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Marching Backwards? Conservative Civil Society, Freedom of Religion and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland

Abstract: This paper examines the role of the Orange Order, a prominent Protestant civil society organization, throughout the period following the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in Northern Ireland. By linking the defense of civil and religious liberties to the preservation of the Union with the United Kingdom, the Orange Order plays both an important religious and political role which has embroiled it in a number of disputes. This paper discusses the Order's parades across Catholic neighborhoods, its involvement in the so-called "culture wars" and its stand vis-à-vis Brexit. Overall, the actions of the Orange Order are a sober reminder of the diversity of civil society in conflict areas, where civic and progressive groups co-exist with associations with conservative religious and political values. The Orange Order's actions demonstrate the controversial role religious freedom may play in the context of peace processes.

Keywords

religious freedom, conservative civil society, Orange Order, Northern Ireland peace process, majority-minority relations, Good Friday Agreement, Brexit, culture wars.

Introduction

Different kinds of civil society organizations co-exist in the context of peace processes. While some groups strive to promote civic politics instead of ethnic/nationalist politics, other ones organize around conservative, particularistic and/or sectarian identities. Even though conservative organizations may openly reject violence, their very existence perpetuates existing divisions within society and can contribute to political polarization and continuing confrontation between communities. The actions of associations with conservative religious and political views bring to the fore the controversial role religious freedom, associated to conservative social and political values, plays in this kind of contexts.

Conservative civil society has been described in a variety of different ways. At one extreme it has been defined as "bad civil society" involving organizations which promote "hate, bigotry, racism, anti-Semitism and aggressive xenophobia" (Chambers and Kopstein, 2001). This normative perspective fails to account for the existence of those conservative groups which, while promoting a combination of conservative religious and social values, strong national identities and illiberal political ideologies

(Youngs, 2018), do not endorse those extreme political views which contribute to define “bad civil society.” More commonly, conservative civil society is composed by groups whose membership is determined by ascriptive criteria, such as race or religion, value religious, cultural and political homogeneity and, in some cases, may even perform a positive role in furthering the goals of peace processes (Belloni, 2008: 190-191).

Whatever the impact of conservative civil society’s activities, its existence is usually based on exclusion of and conflict with others and, accordingly, is a source of tensions and disputes. This paper focuses on the role of the Orange Order, a prominent conservative civil society organizations in the context of the peace process in Northern Ireland. The Orange Order, which is the largest Protestant civil society association in the region, describes itself as “primarily a religious organization,” which is “Christ centered, Bible based, and Church grounded.” It stands officially for civil and religious liberty, but remains firmly sectarian. Its members must sign a declaration before joining that both their parents are Protestant, and leave if they marry a Catholic. Even though the organization perceives itself as mostly religious, it is also a cultural and political body. Its very existence and activities have been a continuing source of tension and occasionally of violent conflict.

Among these activities, the Orange Order each year celebrates the military triumph in 1690 of Protestant King William III of Orange over the Catholics by organizing parades and marches – a celebration perceived by many non-Protestant citizens as provocative and even inflammatory. Parents bring infants to parades, which are ritual exercises in support of the Union with the United Kingdom (UK), and all together wave Union flags, wear sport jerseys identifying Protestant teams and even chant anti-Catholic songs – including, occasionally, the “Famine Song” which mocks the Irish Potato famine. By “marching the King’s highway,” that is, by walking on highways on UK territory which are kept in good repair by tax-payers’ money, participants celebrate a fundamental civil and religious liberty and contribute to develop their own “imagined community” (Anderson 1991).

Through the Orange Order’s activities a large group of people, who do not know each other personally, come to imagine themselves as sharing important characteristics and confirm and recreate their own national identity, historical traditions, and social and cultural political aspirations. By reproducing a comforting set of certainties about communal history and identity in which individuals feel at home, the Order engages the energies and the identities of political subjects within civil society and contributes to develop a *senso comune* (Gramsci, 1971) within the unionist community with regard to issues of identity, belonging and faith. In brief, the Order reflects the popular sentiment and shapes the basic realities within which individuals are brought up and socialized (Blake, 2019).

This paper examines the role of the Orange Order after the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA). When the GFA was being negotiated in the 1990s the Order became embroiled in a bitter dispute with regard to its parades and marches. In the post-agreement period the organization has

been involved primarily in two sets of issues. First, the Order has participated in the so-called “culture wars,”ⁱ implicating a variety of contentious issues ranging from parades, flags and language rights. Second, following Brexit and the 2021 Census, which certified that Protestants are no longer the relative majority in Ulster, the Order stood out as a fierce advocate of preserving the region’s links with the UK. Overall, the case of the Orange Order brings to the fore the hitherto largely unexplored link between conservative values and freedom of religion. While religious freedom is invoked worldwide to uphold and protect the rights of religious minorities, in Northern Ireland it is upheld by the group that, historically, has represented the majority and, thus, its views are widely perceived as conservative and sectarian rather than progressive and emancipatory.

