"Christianity is not just about religion": Religious and National Identities in a Northern English town

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ABSTRACT: *Nationality and religion have become the focus of public debates about ethnic integration in Britain, but what do such identities actually mean to people of the largely secular ethnic majority? In this study, 15 people in a small English town were interviewed about their use of religious and national labels such as 'Christian' and 'English'. Collective identities were expressed mainly through individual values and experiences, indicating a sense of belonging to a group, but little consensus about what is shared between its members. Most participants used terms for religious, ethnic, regional and national groups interchangeably to describe their traditions and morals. In contrast, those few who had a strong personal religious identity distinguished sharply between the religious and national, individual and collective aspects of their identities. These participants stressed the importance of religiosity for their personal identity, whilst emphasising the secular and multicultural character of Britain as a country.*

KEYWORDS: RELIGION, NATIONALITY, IDENTITY, BRITAIN, CHRISTIANITY, ETHNICITY

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Introduction

Despite a high level of secularity and general decline in religious belief and behaviour in Britain, the salience of religion has increased in some aspects of the public sphere. Religion has increasingly become part of the debate about immigration and ethnic integration (Kalra & Kapoor, 2009:1407), and Islam in particular is now frequently discussed as a major challenge to the cultural cohesion of western societies. Balibar (2007) argues that these shifts in policy and public debate have been accompanied by similar shifts in public opinion. The nature of prejudice against foreigners, he argues, has shifted from biological racism to 'cultural racism' (Balibar, 2007:84), where people are discriminated against on the grounds of their cultural background and the perceived incompatibility between different cultures. Sides and Citrin's (2007) study of European opinion on immigration found that attitudes about national identity and cultural values were much more salient than economic concerns such as labour shortage. Increased focus on minority identities raises the question of how *majority* ethnic individuals identify with collective religious and national identity labels.

In two recent papers, quantitative survey research was used to investigate the relationship between religious and national identity in Britain (Storm, 2011a; Storm, 2011b). The results showed that despite low levels of religiosity (less than 13 percent of the population are Christian churchgoers[2]), 23 percent of survey respondents agreed with the statement that 'it is important to be Christian to be truly British' in The British Social Attitudes Survey 2008. Respondents who agreed with this statement were more likely than others to have an ethnic national identity[3] and to think of immigration as a threat to national identity. However, while thinking of Britain as a Christian country was associated with Christian belief and affiliation, there was no association with church attendance. Nominal Christianity, that is affiliation without church attendance, was also shown to be associated with thinking immigration is a threat to national identity (Storm, 2011b). Two main implications of this research seem to be "first, that there is a fundamental difference between being personally Christian and thinking of the nation as Christian and secondly, that there is little difference between regarding religion and ethnicity respectively as appropriate criteria for nationality" (Storm, 2011a:841).

A limitation of survey research is that it is difficult to ascertain the importance of each question to the respondent and exactly what a respondent was thinking when they answered the questions. This qualitative analysis on a recruited sample is intended as a further exploration of the relationship between Christianity, national identity and attitudes to immigration as respondents themselves talk about them. If cultural identities have become essential to political attitudes toward immigration and ethnic minorities, then how people construct their own identities and how they see them in relation to larger collectives such as the nation, the religious community and the geographic locality becomes very important indeed. This paper explores the significance of religious identity for the majority white population in England at both the individual and the collective levels, based on a qualitative interview study of national and religious identities in a Northern English town.

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2 12.7% of people in Britain responded both that they belonged to a Christian religion and attended church monthly or more often (Storm 2011a:82 [table 1]).

3 Using factor analysis, three types of national identity were identified: Civic-symbolic, cultural-aesthetic and ethnic national identity. The ethnic national identity loaded strongly on items about whether non-whites can be considered English, Scottish or Welsh, and whether immigration is a threat to the national identity. For more details see Storm 2011b.

Religion and Identity

The apparent increase in religiously motivated international terrorism, fundamentalist religious communities and religious pluralism within western societies has led Jürgen Habermas ([2008](#)) to deconstruct the dichotomy between secular and religious, and instead talk about a 'post-secular' society, where religion still has a role in private and public life despite modernisation. Peter Beyer ([2010](#)) prefers the term 'post-Westphalian', referring to the terms of the Westphalian peace where religion was at once foundational for the nation state and subservient to it. He argues that religion has become more separated from (and thus less controlled by) the traditional structures of the secular nation state. In the post-Westphalian condition, religious and national identities may also become more separate in the *individual* consciousness, as demonstrated by young Muslims' aspiration for a universal religion 'untainted' by national cultural traditions.

