored by the LGBT walkers and did not amount to a security threat.

The Parade of 2005 may be seen as marking a change in the encounter between the Christian anti-gay movement and the LGBT community in that the protesters made a more determined effort to have the Gay Pride parade of that year banned.

It is significant that in their attempt to halt the Gay Pride parade they invoked the regulations which were originally designed to manage parades which could be argued were deliberately provocative and which might give rise to inter-communal/sectarian violence.

A new Christian anti-gay group, called 'Stop the Parade Coalition', did not simply claim that the Parade was offensive to them, they requested that the Police Service of Northern Ireland refer their complaint to the Parades Commission – the body established to adjudicate on ethno-religious/political parades. According to Jonathan Lerner of Stop the Parade 'As evangelical Christians we believe what the bible says regarding sodomy – that it is a sin- and for that reason we want to oppose a parade that we see as promoting a sinful lifestyle'.²⁹ Even the title 'Stop the Parade' is a slogan which locals would immediately recognise from their past experiences of conflict over religious/political parades. The outcome of discussions under the auspices of the Parades Commission, was that the parade organisers and the protesters agreed to a protocol to conduct themselves responsibly.

The 2005 and 2006 parades passed with small street-side protests, but without major incident. In the 2007 parade an individual carried a placard declaring 'Jesus is a fag' which some people said they found offensive to their Christian faith. This was raised with the Parades Commission as a grounds for objection in the lead-up to the 2008 Parade, and the Free Presbyterians also inserted their newspaper advert on the eve of the Parade. The build-up to the 2008 parade was also more tense than in preceding years given the anti-gay comments made in June by Iris Robinson MP. This had led to a public meeting by the LGBT community, the circulation by the LGBT community of a petition of protest, a formal complaint to the police and criticisms of her comments by other political parties.

The 2008 Pride parade was estimated to have included about 8,000 paraders, the largest ever turnout for Belfast. There were two organised Christian protests along the route, with a few dozen persons in each, one at the City Hall and one next to St Anne's Cathedral.³⁰ There was one verifiable indecent act when an unidentified man dropped his trousers in front of protesters. According to the Chairperson of the Pride Committee 'the incident was not seen by marshals but if it had been that person would have certainly been removed from the parade ... and we condemn anyone indecently exposing themselves in this manner'.³¹

Aside from the Christian objections to the parade, what was arguably one of the most significant developments was the positive engagement between some Christians and the LGBT community as evident in the participation by the Christian pro-gay group, Changing Attitude Ireland. Gay Christians or pro-gay

²⁹ BBC website 28/06/05 (accessed 18/08/08).

³⁰ Ironically, Free Presbyterians gathered outside St Anne's Cathedral to protest at the passing parade, were apparently oblivious to the fact that in 1986 they protested against the visit to the Cathedral of the Roman Catholic Cardinal Suenens during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (see Cooke 1996, 41).

³¹ *The Irish News*, 04/08/08.

Christians had not previously been visible or confident enough to take part as a group in Belfast Gay Pride. This milestone was captured by the media by the headline – 'Clergy at gay Pride to protest and take part'.³² The accompanying newspaper report elaborated that 'Normally the only clergy attending the annual Gay Pride march in Belfast are those present to demonstrate. But on Saturday, Protestant clergy were both protestors and participants. For while Church of Ireland ministers joined a Unitarian clergyman in the Belfast Pride march as supporters, Free Presbyterians and other religious opponents of the city centre event protested on the pavements'.

The Church of Ireland Minister and Secretary of CAI, the Revd. Mervyn Kingston, explained 'This is the first time our banner has been displayed at Pride in Belfast. We are here because it is important to increase our visibility and to show people that there are alternative Christian views to those espoused by Iris Robinson'.³³ In response, an evangelical grouping of conservative Protestant denominations, the Caleb Foundation, criticised the participation by the pro-gay clergy insisting that it was wrong to support it, that no 'true Christian' could be involved in a gay relationship and called for the parade to be banned.³⁴

A well-known political commentator described Belfast Pride 2008 as a textbook illustration of opinion shifted.³⁵ She noted the very high degree of cross-community participation in the parade, a rare achievement for Northern Ireland. All the main political parties in Northern Ireland, both nationalist and unionist (including the Ulster Unionist Party, for the first time) were prominently represented. The Lord Mayor joined the parade, as did trade unions, and community groups. Supportive community stalls, including one from the Police Service of Northern Ireland, ringed the Pride Square. The only noticeable official absence was the Democratic Unionist Party, and the Churches. Nevertheless, other commentators referred to the event as a 'tipping point' in the shift towards acceptance of LGBT persons by the wider society.