Civil Society between Religion and Politics

Over the last four centuries violence often played an important role in shaping the relationship between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, particularly at the local level. According to Frank Wright, Northern Ireland can be defined as an “ethnic frontier” which, unlike what he called the metropolis (by which he understood the heart of empire such as England), cannot actually reach peace and order through law but, at best, communal deterrence (Wright, 1994). In such a context, religious identity has become linked with deterrence relationships whereby the threat of violence constitutes the basic feature structuring relations between communities. Accordingly, fear, mutual accusations, and tensions have been defining characteristics of Ulster politics. Catholics and Protestants are thought to be tied in a perennial relationship of deterrence which hinders the possibility of developing a “normal” liberal order and inhibits the advancement of progressive variants of unionism within civil society (Farquhar, 2024).

In a society of communal deterrence the militant members of each community have an influence which may extend beyond their numbers, especially if they are willing to endorse the use of both violent and non-violent tools in the confrontation with the “other” community. Since its inception, the Orange Order has been at the forefront of this deterrence relationship. The Battle of the Diamond, which took place in county Armagh on 21 September 1795 and involved the Catholic Defenders and the Protestant Peep o’ Day Boys led to the foundation of the Orange Order (Wright, 1994: 31-46). Nominally a hierarchical organization led by a Grand Lodge, it is in practice a diverse association with a tradition of local autonomy. Members must be Protestant with a belief in the Trinity (thus excluding Unitarians) and must leave if they marry a Catholic. The Order’s essential nature is that of an ethnic association representing the Ulster-Protestant people (Kaufmann 2007: 2). Its central mission is the promotion of Protestantism and the principles of the Reformation (Orange Order, 2007a). Together with the Apprentice Boys of Derry and the Royal Black Institution, the Orange Order expresses deeply rooted Protestant and unionist traditions.

Several of the Orange Order's activities have involved opposition to Catholics. Many Orangemen sided with the government to fight the Irish rebellion of 1798. After the Act of Union (1800), they opposed and fought the Ribbon men, a Catholic secret society. Local magistrates used the Orangemen and the yeomen to patrol Catholic areas. The Orange Order's role in fomenting sectarian tensions led to its suppression between 1823 and 1845, and the beginning of a slow decline in membership and political influence. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century Irish nationalist mobilization in the Irish Land League and the controversy over Home Rule revived its fortunes. The Order categorically opposed self-government for Ireland on the grounds that Protestants would be discriminated against in a Catholic dominated Ireland (Wright, 1994).

In this context, Protestant theological ideas evolved from a concern about the relationship of the believer to God into a settler ideology preoccupied with the relationship between Protestants and Catholics. The defining characteristic of the Order's biblical interpretation has been "the association of religious strength and marital biblical imagery with the strength and security of Protestants in Ireland" (Govan, 2021: 507). According to Wright (1994: 20), religious concepts came to affirm ideas typical of colonial situations: "(i) the continuous and total enmity of Catholics and Catholicism to Protestants and Protestantism; (ii) the unity of purpose of all political manifestations of all forms of Catholic self-organization... (iii) the justification of the Protestant society in Ireland as an absolute; (iv) the need for pan-Protestant solidarity to counter Catholic self-organization; and (v)... the timeless and inevitable continuity of the conflict between Protestant and Catholic." This conflict has involved all aspects of political, economic and social life, including issues pertaining directly to religious liberty. For example, in the mid-19th century a bitter contention involved the question of open-air preaching on Sundays. Catholics in Belfast opposed the idea of allowing "Protestant firebrands to preach" in open air settings. By contrast, the (Anglican) Belfast parochial mission refused to call off street preaching because this would mean "surrender" the right to preach the Gospel in the face of anticipated violence (Wright, 1994: 254-255).

The central event for the Order is celebrated on 12th July, when Orangemen commemorate the 1690 battle of the Boyne (Lucy & McClure, 1998). The victory of 1690 contributed to consolidate the Anglican landlord supremacy and the exclusion of Catholics and Presbyterians from institutions of local control (Wright, 1994: 13). The Order claims to celebrate this event because it brought about an "era of religious tolerance, freedom of speech and press, liberty of the subject, independence of judges to interpret the law and the development, both at home and overseas, of parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy."ⁱⁱ In brief, Orangemen argue that in "celebrating the Glorious Revolution, a revolution that changed the British Constitution and guaranteed a Parliament for the people and by the people, we celebrate the liberties we enjoy today."ⁱⁱⁱ

The “Twelfth” constitutes the main manifestation of Protestant unionism expressed through Orangeism. Most Orange lodges hold a parade from their Orange Hall to a local church. Not only are parades a manifestation of a religious commitment to Protestantism and a political allegiance to unionism, but also they are a popular expression of difference and cultural identity (Jarman, 1997: 56). Religious hymns are sung, such as, for example, “Onward! Christian Soldiers,” and “O God, Our Help in Ages Past.” A variety of different bands are also hired to play during parades, while important politicians address the crowd – at least at significant parades. Since the 1970s “blood and thunder” or “kick the Pope” flute bands are predominant, many of which have links with loyalist paramilitary organizations. The music played tends to have a military beat conceived for marching (Ramsey, 2011).

