'Are You a Protestant or a Catholic Muslim?' The Path of Muslim Integration into Northern Ireland

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I. INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH INTO ISSUES surrounding integration is nothing new. From Jews, to Afro-Caribbeans 'we' have always questioned the compatibility of different peoples with 'our' way of life. In recent years the focus of such concern has centred on Muslims living in the West. Indeed, since 9/11 there has been a massive increase in debate and commentary as to whether Islam is compatible with European values, or if Muslims can be integrated at all. Increasingly this discourse is focusing on examples of radical or extreme Islam, which are then used as a starting point to discuss the issue of Islam and integration. Such an approach is entirely misleading and ignores just how multifaceted the process of integration is. It also ignores the context in which these cases of extremism take place. The London bombings may highlight the alienation of some sections of the Muslim community in Britain, but this should not be the paradigm with which to view Muslims in Northern Ireland (NI). Integration is above all, context dependent.

Created by the Government of Ireland Act (1920), NI is an administrative region and one of four constituent parts of the United Kingdom. It is a small unit with less than two million inhabitants, where minority ethnic communities number little more than 1% of the population.[1] Yet the question of how to live with difference is one that has preoccupied NI for decades and longer. NI is perhaps one of the starkest and most well known examples of how problematic identity issues can be. It is an entity which has been blighted by more than three decades of low level

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[1] The Northern Ireland Census (2001) found that ethnic groups other than 'white' numbered 14,279 or less than 1% of the population. While that figure has undoubtedly risen, the numbers of minority ethnic people in NI are still very low.

violence, the origins of which can be traced back more than 300 years. A slight majority of the population are Unionists who wish to remain a part of the United Kingdom, but a significant minority known as Nationalists would prefer to be a part of a united Ireland. These two views are linked to deeper cultural divisions. Unionists are predominantly Protestant, whilst Nationalists are predominantly Roman Catholic. Thus, in its simplistic form we have a division between the Nationalist Roman Catholic minority and the Unionist Protestant majority, and by extension, the divisions and the problems in NI generally, are popularly viewed within a religious paradigm. While religion may not be the whole or even primary explanation, it has become such an important dynamic in the conflict because it is an indicator of a political attitude or identity. Yet where do Muslims fit in, if at all? This chapter will consider the path to integration for Muslims in NI, including the public process of integration, the perceptions of the wider society and of course the role of Muslims themselves in the integration process. Since integration has been so profoundly affected by 9/11 and events since, it is also important to consider the impact of this in NI. However, before any of this can be attempted, an overview of what integration actually means is necessary.

II. WHAT IS INTEGRATION?

Integration: an absolute positive that will cure inter-group tensions and obliterate 'home-grown' terrorist threats, if only it could be achieved. Of course this is somewhat an exaggeration of the terms of the debate, but integration is the buzzword of the moment, especially with regards to Muslim minorities in the West. However, not everyone is speaking the same language when they talk about integration. Outrage, discomfort, indifference or celebration are reactions that may accompany the sight of the hijab in NI, but none of these are incompatible with the concept of integration; it simply depends on what you mean by this. Assimilationism, the liberal approach and multiculturalism are all theories and policies that deal with pluralism or diversity within society. Ultimately they are each trying to engender a common sense of belonging and loyalty between citizens, as well as to the state itself, but each has different priorities and takes a different approach, with the consequence that each produces a different type of integration. However, such conceptual ambiguity has spilt over into analyses of how 'integrated' Muslim communities are in the West. Therefore, a brief dis-