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Gladys GANIEL

Power from the Periphery? 'Extra-Institutional Religion' and the Prospects for Change: Insights from the Life of Fr Gerry Reynolds

ABSTRACT: This article develops the concept of 'extra-institutional religion,' which was first introduced in the 2016 book *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland.* It describes how the author's research for a biography of Fr Gerry Reynolds, a Redemptorist based in Belfast's Clonard Monastery during the Troubles, helped advance the concept by fostering insight into the importance of links between faith-inspired activists and institutional religion. It also develops the concept's theoretical potential, arguing that it may be well-placed to contribute to wider change by balancing two paradoxical structural strengths: its position on the peripheries of religious, social, and political life; and its continued links with institutional religion. It relates these structural strengths to theoretical literature on religion and civil society (which alerts us to how change can emerge from the peripheries); and Grace Davie and Abby Day's work on European religion (which alerts us to the continued importance of historically dominant religious institutions). It then describes how Reynolds's activism was enhanced by the legitimacy and connections that came with his embeddedness in the Catholic Church. Examples include his work with Fr Alec Reid facilitating secret political negotiations during the Troubles; and public ecumenical initiatives like the Cornerstone Community, the Unity Pilgrims, and In Joyful Hope. While Reynolds was not practising extra-institutional religion, his example advances this concept by demonstrating that for faith-inspired activists, maintaining solid links with institutional religion may be more important for sparking change than was originally argued in *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland*.

KEYWORDS: Extra-institutional religion, religious markets, peacemaking, ecumenism, the Troubles, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Redemptorists

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Introduction

In my 2016 book, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland* (Ganiel 2016), I developed the concept of 'extra-institutional religion.' I defined extra-institutional religion as the practice of religion *outside or in addition to* the Catholic Church, Ireland's historically dominant religious institution. I described how people who practice extra-institutional religion are continually operating on the borders and boundaries between historically-dominant religious institutions and new expressions of faith.

In this article, I focus more than I did in the book on the *theoretical potential* of extra-institutional religion to contribute to wider change. I argue that extra-institutional religion may be well-placed to contribute to wider change by balancing two paradoxical structural strengths: its position on the peripheries of religious, social, and political life; and its continued links with institutional religion.

To that end, I reflect on how my research for a biography of Fr Gerry Reynolds (1935-2015), a Redemptorist based in Belfast's Clonard Monastery during the Troubles (Ganiel 2019), has given me a greater appreciation of the relationship between faith-inspired change and remaining engaged with so-called 'institutional' religion – the historically-dominant religious institutions normally associated with mainstream religious life. I am not claiming that Reynolds himself practised extra-institutional religion. But his example has made me realize that for faith-inspired activists, remaining engaged with institutional religion could be more important for contributing to change than I originally argued in *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland*.[1]

Using examples from the life of a priest may seem like an unusual way to develop a concept of religion that – by my own definition – places people *outside or in addition to* the Catholic Church. In fact, in the introductory chapter of *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland,* I quote one of my informants, Ellen, who explicitly references Reynolds as an example of someone firmly embedded *in the institutional church*. Ellen said (Ganiel 2016, 13-14):

> I even had it out with [Fr] Gerry Reynolds … who's a saint. … He said … 'that we were all one in Christ, and that these people who took a non-sacramental and non-institutional, non-structural view of the faith, were just a kind of [an] irrelevant minority'. And I was sitting there going, 'what, what, what?' I do love him … and we always laugh … but we had it out again [recently] over this stuff. He was trying to tell me again that we need institutions to do this, that and the other, and we need priests and what not. I'm going, 'no, no, no.'

[1] I wish to thank Peter Burns, Michael Kelleher and Gerry O'Hanlon for feedback on a previous version of this article. I also benefitted from comments at the 2018 BASR/ISASR joint meeting in Belfast. Any errors and shortcomings in argument remain my own.

> I asked Ellen if that meant she wanted 'to smash the institutions' and she replied, 'yeah, I think so', before saying that her approach was probably 'inadequate' in 'the wider scheme of things' but that on 'my little individual level … it has served me well in terms of what it has enabled me to do and the risks it has enabled me to take'.

In *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland,* I argued that Ellen's approach was theoretically more 'adequate' than she gave it credit for, precisely because working outside dominant religious institutions could give people like her more freedom and flexibility to shape and influence change. In fact, because the book was based on an 'action research' project, in the concluding chapter I identified five lessons that faith-inspired activists seeking wider religious, social and political change should consider. My very first lesson was: 'Work outside traditional religious institutions' (Ganiel 2016, 254).