Parades are a central example of antagonism between the Protestant and Catholic communities being fought through (primarily) non-violent means. Parading fosters a feeling of togetherness and solidarity that contributes to distinguish the Order’s members and sympathizers from others, and which reminds the “elementary passions of the people” identified by Gramsci (1971: 418) as a crucial component of any effective political movement. Through the use of symbols and rituals the Orange Order marks the boundaries between members and outsiders, while heightening members’ sense of belonging to their national group (Blake, 2019).

While Orangemen parade to celebrate their religious and political commitment and evoke an idealized past of control, many Catholics perceive their actions as a symbolic claim to the territory of Northern Ireland and as an assertion of Protestant ascendancy and triumphalism. The Order’s traditional insistence to march through Catholic districts represents a humiliating remainder of no longer tolerable Protestant domination (Bryan, 2000). At times of high political tension parades turn into an avenue for expressing anger or frustration at events beyond the control of participants (Dingley, 2002: 53), but rarely do they degenerate into violent confrontation (Blake, 2019).^{iv} With the breakout of the Troubles in the early 1970s and the escalation of violence throughout the province, parading was an overall marginal issue in local politics. With the 1994 ceasefire, however, parading re-emerged as an important site of confrontation between the two communities.

The Orange Order’s political stand led to its direct involvement into political life. In 1885 it was instrumental in the creation of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). Strong links between the Orange Order and the UUP further extended the influence of the organization. The Order, which had the right to nominate one hundred and twenty delegates to the Ulster Unionist Council (the ruling body of the party), contributed to UUP’s political hegemony by marginalizing potential counter-hegemonic challenges within the Protestant community, such as Labourism (Storey, 2002: 23-27). Its political influence is confirmed by the fact that every prime minister of Northern Ireland during the period 1921-72 was an Orangeman. The collapse of Northern Ireland Parliament in 1972 and the imposition of direct rule on the region until 1998 also meant the loss of the Orange Order’s direct influence on policy-making.

While having strong political links, the Orange Order is first and foremost a conservative civil society organization. To begin with, it monitors state activities in view of preserving individual and collective freedom, including with regard to religious freedom. Religion and politics intertwine in the belief that civil and religious freedom are guaranteed only by the presence of a Protestant Crown in Great Britain. The “Basis of the Institution” is committed to “support and defend the rightful sovereignty”, the succession to the throne in the House of Windsor. In practice, obedience to civil authority has been predicated on that authority maintaining Protestant supremacy (Govan, 2021: 504). This stand makes the Order a prominent unionist body.

In addition, the Order socializes its members into the norms and values of the organization itself which, however, are often antagonistic to those of the Catholic minority. For example, the “Qualifications of an Orangemen” illustrate how the institution cultivates a profound suspicion towards the Catholic Church. An Orangemen “should strenuously oppose the fatal errors and doctrines of the Church of Rome, and scrupulously avoid countenancing (by his presence or otherwise) any act of ceremony of popish worship; he should by all lawful means, resist ascendancy of that church, its encroachments, and the extension of its powers” (GOLE 2006).

Despite its rejection of the Catholic faith, the Order requires its members to respect individual Catholics. It is expected that members honor all citizens’ rights to freedom of religious expression. On these grounds the Order rejects the accusation of being “sectarian.” For Orangemen “sectarianism” simply indicates the fact of “belonging to a group” and does not carry any implication of hostility toward individual Catholics.^v In some cases Orangemen even reject the term “sectarian” altogether, preferring to describe the Order as “pro-Protestant and not anti-Catholic.”^{vi} In refusing accusations of bigotry and hostility towards non-Protestant people, they highlight how the Order has consistently condemned attacks on Catholic churches, thus affirming the distinction between the evils associated with “popery” and individual Catholics who have the right to religious expression. Such subtleties, however, are lost in popular Orangeism, often imbued with a sectarian and openly anti-Catholic discourse (Govan, 2021: 509). In sum, the Order expresses an “identity in opposition” (Storey, 2002: 69) forged against Catholics who are perceived as a separate and potentially hostile community.