On the other hand, French sociologist Daniele Hervieu-Léger ([2000](#)) identifies a general movement towards religious and ethnic traditionalism. The references to tradition as a reaction to loss of collective identity can be found to a varying degree in all European countries, she argues. As examples she cites the importance of the Lutheran state church in Nordic countries and *Front National's* use of Christian imagery to mobilize support in France. In populations where a large proportion do not believe in God and non-observance is an accepted and plausible way of life, the social function of religion remains as a 'guarantor for group identity' ([Bruce, 2001:259](#)). The question is under what circumstances such religious group identities become salient in a predominantly secular context.

Collective identity has been shown to be of universal human importance. Haidt and Joseph ([2007](#)) identified ingroup loyalty as one of the primary foundations of moral decision making and behaviour. Forming the basis of social identity theory, Tajfel's 'minimal group' experiments showed that random assignment to two arbitrary groups produces ingroup favouritism and increases negative attitudes to members of the other group ([Billig & Tajfel, 1973](#)). This demonstrates that group membership is quickly assimilated as a part of each group member's individual identity. However, one could go one step further and claim that each group attains an identity of its own, and that it is this collective identity that the individuals are trying to strengthen by favouring fellow members.

Realistic group conflict theory (RGCT), based on a series of experiments by psychologist and sociologist Muzafer Sherif ([1966](#)) posits that *competition* between groups forms the basis of intergroup hostility ([Campbell, 1965](#); [Sherif, 1966](#); [Jackson, 1993](#)). Bobo ([1983](#)) points out that to determine individual outgroup hostility and prejudice, threats to the survival and status of the group as a whole is just as, if not more important than, threats to individual members. For example, he found that white people in the United States opposed desegregation policies such as the busing of black students into white schools, "not because they felt personally threatened by black people, but because they felt these policies were a threat to the status of their ethnic group and to the social world they were accustomed to" ([Bobo, 1983:1208](#)). Campbell ([1965:291](#)) also points out that it is the *perception* of threat from an outgroup that is crucial for the increase in ingroup solidarity and outgroup hostility whether or not this perception is founded on a real conflict of interest between the groups.

As Seul ([1999:556](#)) puts it, "[g]roup identity is, in essence, a manifestation of the individual identity impulse." Hence threats to the group will be perceived as threats to individual identity, and conversely threats to individuals may be experienced as threats to the group as a whole ([Seul, 1999:557](#)). In Durkheim's ([1912/1971:427](#)) words, "There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and collective ideas

which make up its unity and personality." Negative outgroup attitudes tend to increase with objective material threat such as competition over scarce resources (Green, 2007:368). However, "[s]ubjective feelings of vulnerability can be equally strong predictors of strict gatekeeping attitudes" (Green, 2007:368). The blurring of boundaries between groups, for example through geographical migration and cultural assimilation, is at the same time an objective and subjective process that could lead to increased ingroup identification. Paradoxically, it is "only when the categories of self and other are empirically dubious that they emerge with clarity" (Kinnvall, 2004:753).

Religion may play an important part in both individual and collective identification, partly due to its inherent emphasis on narrative and community. In a qualitative study of religious identity and belief in Northern England, Abby Day (2011) found people locate the source and maintenance of their beliefs in relationships with family, friends and local communities. The emphasis on continuity and tradition (Hervieu-Léger, 2000) also encourages bringing up children to hold the same religious beliefs and perform the same religious practices. Thus at the macro level, religion is transmitted to the next generation of the same cultural community (Storm & Voas, 2012). At the micro level religion becomes something that family members have in common, creating an association between family identity and religious identity which is likely to further a sense of affinity with the religion in multireligious societies (Day, 2011:160). However, it is still unclear how religion is associated with collective national and ethnic identities among people with little or no religious beliefs and behaviours in a relatively secular country such as Britain.