Throughout his long years of activism, Reynolds did not see himself as working outside the Catholic Church. Indeed, Religious Congregations like the Redemptorists to which Reynolds belonged have a great deal of independence from the Catholic Church's diocesan structures, giving them considerable autonomy, freedom and flexibility. Yet at the same time they have power and legitimacy because they remain *within* the Church. I am certain that some laypeople with whom Reynolds worked (both Catholic and Protestant) would have regarded his peacemaking and ecumenical activism as somehow *outside or in addition to* the 'institutional' Catholic Church. But their perspective contradicts Reynolds's own self-understanding, illustrating how people can interpret religious phenomena in very different ways.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I briefly define extra-institutional religion and explain how I developed the concept. Then, I explore extra-institutional religion's structural strengths by relating it to theoretical literature on religion and civil society (which alerts us to how change can emerge from the peripheries); and Grace Davie's and Abby Day's work on European religion (which alerts us to the continued importance of historically-dominant religious institutions). After that, I provide examples from Reynolds's life. I argue that Reynolds's continued embeddedness in the Catholic Church gave him legitimacy and connections that helped him to contribute to political, social, and religious changes. I am not arguing that Reynolds's activism was extra-institutional; that is beside my main point. Rather, my main point is that writing Reynolds' biography has taught me that for faith-inspired activists, maintaining solid links with institutional religion may be more important for sparking change than I originally supposed.

Developing and Defining Extra-Institutional Religion

I developed the concept of extra-institutional religion as a way to explain how I observed people practising their religion on the island of Ireland. It should be considered a provisional concept: new, empirically grounded in Irish/Northern Irish contexts on both sides of the border, and untested outside the island. It is rooted in the island's long relationship with the Catholic Church, which includes a historic association between Irish national identity and Catholicism, opposition between those identifying as Catholics and Protestants (at times violent, especially in Northern Ireland), a strong relationship between the State and the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland, and the Catholic Church's seemingly rapid demise over the last generation, which is related to clerical abuse scandals as well as wider processes of economic development and modernization (Ganiel 2016, Fuller 2004, Inglis 1998). I articulated a succinct definition of extra-institutional religion: the practice of religion *outside or in addition to* the Catholic Church, Ireland's historically-dominant religious institution.

Since the publication of *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland*, I have benefitted from feedback on the book at conferences and from reviewers (Davies 2019, Stringer 2018, Conway 2016, Maher 2016, Maignant 2016, Inglis 2017, Kmec 2017). This has helped me to clarify what I mean by extra-institutional religion. A forthcoming article grounds extra-institutional religion more deeply in relevant debates, refining its utility and theoretical potential (Ganiel forthcoming). In it, I elaborate on my initial definition of extra-institutional religion, offering this fuller description of what it looks like (Ganiel forthcoming):

> People who practiced extra-institutional religion were reflexively individualistic in their beliefs and practices. But their individualisation was moderated by the *dominance of the institution* in how they thought about and practised their religion. Even those who defined themselves *against* the Catholic Church maintained some links *with* it. These were individuals whose religious practice was important in their lives. They either found or created extra-institutional spaces in order to pursue personal and collective transformation through religion. So extra-institutional religion is not simply all religious practice in Ireland outside the Catholic Church; it is committed religious practice that defines itself and its practice over and against the Catholic Church. It may (though not always) include continued engagement with the Church, such as attending mass. It is this preoccupation with the historically dominant religious institution that sets extra-institutional religion apart from other concepts, like lived religion. Such people are a minority among Europeans – and even among the Irish. But their practice provides insight into one way religion functions even in secularising societies.

Originally, the concept of extra-institutional religion was developed during a research project that asked questions about how churches were navigating increased diversity due to immigration, and/or addressing historic Catholic/Protestant oppositions through ecumenism or reconciliation projects.[2] As I asked questions related to these topics, *people could not stop talking about the Catholic Church.* Many brought up the Catholic Church so they could define their own faith against it. So the concept emerged rather unexpectedly from a project that was initially more concerned with other matters.

The data for the project consisted of two surveys conducted in 2009. The first was distributed to 4,005 faith leaders, as near as we could achieve a universal sample of Christian clergy and other faith leaders; 710 responded. The second was an open, online survey for laypeople; 910 responded. We also conducted 113 in-depth interviews as part of eight case studies of 'expressions of faith' between 2009–11. Some of these were Catholic, some Protestant, others ecumenical. I simply refer you to *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland* for more details about these cases.