Overall, the Order can be described as an institution with multiple dimensions and shared values, including the “belief in God, a commitment to Reformed Christian faith, civil and religious liberty, and a specific commitment and loyalty to the British state” (Storey, 2002: 37). The Order is home to a broad section of the Protestant and unionist community, incorporating and reflecting the many divisions between different Protestant denominations, between urban and rural areas, between the working and the middle class, and within unionist politics. At its best, the Order expresses a “respectable Orangeism” (Jarman, 1997: 28) rooted in social correctness, tradition and historical stability. For its supporters, the Order provides many benefits, including “networking and general fraternity. It has a significant social

capital and gives a lot back to the community through charitable works.”^{vii} At the same time, although the Order stands officially for law and order, its activities have been disrupted by “rougher” elements of society from working class, inner city and unemployed elements. The actions of paramilitaries have also been tolerated (Kennaway, 2006: 47-69). As a result, many of the middle-class members who represent the respectable face of unionism have dropped out. Even though official membership is 42,000, insiders argue that this number is inflated and estimate its current membership at around 28,000 people.^{viii}

The Orange Order and the Peace Process

As the peace process moved forward tentatively in the mid-1990s, Orange parades grew more controversial, leading to increasingly violent confrontations between members of the two communities. The organization’s parades and marches through Catholic neighborhoods heightened the tension between Catholics and Protestants. In most cases discontent for Orange marches among Catholic residents could have been managed locally. However, the dispute over marches became a proxy for political and symbolic power. According to both the Orange Order and analysts sympathetic to Orangeist views, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and its political wing Sinn Féin decided to move the theater of conflict to the local level by mobilizing Catholic citizens into “residents’ groups” to oppose Orange parades.^{ix} The Order made suggestions on accommodation on the biblical basis of St Paul’s injunction to the Corinthians to “Give none offense,” with the remainder that love is “not quick to take offense” (Duddley-Edwards, 2000: 409) but this kind of counsel did not prevent escalation.

The Drumcree stand-off in Portadown is probably the most well-known dispute, the details of which are well-known (Bryan, 2000; Ryder & Kearny, 2001).^x In the mid-1990s a resident group from the Garvaghy Road began agitating against the Drumcree Orange Church parade taking place on the Sunday before July 12. Since then, and for several years, Drumcree has emerged as a serious problem, sparked protest and violence, threatened to derail the peace process and embroiled the organization in a bitter internal debate. Brian Kennaway, a former senior member of the Order who wrote the first authoritative insider account of the organization, lamented the evolution of the Order from a religious institution to one involved in parading rows (Kennaway, 2007). While for many nationalists such parades are seen as “triumphalist” and “suprematist” (Ryder & Kearney 2001: 103-127) and perceived as a humiliation, a provocation or a threat, for Orangemen opposition to parades represents another instance of a direct assault on Protestant identity and culture. For them, the “right to march” constitutes what Gramsci (1971) would have defined as a persuasive and emotionally powerful *senso comune*.

For the institutions and its members parading is a “vital part of Orange heritage, something defining Orange identity.”^{xi} Even a cursory glance at the *Orange Standard*, the Order’s Official Monthly publication, confirms the central importance of parading for the Orange tradition. Because parades are understood by participants more as cultural expressions of Protestant solidarity rather than political

statements affirming a sentiment of domination over the Catholic community, they are inherently hard to mediate. In late 1997 the British government created an Independent Parades Commission to encourage negotiation between the two sides and oversee the re-routing of those parades expected to degenerate into violence.

The Orange Order, however, did not recognize the Commission.^{xii} It interpreted its establishment as an attempt to infringe upon their “right to march” and thus practice Protestant culture. This position was at odds with mainstream unionist views believing that the religious diversity of an area should be taken into account when considering the right to march (McAuley, Tonge, Mycock, 2011: 82-83). Nonetheless, the Order published *The Case Against the Parades Commission*, criticizing this body for being an “unelected quango” (Orange Order, 2007b). It refused to recognize and engage with the Parades Commission until late 2005 when a former district master joined the reconstituted Commission (Kaufmann 2007: 236-66). Nonetheless, since then hostility for this body has remained common within the Order, with 87 per cent of members believing it to be fundamentally anti-Orange and desiring immediate resolution.

Since the early 2000s the situation in Portadown, and more generally in Northern Ireland, has been relatively calm. The possibility of a brokered agreement between the Orange Order and the Residents’ Association to allow marching on the Garvaghy Road has been occasionally reported by the press, but never officially formalized (Young, 2020). While tensions accompanying parades lessened overtime, the Order engaged more proactively in public relations in order to cultivate political and social capital and expand its appeal within its own community and further afield. It began by counter-acting the image of parades as sectarian and sometimes dangerous events. It emphasized the pageantry and entertainment value of parades while showing decreasing toleration for untidy and drunk rough-and-ready flute bands.^{xiii} In addition, the Order began to draw from the growing liberal discourse on multiculturalism and group rights in order to assume the role of steward of Protestant cultural heritage (Smithey, 2011: 119).