Method

15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with people living in a locality in the North West of England between October 2009 to May 2010. Most of the participants were recruited through door-knocking (Davies, 2011), and some through directly approaching them in public venues, such as pubs and cafes.[4] Choosing streets and venues that represent different kinds of neighbourhoods in the area and approaching people directly ensured that the recruited sample was diverse in terms of age, gender, social class and perspectives on religion and nationality. Nine women and six men between the ages of 19 and 85 were interviewed. Table 1 shows the age, gender and the initial self-identity of participants, but as will become clear these labels were understood very differently. The names of participants have been changed to protect confidentiality. Because the aim was to research majority identities, the participants were all white British, and had a Christian or secular family background. The interviews, which lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, were conducted by the author and took place either in the participants' homes or in public places, such as cafes or meeting rooms, and were recorded on a digital audio-recorder and subsequently transcribed.

Each semi-structured interview started with an "identity labelling" exercise where the participant was asked to choose five out of a large number of cards with different identity labels written on them (e.g. 'English', 'Catholic', 'Black', etc.)[5] This was followed by discussion around the selection

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4   It was explained to participants that the study would be about national culture and religion, and they were given a leaflet with more details about the study and that it would be part of a doctoral thesis. Participants who wanted to take part were invited to suggest a time and place that suited them. No participant was interviewed on the same day as they were recruited, and after the research had been explained to them all participants gave informed consent for the interview to be recorded and used for research.

5   There were 55 pre-defined labels to choose from as well as five blank labels: White, Black, British, English, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, European, Irish, Polish, Caribbean, Asian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Bengali, Punjabi, African, Nigerian, American, South-American, Australian, Southern, Northern, Mancunian, "[town]ian", Cosmopolitan,

and ranking that the participant has made, where they are allowed to change the selection of the labels. This method is adopted from DeHanas' (2010) research on minority religious identities in London and its primary aim is to generate conversation about identities and their salience to the participant. The goal was not to create a fixed list of identities in order of importance, but to explore ambiguities and context dependence. Hence participants were allowed to change the selection of the labels during the discussion. The main research questions were concerned in what contexts people experience religious events and symbols as important, in what contexts nationality is important to them, and to what extent they distinguish between religious and nonreligious aspects of the national culture. The term 'religious' was not defined or explained for the participants, because their interpretations were the object of study. In this article, 'religious' is used about anything directly related to the belief, symbols and ritual worship of supernatural beings or forces within a collective tradition. When describing a person, the participants' own terminology is used. 'Nonreligious' is understood to mean anything that is not religious by this definition.

Table 1. Interview Participants and Characteristics.

Interview	Alias	Gender	Age	Religious self-identification	National Self-identification
1	Susan	F	58	Christian	English
2	Claire	F	33	Christian	British
3	Tom	M	59	Christian	British/English
4	Caroline	F	56	Christian	English
5	Margaret	F	67	Christian	English
6	Mark	M	74	Christian	British
7	Sarah	F	85	Christian	British/English
8	Kate	F	33	Atheist	British
9	Michelle	F	38	Christian	British
10	Jenny	F	30	Not religious	English
11	Peter	M	37	Christian	British/English
12	Liam	M	19	Catholic	British/English
13	Andrew	M	53	Christian	British/English
14	Vanessa	F	39	Not affiliated	British
15	Shayne	M	25	Not religious	British

The Town

The research was conducted in a small deindustrialized town in Greater Manchester with a population of about 20,000. At their height of productivity, the cotton mills in the area employed 80 percent of the population, but today there are no mills still in use, and the main economic activity in the area is in distribution and manufacturing. The population is predominantly working class and lower middle class, but the area has the highest house prices in the borough and less than 10 percent of the

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Religious, Christian, Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Atheist, Agnostic, Spiritual, Male, Female, Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Young, Older, Middle-aged, Teenager, Working class, Middle class, Professional, Student, Pensioner, Unemployed, Human.

population live in income-deprived households. The age distribution in the area is similar to the national average for England.[6]

This town was chosen as a case study for research on national and religious identity was that in contrast to many other parts of Greater Manchester, it has a stable and vital local community with a central market square, supermarkets, pubs and cafes, a town hall, a public library and a health centre. It also has a number of local schools and churches. Talking to people one also quickly got the sense that it has low rates of out-migration.[7] Many of the older residents have lived in the town all their lives and many of the younger residents aspire to remain in the local area. The existence of an established local community enabled a comparison between local and national identities and loyalties.