When selecting the expressions of faith, we deliberately sought out people and groups with *committed* religious practice. We were not attempting to understand the full variety of religious practice in Ireland; rather, we were seeking to understand the different ways that the religiously-committed were living out their faith. Some expressions of faith were located through responses to the surveys (respondents were asked if they would be willing to participate in further research); others were found through my own and associated researchers' networks. These expressions of religion were usually small and often unnoticed by those outside them. Analysing the interviews with these religiously-committed individuals inspired the concept of extra-institutional religion.

Because the Catholic Church was not the main focus of the research project, I did not ask people direct questions about it. But interviewees soon brought the conversation around to the 'institutional church,' as they usually called it. They described how they were engaging with the institutional church. But they still seemed to see themselves as somehow outside it – even if they still attended church. In this way, I learned about the methods and strategies people were using to keep their faith alive, *outside or in addition to the Catholic Church,* and began to conceive of these practices as extra-institutional religion. It is not clear how many people in Ireland are practising extra-institutional religion; the concept was developed over the course of the project so including the means to measure it among the general population was not part of the study. But by definition, those who practice extra-institutional religion are relatively committed to

[2] The project, 'Visioning 21st Century Ecumenism,' was funded by the Irish Research Council and carried out while I worked at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin.

their religion. This makes them a minority among the general population, which has secularized rapidly over the last generation (Inglis 2014, Fuller 2004). To summarize: people in Ireland who practice extra-institutional religion are a small minority, located on the peripheries, borders or boundaries of religious life.

Extra-Institutional Religion's Theoretical Potential

One of the main findings of *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland* was that people who practiced extra-institutional religion had experienced profound *individual* change. Many saw their practice of extra-institutional religion as prompting this change, which they talked about in terms of 'spiritual growth'. In this way, extra-institutional religion resonates with literature on religious individualization (Brewer 2018, Marti 2015, Marti and Ganiel 2014, Beck 2010). This literature recognizes the importance of religion for individuals, but questions whether so much emphasis on the personal (and often private) functions of religion limit religion's social and political roles.

But most of the people I spoke with wanted their religion to make a difference in the world outside their home and parish. They thought religion could and should contribute to public life, influencing politics and society. Most had given up on the Catholic Church in this regard, seeing it as too damaged by its handling of the abuse scandals, and out of touch with what laity and the wider public thought on a range of matters, like the role of women and engagement with LGBTQ people. Others saw the Catholic Church as too caught up in preserving itself as an institution to advocate on issues of social justice and the common good. At the same time, they wanted the extra-institutional groups they were engaged with to make a difference – although most of them were at a loss about how they might make this happen.

While there was limited empirical evidence that extra-institutional religion had contributed to wider changes, I still argued that it had the *theoretical* potential to do so. This argument is grounded in theoretical literature on religion and civil society (which alerts us to how change can emerge from the peripheries); and Grace Davie and Abby Day's work on European religion (which alerts us to the continued importance of historically-dominant religious institutions).

Power to Change – from the Peripheries

Ulrich Beck's concept of 'sub-politics' offers insight into how civil society groups – including religious ones – can use their peripheral position to contribute to change by 'shaping society *from below*' (Beck 1994, 23), as 'agents *outside* the political or corporatist system' (Beck 1994, 22). Beck

argued that because sub-political groups are not part of the heavily-institutionalized system, they have more freedom and flexibility to shape and influence change. Further, he claimed that only *networks* of sub-political groups can amass enough power to contribute wider changes. In short, people on the peripheries need to connect with each other.

Similarly, in an earlier book, *Evangelicalism and Conflict in Northern Ireland* (Ganiel 2008), I drew on the work of Martin Marty (2000) to argue that religious *structures* determine how effectively religious actors can contribute to change within a diverse, competitive civil society. Denominations have limited effectiveness because they are often compromised by a vision that valorises their previous partnerships with State power, and hampered by bureaucracy, slow committee-based decision-making, and the challenge of remaining faithful to denominational traditions.

On the other hand, religious *special-interest organizations* are more effective, because they can make faster decisions, more forcefully critique denominational traditions, respond quickly to developments on the ground, and harness the energy and enthusiasm of committed activists. Such organizations are even more effective if they work in *networks*. My work was grounded in a study of evangelical organizations in Northern Ireland, the most prominent of which was Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI). I argued that ECONI had been among the most effective religious groups throughout the peace process. This was due to ECONI's flexible organizational structure and its use of the Bible to critique how evangelicals had justified division and violence by abusing Calvinist theological ideas about the covenant, the chosen people, and the Promised Land.