At the same time, it continued both to condemn attempts to regulate the parade issue. The Grand Master of Ireland, Rev. Mervyn Gibson, censured both the legislation in place to deal with parading and the Parade Commission, which is said “to appease one community rather than create a level playing field for all” (OS, October 2016). According to Gibson, the Public Procession Act, which created the Parade Commission, was “introduced at the behest of the republican and nationalist communities, as part of the so-called peace process” and “is now a major part of the problem” (OS, February 2018). His views reflect those of participants to parades, who believe that Catholic objections to Orange marches are manufactured by the republican movement (Blake, 2019: 130-135).

Orangemen views are symptomatic of the organization’s assessment of the GFA and of the dynamics it set into motion. While 57 per cent of Protestants overall supported the agreement, only 28.9

per cent of Orange Order members claimed to have voted for the GFA (Tonge, Evans, Jeffery, McAuley, 2010: 9). Following the signing of the peace agreement the Orange leadership provided no encouragement whatsoever to its implementation (Kaufmann, 2007: 205-13). According to the Grand Lodge, the Good Friday Agreement has brought about a number of “disastrous results,” including the release of terrorist prisoners, the presence of Sinn Fein members in government, the emasculation of the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary], the growing influence of the Republic of Ireland in the day-to-day affairs of Northern Ireland, bilingualism in government departments, and more (OS, February 2000). Accordingly, the Order has interpreted the peace process as involving a “deadly campaign:” while “the IRA guns may be silent, an equally deadly campaign aims at making Ulster ‘culturally neutral’” (OS, March 2008).

In this context, a significant number of Orangemen switched their allegiance from the UUP, which defended the positive outcomes of the peace accord, to the hardline Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which initially opposed the agreement. Most DUP members are positively predisposed towards the Orange Order, and in many cases they also belong to the organization (Tonge, Braniff, Hennessey, McAuley, Whiting, 2014). The Grand Lodge of Ireland described the GFA as “fatally ambiguous, morally objectionable, and constitutionally flawed” (OS, May 1998). From 1999 on, anti-agreement speakers addressed virtually all demonstrations following parades throughout Northern Ireland, thus putting the Orange Order in direct opposition with the UUP which negotiated and signed the deal. The formal ties between the two institutions were finally rescinded in March 2005. The split between the Orange Order and the UUP represented the culmination of the decline of both unionism and the Orange tradition which began in the early 1970s (Patterson & Kaufmann, 2007). Since the end of its formal links with the UUP, the Orange Order has not advocated for any particular party and, accordingly, its membership reflects the array of unionist political views (Kaufmann, 2007: 202-235).

Culture Wars

Throughout the peace process the Orange Order has continued to advance its values, principles, and strategies grounded on the attempt to preserve the Union with the UK as a fundamental precondition to guarantee religious liberty within Northern Ireland (McAuley & Tonge, 2009). Above all, the Order has worked to strengthen the political and cultural cohesiveness of the Protestant community.

Pan-Protestantism is based on a view of society as populated by threatening Catholic power (Wright, 1994: 432). To counter this threat, the Order has advocated for the unity of unionists, in particular at the polls, against any political, economic and cultural development that could undermine the links with the UK and the “Britishness” of the region. Titles such as *Unity must be paramount* (September 2000), *Grassroots demand unity* (March 2003), *All Orangemen brethren must unite and vote* (May 2005); *Plea for unionist cooperation* (May 2017) are representative of the many articles published

on the pages of the *Orange Standard* since the signing of the GFA. These calls have been accompanied by concrete steps to further the unionist cause. For example, in December 2009 the Order held secret talks with the UUP and the DUP in the run-up to May 2010 general election (BBC, 2010) and occasionally expressed its desire for a single unionist party.

While addressing political concerns, the Order also got involved in the culture wars which brought to the fore issues such as flags, bonfires and language rights. The growing political profile of these issues persuaded many Orangemen to consider Orangeism as increasingly “under attack.”^{xiv} The flags controversy, which erupted in Belfast in December 2012, best exemplifies how culture wars are both fought out in physical space and express economic malaise. Flying a national flag over a local authority expresses a kind of “banal nationalism” (Billig, 1995) which is common to most polities around the world. What is distinctive about Northern Ireland is the use of flags on lampposts as a way of demarcating the territory and distinguishing between “friends” and “foes.” The controversy emerged following a decision by the city council to fly the Union flag over the City Hall on designated days, like the Queen’s birthday, rather than all-year round. This decision was seen by many Protestants as an assault on their values and another instance of Catholic concerns being prioritized over theirs.