In conclusion, because Northern Ireland is not a secular society, the public stances of the Churches and the behaviour of individual Christians affects both the experiences of the many LGBT Christians and the attitudes of the wider society. We have located our review of the engagement between Christians and gay persons over past 30 years in the wider ethno-religious context. We noted that the LGBT community and Christian pro-gay groups were more successful than either the wider society or the Christian anti-gay activists in rising above both the Protestant-Catholic ethno-religious and the denominational disunity. We traced the continuity between the language of conservative Christian evangelicals which easily moved between emotionally charged criticisms of Roman Catholicism,

³² *The Irish News*, 04/08/08.

³³ *The News Letter*, 04/08/08.

³⁴ *The News Letter*, 05/08/08.

³⁵ Fionnuala O'Connor, *The Irish Times*, 07/08/08, 'Pride and Prejudice Over North's Gay Community'.

political opponents or gay persons (or sodomites according to the most vociferous Christian anti-gay spokespersons). We showed how institutions and regulations originally designed primarily to manage conflict around ethno-religious parades have been accessed by Christian anti-gay activists in their attempts to halt the Belfast Gay Pride parade.

While much of our attention has been on continuity, we have revealed some indications of change. Although the vocal evangelical Christian anti-gay activists limited by their failure to form alliances with conservatives in the mainline denominations, we have seen at least one example of some cooperation between the mainline denominations in how they respond to changes in the civil law pertaining to sexual orientation. Change has been slow within the mainline denominations although the establishment of and activism by Changing Attitude Ireland, suggests that Christian pro-gay opinion within the Churches in Northern Ireland is finally beginning to be mobilised. The emotional language of abomination and sodomy has not abated, but the responses by all political parties (bar the DUP), and their participation in Gay Pride, is indicative of a shift in public opinion towards increased respect for the dignity of gay and lesbian persons in Northern Ireland.

Chapter 8

Is it Meaningful to Speak of 'Queer Spirituality'? An Examination of Queer and LGBT Imagery and Themes in Contemporary Paganism and Christianity

Yvonne Aburrow

Is there a distinctly queer spirituality? The term 'queer' has been defined in a variety of ways – as 'resisting normativity' and as a verb meaning 'to spoil or interfere', and as a tool for liberation (Goss 1999, 45–6). Irshad Manji (Summerskill 2006, 62) defines queer as 'being unpredictable', rather than 'rigid and absolute, and frankly dull'. Queerness is a metacategory which includes various non-normative sexual identities. 'Queer' is also a very different term from 'gay'. Being gay or lesbian has meant fitting into a specific identity:

Gay identity can be as confining as 'closetedness' in its minoritization and elision of the social-cultural differences of same-sex desire. (Goss 1999, 45)

The concept of queer defies categorisation and resists normativity: it is often understood as critically non-heterosexual, transgressive of all heteronormativities and, I would add, gay normativities. 'Queer' turns upside down, inside out, and defies heteronormative and gay normative theologies (Goss 1999, 45).

Some LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and transsexual) people contest the appropriateness of the term 'queer' (Hawley Gorsline 1996, 136); transsexual people say that a lot of their experience does not fit into the queer paradigm (Prosser 1998, 59), others have complained that trying to define a specific LGBT or queer spirituality is essentialist (Ali et al. 2006, 30) – in this context, the idea that gay people are more, or differently, spiritual than others because of their liminal status (Stemmeler 1996, 100), either as marginalised people, or as 'intermediates' (Owen 2004, 109).

Charges of essentialism notwithstanding, because of the marginalisation of LGBT people, a separate culture has developed to a certain extent in the enclaves and safe spaces created by LGBT people. This chapter will examine this marginalised culture and its spirituality, and ask whether it can be described as a distinct spirituality. The use of the term 'queer spirituality' (as distinct from talk of gay or lesbian spirituality) is a post-AIDS phenomenon; male gay theologies drew