In their book *Religion, Civil Society and Peace in Northern Ireland,* John Brewer, Gareth Higgins and Francis Teeney (2011) also observed that it is inevitably religious 'mavericks', brave individuals or organizations on the peripheries of mainstream religions, which have been most effectively engaged in religious peacemaking. They claimed that the mainstream Christian denominations and their clerical/hierarchical representatives did little more than 'speechify' when they condemned violence. Peacemaking was left to 'maverick' individuals from across the religious spectrum, including Fr Gerry Reynolds (Brewer, Higgins and Teeney 2011, 6). They argued that these mavericks would have been even more effective if they had received more moral and practical support from the institutional churches. Their claim was rooted in the theoretical potential of 'progressive civil society.' For them, progressive civil society groups could capitalize on the freedom found in peripheral intellectual, institutional, market, and political spaces, and carry those insights to the mainstream (see also Brewer, Higgins and Teeney 2010, Kmec and Ganiel 2019).

Importance of Historically-Dominant Religious Institutions

While debates about secularization are beyond the scope of this article, my argument cannot proceed without a brief nod to the development of 'market' theories of religion.[3] Market theories are rooted in the contrast between European patterns of secularization (from which Ireland seemed to be exempt until quite recently); and the apparent vitality of religion in the United States. Rational choice theorists explained this difference by developing the idea of a religious market. For them, the historically-dominant churches of Europe, which usually had an official link with the State or a very close relationship with it, declined because they were bloated monopolies. Supported by the State, they were simply too lazy to compete for souls. In the United States, on the other hand, a competitive religious market enticed people to make 'rational' choices about how they could gain the most from religion, fuelling religious vitality (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994, Finke and Stark, 2003).

The concept of religious markets is not unproblematic; for example, it is doubtful that people act so 'rationally' when making religious choices. But I do not reject it altogether – even as a tool for explaining religious change in Europe. I take an alternative view: European societies also have religious markets, but the legacy of monopoly religions means that European religious markets have different shapes and characters than the more free-wheeling religious market of the United States (Martikainen & Gauthier, 2016; Gauthier & Martikainen, 2016). In Europe, religious market choices are shaped and even dominated by historically-dominant religious institutions, usually state churches. So if Europeans seem indifferent to conventional religious belief and practice, this is balanced by continued relationships with historic state churches. These relationships may be limited and ambiguous, but they are significant enough that European societies can be conceived of as having 'mixed' religious markets, where historically-dominant institutions – the state churches – retain residual social influence and political privilege. Although the Catholic Church was never officially established in Ireland, it has functioned like a historic state church, at least in the Republic. Today, like much of the rest of Europe, the island of Ireland has a mixed religious market.

Two scholars whose work is grounded in the British context, Grace Davie and Abby Day, have increased our understanding of how religion functions in Europe's mixed religious markets. Their insights have been especially important in highlighting the importance of historically-dominant religious institutions: Davie through her concepts of 'believing without belonging' (1994) and 'vicarious religion' (2000); and Day (2011, 2010) through her emphasis on 'believing *in* belonging' (emphasis mine),

[3] See Ganiel (forthcoming) for a fuller discussion of secularization and religious markets.

and the role of institutions in 'performing' religion on behalf of a nominal public.[4]

Davie's concept of believing without belonging is so well-known that I hardly need to review it: it describes how individuals maintain belief in God and other Christian ideas, but with little or no participation in church. Believing without belonging was rooted in her study of religion in Britain, but she also was influenced by the Nordic countries, where people combined a seeming contentment with *belonging* to their state religion (religion as a public utility), with low levels of religious *beliefs* (Davie, 2007: 141). Davie's (2007: 127) later concept of 'vicarious religion' goes a step further. Defined as 'the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, *who implicitly at least not only understand, but quite clearly approve of what the minority is doing,*' vicarious religion is a type of collective memory, secured by the institutional churches, educational systems and media. For Davie, vicarious religion helps explain the persistence of religion even more effectively than believing without belonging.

Day's (2011) term believing *in* belonging obviously plays on Davie's phrase. Questioning what she sees as an inherent individualism in Davie's early approach, Day (2010, 2011) argues that belief is linked with action, including ritual and performance; and that even nominal Christians in Britain continue to 'align themselves to institutional Christianity and what, for them, it represents' (Day, 2011: 181). Day's empirical research revealed that rather than retreating to individualized forms of religion, people are finding meaning through relationships. Institutional religion remains salient through 'performative belief,' or the ways in which the institutional church plays a 'role in bringing into being forms of identity that actors strategically create in order to adapt to and integrate themselves into various social situations' (Day, 2010: 10) – an idea similar to vicarious religion.