The protest occurred in a context where many Protestants perceived themselves increasingly as an “insecure majority.” They believed that their economic and social condition has deteriorated since the signing of the GFA, and that the peace process has benefited Catholics more than them (Patterson, 2012). While this perception is only partly true (Guelke, 2014), it remains the case that multigenerational poverty continues to affect heavily working-class communities in Northern Ireland (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2018). In such a context, the Orange Order conveyed to public opinion the feeling, common within the Protestant community, of “being under siege” politically, economically and culturally. The Grand Master Edward Stevenson condemned the decision to fly the Union flag on designated days, accused republicans of “engaging in a cultural war to erode all symbols of Britishness” and praised the protesters: “I believe the flag protesters did this generation a great service by awaking us from our slumber - apathy, pessimism and defeatism were waling us into a United Ireland.”^{xv} Several Orange Lodges and Apprentice Boys Clubs gave support to the protests, which involved mass marches, rallies and pickets. The target of protest was not only the Catholic community but also political elites. This mobilization led to more than 55,000 recorded protest events in about 4 months and to 224 convictions, with 37 young (Protestant) men receiving a short custodial sentence (Wilson, 2016: 125-126). Overall the flag controversy reinforced a wider conviction within the Protestant community that the Westminster elite has rarely their interests at heart (Coulter, Flaherty & Shirlow, 2023: 71).

From the Protestant perspective culture wars are fostered by Catholics’ quests for “parity of esteem,” which involve demands for equality and rights. According to the Order, parity of esteem represents an existential danger and “[t]he Protestant people need to guard against this creeping

process" (OS, March 2008). Grand Master Stevenson raised to the task and explicitly rejected equality demands, which are understood to reflect a nationalist plot to achieve the goal of a United Ireland through non-violent means: "This institution will not support any political development which would reward Republicans with a victory in their ongoing cultural war. Let us ensure that what Sinn Fein/IRA failed to win with bomb and gun does not now become a casualty of their latest weapon: the trojan horse of equality and rights" (OS, October 2017). In its defense of unionist goals the Order went as far as describing the entire Catholic population as, at least indirectly, complicit with terrorist violence. In a 2010 article Grand Master Robert Saulters referred to "dissident" Irish republican paramilitaries (that is, republicans who do not support the GFA) as "Roman Catholic IRA," thus linking the Catholic community to terror groups (Gordon, 2010). In such a climate, it is perhaps unsurprising that in a 2011 survey of 1,500 Orangemen over 60% declared to believe that "most Catholics are IRA sympathizers" (BBC, 2011).

High profile members of the Orange Order accompanied their defense of Protestant rights with warnings against the revival of the Irish language (Simpson, 2014). In several European states the protection of minority languages is increasingly common, reflecting the evolving idea of the nation-state as involving pluralism rather than assimilation. In Northern Ireland, however, language has become a deeply divisive political issue. The GFA accorded some protection for the Irish language and placed a duty on authorities to encourage Irish education. For nationalists, legislation enhancing and protecting the development of the Irish language is an important component of the "equality agenda" (also including same-sex marriage and abortion rights) endorsed by the peace agreement.

An Irish Language Act would lead to the use of Irish in the Courts and state bodies, bilingual signs on public buildings and roads, the appointment of an Irish-language commissioner, and education through Irish. While for nationalists the Irish language is an important part of their meaning system, for unionists the adoption of an Irish Language Act is perceived as a political weapon, a symbolic threat to the "Britishness" of Northern Ireland and a step towards a United Ireland. These alternative views are often cited as a key reason for the political deadlock that led to the suspension of the devolved institutions for more than three years in the late 2010s.

The Order lobbied against the possibility that a Language Act could give Irish an equal status to English. Grand Master Edward Stevenson underlined his opposition to any form of Irish Language Act: "the current demand for an Irish language act is simply the next chapter in the republican campaign to rid Northern Ireland of any remaining semblance of British cultural identity" (OS, April 2018). According to David Hume (Orange Director of Services), "[t]he Irish language is viewed by Sinn Fein as a Trojan horse to help alienate unionists and take us further along the road of their eventual political aim of a United Ireland." He added how the language issue, as it is used by republicans, is intended to create a situation where... 'cold-house' for Protestants would come about" (OS, March 2015). Robin Swaan (2018), a UUP leader, asked rhetorically whether nationalists are "trying to achieve the type of Gaelic revival envisaged

by De Valera,” suggesting how the language issue is “being used as a tool to further divide in this country. It is the very opposite of a shared future.” To counter this perceived threat, in 2015 the Grand Lodge made a submission to the Department of Arts, Culture and Leisure where it stated its respect for Irish as “one of the indigenous languages of the British Isles” but it opposed the introduction of the Irish Language Bill which, according to the Order, would promote inequality because it would be “directed towards a section of the Roman Catholic community” (GOLI, 2015).

