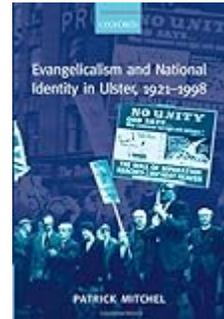


Patrick Mitchel. *Evangelicalism and National Identity in Ulster, 1921-1998.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. 362 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-925615-0.



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Religious Nationalism?

The last decade has seen a dramatic surge of scholarly interest in the history of Irish Protestantism, a positive trend that has helped forge a much more nuanced portrait of the evolution of Irish and Northern Irish identities. Patrick Mitchel's new work is a welcome addition to this growing field. Arguing that commentators too often focus on the extremist voices of Ulster Protestantism, like the Reverend Dr. Ian Paisley, Mitchel emphasizes the broad diversity of Ulster Evangelical Protestantism, examining evangelicalism within the Irish Presbyterian Church and the Evangelical Contribution of Northern Ireland (ECONI), as well as the Orange Order and Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church. Indeed, one of the chief virtues of Mitchel's book is that it does give voice to Protestant perspectives often submerged by louder voices within the voluminous literature on Northern Ireland.

In many ways, *Evangelicalism and National Identity in Ulster, 1921-1998* can be viewed as two interesting but rather awkwardly linked studies. The first part of the book is an extended meditation on how Ulster Unionism fits into scholarly understandings of nationalism and re-

ligion. This is the weakest part of the book. After finding fault with what he terms the four dominant explanations of Ulster Unionist identity (his analysis of David Miller's influential work is particularly brief and unsatisfying), Mitchel argues that unionist identities are best understood using a broad and elastic conception of national identity—the problem here is that his umbrella is so inclusive that it holds very little water. While Mitchel's theoretically framed discussion is well crafted and stimulating, his argument that Ulster Unionism must be viewed as a form of national identity ultimately fails to convince.

Mitchel is at his best in the second part of the book, when he uses four case studies (the Orange Order, Paisleyism, the Irish Presbyterianism and ECONI) to examine the relationship between evangelical Protestantism and nationalism. Using the influential theologian Miroslav Volf's notion of distance and belonging, Mitchel characterizes both the Orange Order and Paisleyism as examples of religious nationalism. In other words, while evangelicalism may be central to individuals within both of these overlapping groups, spiritual concerns do not lie at the heart of either movement. While the examples

here are hardly new (his historical examples are stock and rather reductionist at times), the case studies nicely ground a discussion that is rather abstract in the first half of the book.

In many ways, the closing sections on Irish Presbyterianism and ECONI are both the strongest and most frustrating parts of the book. On the one hand, it is refreshingly clear where Mitchel's own views and interests lie; he clearly supports the effort to disentangle political ideology from religion. Indeed, he offers his book as a resource for Northern Irish Protestants looking to find a new balance between distance and belonging, and is a clear advocate of ECONI's attempt to make a third way between fundamentalist fuming and evangelical silence. But, while his attention to these voices is both important and welcome, one wonders if he has not overemphasized their importance.

This seems especially true with regard to the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, which Mitchel portrays as moving away from what he terms closed evangelicalism. But his exclusive focus on the theoretical literature certainly begs a rather critical question: to what extent does official rhetoric reflect real attitudinal shifts? Do these thoughtful and well-crafted pamphlets have any impact at a popular level? While there is no doubt that Mitchel's analysis holds true for the writings and stated beliefs of Presbyterian moderators like Dr. Trevor Morrow and Dr. Ken Newell, the degree to which these sentiments pervade their congregations is problematic at best.

Newell, the current moderator, has been quite eloquent on this subject in recent interviews, particularly when describing the difficulties involved in disentangling religion from politics in Northern Ireland.[1] Moreover, the recent political fortunes of the "new Unionists" in the last elections would not seem to hold out much hope for this more spiritually focused project, in the short term. At the very least, Paisleyism's current ascendancy would seem to speak to the continued power of religious nationalism quite nicely.

It would be wrong to end on such a skeptical note, for *Evangelicalism and National Identity in Ulster, 1921-1998* is a good book, and a must read for scholars and graduate students interested in the relationships between religion and politics in twentieth-century Northern Ireland. Mitchel's determination to highlight the diversity of evangelical Protestantism in Northern Ireland is a welcome one, bringing to light the efforts of groups like ECONI. As the recent elections have shown, there are reasons that the Reverend Dr. Ian Paisley has dominated the academic stage, but one could argue that Mitchel's efforts to broaden that stage are all the more important for that.

Note

[1]. David Rutledge, "The Religion Report: Presbyterian Moderator Ken Newell on Northern Ireland." (27 April 2005), <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/re/rpt/stories/s1365024.htm> (accessed 3 October 2005).

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