Davie's 2015 book: *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox,* is an updated version of *Religion in Britain Since 1945.* The paradox of her new title is 'the decline in active membership in most, if not all, churches in this country, alongside the growing significance of religion in public—and therefore political—life' (Davie, 2015: 205). She identifies six 'factors to take into account' when analysing religion in Britain, arguing that they apply to almost all European societies (Davie, 2015: 3-4). For my purposes, her first two factors are most important: the role of the historic churches in shaping British culture; and an awareness that these churches still have a place at particular moments in the lives of British people, though they no longer greatly influence the beliefs and behaviour of the majority. Although the dynamics of religious change in Ireland have been vastly different from

[4] See Ganiel (forthcoming) for a fuller discussion of Davie and Day.

those in Britain, my research hints that you could substitute Irish culture and Irish people for British in Davie's analysis, and it would still ring true.

To summarize: Vicarious and performative religion explain how religion retains significance for people whose religion is nominal. Extra-institutional religion describes the practice of those who are relatively committed to their religion. But extra-institutional, vicarious and performative religion are united in two important ways: 1) the significance they place on historic religious institutions, and 2) the recognition that such institutions retain relatively privileged positions in the mixed religious markets of Europe. So, Davie and Day's conceptual work is important for my argument about the *theoretical potential* of extra-institutional religion because it helps us to understand how historically-dominant institutions like historic state churches continue to shape individuals' religious choices. It follows that if in Europe, historically-dominant religious institutions remain more important than has been supposed, the prospects for change *coming from the peripheries, the borders or the boundaries of religious life* would be enhanced if those who practice extra-institutional religion remain *more* engaged with historically-dominant institutions than I originally proposed in *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland*. This theoretical insight made all the more sense as I researched Fr Gerry Reynolds's biography.

Below, I share some of Reynolds's story, focusing on his years in Belfast's Clonard Monastery (1983-2015). I introduce you to some of the initiatives he was involved with, arguing that they contributed to wider political, social, and religious changes. Throughout, I emphasize how Reynolds's effectiveness as a change-agent was linked with his embeddedness in the Catholic Church, due to the legitimacy and connections this gave him (see also Kmec and Ganiel 2019).

Introducing Fr Gerry Reynolds

Reynolds was born in 1935, the second child of four in a farming family in Mungret, Co. Limerick. Reynolds was only six years old when his father died. His mother assumed responsibility for running the farm. She also instilled in her children a sense of wonder about the mysteries of God and devotion to the Catholic Church. As was common in the Ireland of this era, Reynolds's family life and wider social world was shaped by the rituals and values of the Catholic Church. Two of his uncles were Redemptorist priests; an aunt was a Mercy Sister. Reynolds told me he couldn't remember a time when he didn't want to be a priest. With the encouragement of his uncles, he joined the Redemptorists before he even left secondary school. His younger brother also became a Redemptorist.

As a young priest, Reynolds was enthused by Vatican II and its emphasis on the Church as *all* the people of God, as well as its openness to

Christians of other traditions and those of other faiths. He helped to found the Irish branch of the international Jesus Caritas Priests Fraternity, which encouraged devotion to prayer and promoted ecumenism. Between 1962 and 1975 he worked in communications and media in Dublin.

Reynolds served in Limerick and Galway before being posted to Belfast in 1983. Reynolds had felt 'called' to Belfast for several years. Pope John Paul II's visit to Ireland in 1979 was among the first indications of this call. On 29 December 1979 he wrote in his journal of a Christmas Day sermon in which he told the congregation that what John Paul II's visit had asked of him was to 'be a peacemaker.' Reynolds's enthusiasm for ecumenism and his desire to build relationships with Protestants was rare among priests in Ireland at the time, and probably still is. But it made him gifted for ministry in Northern Ireland, a place long-divided along religious lines and where religion was often perceived as contributing to the Troubles (circa 1968-1998).

Power from the Periphery? Political Change

Before Reynolds arrived in Clonard, another Redemptorist there, Fr Alec Reid, was already engaged in a risky, and deeply secret, mission to help end the violence. Because this work was behind-the-scenes, details about it have only become more widely known in recent years (McKeever 2017, Rafter 2003). At a time when 'talking with terrorists' was condemned, Reid had decided that the violence would not stop unless there was dialogue with those who were committing it. From Clonard's West Belfast context, that meant the Irish Republican Army (IRA). This was not just a practical calculation; Reid believed that because Jesus himself had welcomed the tax collectors, the sinners, the Samaritans – then Christians also were called to engage with those who seemed out of bounds. Reid had built relationships with republicans through his prison ministry, especially during the 1981 hunger strikes. It was in that year that Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams told him that when it came to ending the violence: 'The only organisation that can do anything is the church – the church is the only organisation that has the status, the credibility, the lines of communication' (quoted in McKeever 2017, 28).