The 2021 Census and the Post-Brexit Anxiety

The results of the 2021 census, though not unexpected, provided an additional blow to Protestant and Orangeist self-confidence. Even though Northern Ireland was constructed to ensure that the Protestant community would remain a majority in perpetuity, this is no longer the case (Cooley, 2021). The census certified the end of Protestant majoritarian status. For the first time Catholics outnumbered Protestants: 42,3% identified as Catholic and 37,3% as Protestant or other Christian. As the same time, the proportion of the population describing themselves as neither Protestant nor Catholic has grown from 3.7% in 1991 to 17.4% in 2021. In practice, these data challenge the binary nature of (religious) identity. Northern Ireland now has three communities, none of which constitutes a majority. Secularisation has contributed to the emergence of a political middle ground, which is expressed in the electoral success of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland. Secularisation is particularly worrying for the Protestant community,^{xvi} since younger Protestants are more likely than their Catholic counterparts both to be denominationally “neutral” (Coakley, 2021: 32) and to be strongly supportive of issues such as gay marriage and abortion rights (Coulter, Flaherty & Shirlow, 2023: 65), which are in sharp contrast to the Orange Order’s socially conservative agenda.

The changing demographic situation has brought to the fore the need to re-assess the Orange Order’s relationship with Catholics. In a rare acknowledgment of the novel situation, Rev. Gibson conceded that “times have changed” and that the Order may have to accept a changed Northern Ireland (Mc Bride, 2020). On the ground this means a different stance towards parades. For example, in Derry, only 17.37% of citizens indicated that they have a British national identity (down from 23% in 2011). In a context where the population with an Irish national identity is the overwhelming majority (64.55% according to the 2021 census) the Apprentice Boys of Derry changed their traditional uncompromising stance and reached an agreement with Catholic/Nationalist groups with regard to their “right to march.” This group commemorates the 1689 Siege of Derry when Catholic James II of England laid siege to the city, which was then a Protestant stronghold. In 1969 the Apprentice Boys’ parade sparked three days of intensive rioting in the city, known as the Battle of the Bogside, which is widely regarded as the start of the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland. Because of the changing demographic character of the city, since the

early 2000s a more conciliatory approach on both sides has taken place and now parades are virtually trouble-free.^{xvii}

While demographic changes are a source of concern for Protestants and have contributed to modify established routines, Brexit has presented an existential challenge for loyal institutions because of its potential to jeopardize the Union with the UK (Cochrane, 2020). Not only has Brexit reinforced the rise of the center ground (Murphy, 2023), which in 2022 contributed to unseat unionism as the largest political force in Northern Ireland, but also the fact that Sinn Féin has begun to mobilize openly for a United Ireland has increased unionist concerns for the long-term consequences of deriving from the decision to leave the European Union (EU). The Grand Lodge remained neutral regarding the Brexit referendum in 2016, having members on both sides of the debate, but had subsequently to respect the electoral mandate to exit the EU. Nonetheless, it intervened frequently in the negotiation between the British government and EU institutions condemning any step that, in its view, would weaken the Union with the UK (OS, 2018/2019).

In late 2019 the British government proposed a Protocol stating that Great Britain is no longer in a customs union with the EU. Likewise, Northern Ireland would also no longer legally be in the EU customs union but would remain an entry point into it, creating the Irish Sea Border, a de facto customs border in the Irish Sea. The Protocol is intended to guarantee the smooth working of the EU single market, while avoiding the imposition of a “hard border” between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that might destabilise the relative peace that has held since the signing of the GFA.^{xviii}

The possibility that an Irish Sea Border could be created and Northern Ireland could become increasingly integrated with the Republic of Ireland is a source of serious concern for unionists. The Orange Order condemned the Protocol and lobbied against this option. In November 2021 it launched its *Declaration Against the Northern Ireland Protocol* and called on all unionists to sign it. The Order contends that the Protocol should be rejected on three main grounds: “It makes Northern Ireland a place apart within the United Kingdom – we are not treated as equal citizens of the UK; It leaves Northern Ireland citizens subject to laws made by Europe, and therefore subject to European Courts. This undermines the Sovereignty of the UK; It is delivering an all-Ireland economy. Trade with the Republic of Ireland has grown significantly and reports continue of difficulties in sourcing goods from the UK” (GOLI, 2023).

Of particular concern for the Order is the suspension of art. 6 of the Act of Union, which prescribes that “[t]he subjects of Great Britain and Ireland shall be on the same footing in respect of trade and navigation, and in all treaties with foreign powers the subjects of Ireland shall have the same privileges as British subjects.” In June 2022 the UK government introduced a Northern Ireland Protocol Bill which sought to change how the Northern Ireland Protocol is applied but 52 of the 90 members of the Northern Ireland Assembly signed a strongly-worded declaration that this proposed action would be

contrary to the wishes of the majority of people in Northern Ireland (Walker, 2022). Until a solution to the Protocol problem is reached, the Orange Order will continue to make its voice heard in the public debate.

Conclusion

Throughout its history the Orange Order functioned as an institution of unionist hegemony, actively working to exclude Catholics from political representation and the job market. The Order has argued in favor of both loyalty to the Crown and the preservation of existing constitutional ties with the UK as the only political arrangement guaranteeing, in its view, the civil and political rights of the Protestant community, including religious liberty. For its members, freedom of religion includes the right to manifest religion in teaching, worship, observance and practice and is guaranteed by the preservation of the Union with the UK. While for its supporters Orangeism is a celebration of civil and religious liberty, for its detractors is a symbol of sectarianism.

The Orange Order's advocacy in favor of religious liberty takes place in a context characterized by deeply rooted religious, political, social and economic divisions. The plantation of English and Scottish settlers in Ireland since the early seventeenth century led to the development of two groups with diverse religious and cultural values and political allegiances. The relationship between the Protestant and Catholic communities has never been harmonious. Although there have been periods of peaceful coexistence, this relationship has been characterized by the "tranquility of mutual deterrence" (Wright, 1994), whereby the threat of communal has structured relationships between the Protestant and Catholic communities.

The GFA attempted to change this pattern by establishing, among other issues, the key principle of "parity of esteem" between the two communities. In this new context most of the over twenty-five hundred parades performed by Protestants each year occur with no incidents, even though several remain contentious. While the lessening of tensions over parades represents a step forward in the relationship between the two communities, nonetheless the Orange Order argues that the GFA has worked against the interests of unionism and actively opposes it. The Order has resisted the erosion of what it sees as cultural symbols of Britishness and, with regard to Brexit, it has denounced any scheme that would, in its view, soften and dilute the political, economic and cultural links with the UK. Changing demographic dynamics and the rise of both secularism and the political middle ground have further challenged established certainties and planted the seeds for a broader re-assessment of the organization's role within Northern Ireland society.

Be that as it may, the Order remains an important conservative civil society actor whose activities and views contribute to shape the development of Protestant public opinion. Even though the Order is increasingly eschewed by middle-class Protestants and challenged by the growth of secularism, its

rootedness is testified by the fact its members still account to more than four times the combined membership of all of Northern Ireland’s political parties (Blake, 2019: 40-41). The Orange Order is a key institution for the protection of the religious beliefs of the Protestant people and an important civil society actor whose conservative views and actions express deeply-felt grievances of significant sections of the Northern Ireland population.

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Notes

ⁱ Nelson McCausland, a prominent DUP politician, is often credited for the introduction of the expression “culture wars” to Northern Ireland political debate.

ⁱⁱ Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, *History of Orangeism*, www.grandorangelodge.co.uk/history (accessed 3 September 2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ Email message from a self-described “conservative Orangeman,” 31 May 2023.

^{iv} Data on parades can be found at: www.paradescommission.org

^v Several of my interlocutors in Northern Ireland have stressed the importance of this point. Among them, Dr. Jonathan Mattison, curator of the Museum of Orange Heritage in Belfast.

^{vi} Email from a self-described “conservative Orangeman,” 31 May 2023.

^{vii} Email from a self-described “conservative Orangeman,” 31 May 2023.

^{viii} Interview with Chris McGimpsey, Orangeman, UUP member and former Belfast city councilor, July 2022.

^{ix} As key evidence of republican manipulation, Protestants cite Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams: “Ask any activist in the North, did Drumcree happen by accident and they will tell you ‘no’... Three years of work went into creating that situation and fair play to those that put the work in.” (cited in Kennaway 2006: 91).

^x Analyses sympathetic to the views and actions of the Order can be found in Dudley-Edwards, 2000 and Pickering, 2009.

^{xi} Interview with a prominent Orange clergyman, Belfast, July 2022.

^{xii} To substantiate their argument against the Parades Commission, Orangemen often claim that Nationalist parades have never been re-routed.

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- ^{xiii} Online interview with Billy Moore, General Secretary of the Apprentice Boys, June 2023.
- ^{xiv} Interview with a prominent Orange clergyman, Belfast, July 2022.
- ^{xv} Edwards Stevenson on BBC News, “Northern Ireland Orange Order Leaders Warn of Cultural War,” 12 July 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-23267038>
- ^{xvi} Interview with Chris McGimpsey, Orangeman, UUP member and former Belfast city councilor, July 2022.
- ^{xvii} Online interview with Billy Moore, General Secretary of the Apprentice Boys, June 2023.
- ^{xviii} Thanks to Adrian Guelke for drawing my attention to the importance of this point.

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