Adams's words drive home the importance of the Church in terms of the legitimacy it held within the wider Catholic-nationalist-republican community. Adams wanted Reid to facilitate, first, talks among Sinn Féin, the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Irish Government. We now know that Alec facilitated those talks, which also led to secret communication with the British Government. After Reynolds arrived in Clonard, he assisted Reid with aspects of this dialogue process,

at times attending meetings with him and reading drafts of the position papers Reid presented to various parties.

But Reid was in a tricky position – starting a dialogue with the IRA was not something that could be decreed or controlled by the so-called 'institutional' church. Reid would need to act as someone inside the church, yet also somehow outside of it. Alec's biographer, Martin McKeever (2017, 28-29), describes the tension in Alec's position this way:

> [Reid] had not been asked by the bishop or by his Redemptorist superiors to initiate a peace process. … The ambiguity of Fr Alec's position consisted in the fact that, on the one hand, he needed to have his hands free if he was going to be effective in his delicate role, but that, on the other hand, he needed to be able to claim that he was acting in the name of the Church. He was indeed acting in the name of the Church in that it was as a Redemptorist and as a priest that he was doing what he was doing. He had at least the tacit approval of his religious superiors and that of at least some members of the Catholic hierarchy, including the cardinal of Armagh. There was also an element of political pragmatism involved here: Fr Alec knew that it would be easier for parties to accept an invitation to talks at which their adversaries would be present if invited by someone representing the Church.

Further, because of the stigma about 'talking with terrorists,' there was almost no way for Sinn Féin to encounter politicians from the Protestant-unionist-loyalist community in a meaningful way. Reynolds credited Reid with coming up with a way around this problem: initiating secret talks between Sinn Féin and Protestant clergy. The idea was that while unionist politicians were not in a position to listen to Sinn Féin perspectives, the Protestant clergy with whom Reid and Reynolds had built relationships over the years were. These clergy also could present unionist perspectives to Sinn Féin. These talks began in 1990 and continued for some years beyond the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Again, it is only in recent years that more has become known about the Sinn Féin-Protestant clergy talks. The Protestants who participated did so on condition of anonymity; today, only the identities of those who have acknowledged they took part or spoken openly about it have been revealed. Reynolds described the talks as 'trying to search for a rational and peaceful way forward. ... The fruit of it was it helped human relationships. It helped to create a human understanding between people who were ideologically in very different places.'[5] Certainly, these talks helped Sinn Féin understand unionist political perspectives and were invaluable preparations for the Good Friday Agreement negotiations. They also helped Protestant clergy, who were often regarded as leaders in their local communities, understand

[5] Interview with author, 2015.

Sinn Féin's perspectives and to communicate this (subtly and delicately to be sure) to people in their congregations and communities.

It is impossible to quantify the value of Reid and Reynolds's actions in bringing Sinn Féin and the IRA into the peace process through these secret talks. But I think it is helpful when pondering their importance to ask questions such as: What if there had been no Alec Reid? What if there had been no Gerry Reynolds? Would someone else have stepped in to play their role? Would others have needed, or found it useful, to establish their political legitimacy through their religious credentials?

We can never provide definitive answers to History's hypothetical 'what if' questions. But it is reasonable to conclude that the actions of both of these priests contributed to wider political changes. These changes culminated in the 1994 ceasefires and eventually the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The influence of these secret talks on wider political processes illustrate *how important it is for faith-based activists who are working for change to remain engaged with wider, mainstream religious institutions.* If Reid and Reynolds had tried to work entirely outside the Catholic Church, they would have lost much of what made them – in the Northern Ireland context – legitimate *political* actors.

Power from the Periphery? Social Change

Northern Ireland was, and remains, highly segregated along religious lines. About 90 percent of people in Belfast live in communities composed entirely of people from their own religious background. In some disadvantaged areas, these communities are separated by imposing 'peace walls.' Clonard Monastery is located almost adjacent to one of these walls; when Redemptorists look out from the upper windows of Clonard their view includes a peace wall and the homes of the Protestants beyond it. Before he arrived in Belfast, Reynolds was committed to ecumenism, convinced that Catholics and Protestants were already brothers and sisters in Christ. But while this conviction was real to Reynolds, harmony among Catholics and Protestants was not a religious nor a social reality in Belfast.

Not long after Reynolds settled in to Clonard, he became involved with two grassroots ecumenical groups, the Cornerstone Community and the Clonard-Fitzroy Fellowship. Both of these groups had been started a few years prior to Reynolds's arrival in Belfast, but he soon became central to them. Both of these groups could be considered extra-institutional in that they were on the margins of the institutional churches (both Catholic and Protestant). They used their positions on the peripheries of religion to say and do the risky things that the institutional churches could not or would not.

Clonard-Fitzroy has received more scholarly and popular attention, having won the international Pax Christi award in 1999, an honour American historian Ronald Wells has described as the Catholic equivalent of the Nobel Peace Prize (Newell, 2016, Wells 2010, 2005). So I will focus instead on the lesser-known and perhaps under-appreciated work of Cornerstone (see also Robinson 2015, Power 2007).

Cornerstone was a semi-residential ecumenical community located beside a peace wall near Clonard. It included clergy and laity, and women were leaders within the group. Indeed, Cornerstone probably would never have existed without the inspiration of two women Religious: Sr Mary Grant and Sr Gladys Hayward; and Presbyterian laywoman, Isabel Hunter. Cornerstone's members saw their prayer and presence in the community as a visible sign of Christian unity and reconciliation in the midst of violence. Cornerstone's reputation was reflected in a local child's comment, which Reynolds recorded in his diary in 1993: 'Anyone can ring the bell of that house; it doesn't matter whether you're a Catholic or a Protestant.'

Reynolds pushed Cornerstone's ministry in an unexpected direction in August 1986. He was struggling to cope with news of the murder of Dennis Taggart, a 33-year-old father of two and part-time sergeant in the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR). Taggart had been shot dead by the IRA as he was getting out of his car beside his home – not far from Clonard, but on the other side of the peace wall. His 13-year-old son found him lying dead beside his car. Reynolds felt moved to visit the Taggart family, but knew that as a Catholic priest, he could not take this step alone. So he rang Rev Sam Burch, a Methodist minister who was the then-leader of Cornerstone. Sam was reluctant, but finally agreed to go with Reynolds and Rev John Caldicott, an English Anglican who was visiting Clonard. Reynolds wrote about Taggart's mother Peggy's reaction to his visit in the *Irish News* in 1987[6]:

> There's a broken-hearted mother living in the Shankill whose son was killed by the IRA. To the Provos, the woman's son was just another legitimate target. The first time we met was just hours after the shooting. She threw her arms around me and said, 'I'm so glad you came.'
> … One day recently she said to me: 'If only they had known him, they could never have killed him.' Could the tragedy of our divided society be described more poignantly than that?

In his diary, Reynolds recorded that four nuns had accompanied him on the day when Peggy spoke those words. He wrote: 'My visit brought back the heartbreak of Dennis' death but they were very happy to see me again. … I was struck by the warm invitation which the Little Sisters received to come back.'

[6] Quoted in Wells (2005, 97). Gerry wrote a regular column for the *Irish News*, 1987-1989 (Ganiel 2019, chapter 15).

The visit to the Taggarts was the first of many Reynolds and Burch made together. Over the years they visited more than 50 families, most within a one-mile radius of the peace wall. They called ahead to ensure they would be welcome. Members of Cornerstone developed this ministry, visiting as pairs of Catholics and Protestants. As they went out, two-by-two, Catholic and Protestant, women and men, they modelled a different religious and social order not just to the grieving families, but to the wider community, which became aware of their ministry.

As the years went by, Cornerstone organized social services for families, senior citizens and youths, to address the multiple problems created by division and socio-economic deprivation. By 1997 Cornerstone had become part of a new partnership that included the Springfield Road Methodist Church, the Curragh Community (an ecumenical group started by Sr Noreen Christian, on the Protestant side of the peace wall), and the Mid-Springfield Community Association. The new endeavour was called the Forthspring Inter-Community Group. Most of Cornerstone's social work transferred to Forthspring, and is still ongoing.

On Remembrance Sunday 1994, Reynolds felt inspired to join a Protestant congregation for worship. Over the next few weeks, he wrote, 'Some grace drew me back … to visit other Shankill congregations and share in their worship' (quoted in Wells 2010, 136). In time, Reynolds asked Catholic members of Cornerstone to join him. It was the beginning of an initiative that is still ongoing: the Unity Pilgrims. While Cornerstone's contribution to Forthspring was significant, both theologian Leah Robinson (2015, 181) and historian Maria Power (2007) reported that members of Cornerstone 'overwhelmingly agreed' that the Unity Pilgrims were 'the most successful of Cornerstone's projects.' They did not see the Unity Pilgrims as a success because they are still going; rather, they measured success in the prayerful and respectful way the pilgrims go about their visits. When they arrive at a Protestant church they spread themselves out through the congregation, making it more likely they will strike up conversations with their hosts after worship. They make no attempt to proselytize, instead treating Protestants as their Christian sisters and brothers.

As with Reynolds and Reid's impact on political change, it is impossible to quantify Cornerstone's impact on social and religious change. It is likely their contributions to the establishment of Forthspring contributed to wider social changes which helped to mitigate the effects of division and violence. This might be measured through an investigation of Forthspring's activities over the years. But Forthspring is just one organization in Belfast, and its impact is local and limited. It is even more difficult to measure the impact of Cornerstone's prayers, their everyday welcomes to people from both sides of the peace wall, their visits to bereaved families (which may have calmed tensions and kept young men

in some of those families from becoming radicalized), and the changes in perceptions wrought through the Unity Pilgrims' visits to Protestant congregations. There is some qualitative, micro-level evidence that their actions contributed to wider social and religious change through a softening of political/religious identities and more positive perceptions of the so-called 'other' (Brewer, Higgins and Teeney 2011, Wells 2010, Power 2007). While Reynolds and his friends in Cornerstone did not tear down the peace walls or significantly alter the social structures that keep 90 percent of Belfast segregated, their actions contributed to a normalization of ecumenism and established cross-community relationships that would have been un-imaginable in the 1980s.

While Reynolds and Reid's facilitation of the secret political talks depended on the legitimacy they gained through their identification as priests within the Catholic Church, Reynolds did not necessarily need this sort of legitimacy to participate in Cornerstone. Cornerstone was an ecumenical space in which many (perhaps most) of the participants would have identified themselves as on the periphery of their own denomination; in part because they were disillusioned because they believed their denominations were not doing enough to promote peacemaking. Yet it was still important that Reynolds and his friends in Cornerstone cultivated links with the institutional churches. Their witness was not only to the people in the divided and disadvantaged neighbourhood they served; it was also a witness to the mainstream religious institutions that there were other – more radical – ways to live out Christian faith in the midst of violence.

Cornerstone closed in 2012, but this was not the end of its story. It was not the end because steps were taken to embed aspects of Cornerstone's work in other organizations – not only in Forthspring, but also *within the Catholic Church itself.* This was accomplished through the establishment of a Redemptorist 'Peace and Reconciliation Mission' in Clonard, originally staffed by Reynolds until he was joined by a lay worker, Ed Petersen. They took over the organization of the Unity Pilgrims and more ambitiously, devised a plan to share the Unity Pilgrims concept throughout Ireland. This included producing a prayer and study guide which was published in 2010 with a commendation from Noel Treanor, Bishop of Down and Connor. Another initiative, 'In Joyful Hope,' in which Christians observe each other's Eucharistic/communion services, followed on from the Unity Pilgrims and continues to be organized through Clonard's Peace and Reconciliation Mission.[7]

The Unity Pilgrims and In Joyful Hope remain small and peripheral. Yet it seems to have been the decision taken by Redemptorists in Clonard to embed them in their Peace and Reconciliation Mission (which could be considered an expression of the 'institutional' church), that may ensure that

[7] See O'Brien (2017) for more on how the Peace and Reconciliation Mission has developed since Reynolds's death.

the vision of unity and reconciliation they embody is communicated more widely. This demonstrates *how important it is for faith-based activists who are working for change to remain engaged with wider, mainstream religious institutions*. If mechanisms for some of Cornerstone's initiatives to continue within the institutional church had not been created, it is possible they could have died out with Reynolds and the friends who accompanied him. Having said that, neither the Unity Pilgrims nor In Joyful Hope have been widely adopted by churches in other locations throughout Ireland. So while these initiatives have been embedded within part of the institutional church, the evidence for changing the wider institution itself is more limited.

Conclusion

Extra-institutional religion is a new, provisional, concept, based on limited data from a study in Ireland. My reflections on the life of Fr Gerry Reynolds are not intended to demonstrate its validity. Rather, I wanted to explain how contemplating Reynolds's life has helped me refine the concept: I have a greater appreciation of *how important it is for faith-based activists who are working for change to remain engaged with institutional religion*.

This is important because it helps me to develop my argument about the *theoretical potential* of extra-institutional religion. I have argued that extra-institutional religion may be well-placed to contribute to wider change by balancing two paradoxical structural strengths: its position on the margins, and its continued links with institutional religion. The examples from Reynolds's life demonstrate that, at least in part. Davie and Day's conceptual work strengthens my case for the continued significance of historically-dominant religious institutions. I now see that the theoretical potential of extra-institutional religion can be enhanced by emphasizing, more so than I did in *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland,* the importance of engaging with historically-dominant institutions. This has implications for further research, which might challenge or confirm the conceptual utility of extra-institutional religion in Ireland and other European contexts.

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