A second reason for selecting the town as the site for conducting the research was its ethnic composition as a predominately white area that neighbors more ethnically diverse areas. In the 2001 Census more than 97 percent of the population identified as white compared to a national average of 90.9 percent. This enabled easy access to the majority population through relatively randomized methods such as door knocking (Davies, 2011). At the same time the participants were conscious of the impacts of ethnic and religious diversity in local communities due to the ethnic composition of surrounding areas. In one neighbouring area, for example, 37 percent of the population is non-white, mainly Bangladeshi. There is also a history of political nationalism in the area. Candidates from the British National Party have stood in general elections, and their relative success was thought to be a result of the Oldham race riots in 2001, which although they did not take place in this particular area, affected the whole region.

Results

'They're just labels, but they make up how people perceive me'

To start the conversation, participants were asked to choose up to five labels that they felt were important to describe who they were. They were then asked if the labels they had chosen were important to define who they were, which often led to a discussion of the meanings of identity. An issue that emerged in a number of these conversations was the difficulty in negotiating the balance between ascribed and self-defined identities (Eriksen, 1993). Talking about this established that the labels chosen were not necessarily the most personally meaningful to the participant. As Michelle put it: "Well, obviously I had to pick five, but I don't think they define who a person is, no. I think they're just labels, but they make up how people perceive me." Many were reluctant to label themselves and pointed out that choosing from a predefined set of categories restricted their options (even if blank cards were available), leading to a repetition of ascribed categories, rather like filling out forms. As Vanessa said:, "I'd put British, but I suppose part of it is 'cause we're used to filling identity forms in, it's 'White', 'English'. You – you know, tick on the boxes there. It's not, I don't feel a - a distinct identity."

A few participants pointed out that it may be because they were in the majority that ethnic, religious and national differences seemed unproblematic and unimportant, and that those who had felt discriminated against on ethnic or religious grounds may feel differently about it. For example, Kate

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6   The statistics are mainly from reports from the local council based on census data from 2011, and have not been referenced for reasons of anonymity.

7   In the Census year 2001, 88 percent of households lived at the same address or in the same area one year ago. This compares to 86 per cent for the North-West as a whole and 77 per cent for Manchester (ONS, 2011).

said, "I'm never going to be really judged on it (...) and I can't empathize with how that feels so all I can do is try and treat everybody the same." The idea of whiteness as racially unmarked ([Byrne, 2006:25](#)) was thus reflected upon rather than merely accepted by a number of the participants.

Religious and Nonreligious Identities

Most of the respondents, whether or not they were religious themselves, felt that being religious was generally positive rather than negative for morality and social cohesion, although they almost unanimously acknowledged that it can be used to bad ends. Or as Susan put it, "faith is good if you use it the right way." Two participants identified as Not Religious, and one of the participants did not want to specify her affiliation. The only participant to explicitly and positively define herself as an Atheist, Kate, did not blame religion for political unrest. She argued that there has been too much focus on religion since September 11, 2001, and said "people seem to think that if they can blame religion, or a religion, these things will go away." Political conflicts were sometimes attributed to religious difference rather than religion itself. Not Religious Shayne, for example, said, "It's probably the cause of every war known to man. I think it's good that people believe in stuff like that, but I just think if there wasn't so many different religions you wouldn't have so much conflict of ideologies and the world would be a better place."

Nevertheless, some of the respondents who were religious themselves emphasized the potential of religious beliefs to bring different faith communities together. As Andrew, an active church member, put it, "Church for me is all about sort of oneness (…) the faith I practise is, is eh, is Christian faith, but I believe in a universal God. (…) I believe in oneness." Moreover, most participants did not seem to express a great deal of identification with their particular religious denomination. Many had been brought up with parents from two different Christian traditions, and some had converted, left the church or changed denomination over the course of their lives. Peter, who was brought up Catholic, chose to call himself 'Christian' instead, saying, "I don't see that it needs to be separated into so many different schools of thought."

Religion was generally not much discussed among friends and family. For some, especially those who did not consider themselves strongly religious, it was not seen as relevant or interesting enough to talk about. For the religiously active, however, there was a conscious avoidance of the topic in public. As Vassenden and Anderson ([2010](#)) point out, faith can constitute a stigma in a secular society even when it is the majority faith, and for Christians it can be difficult to decide whether or not to disclose this aspect of their identity since it is not something which is immediately visible. Vassenden and Anderson's ([2010](#)) research in Norway also suggests that the increased association between faith and racial minorities means that whiteness has become similarly associated with non-religiosity. White people are thus presumed to be nonreligious unless they actively inform people otherwise, and many prefer to keep their religiosity hidden in order to avoid confrontation.

Andrew's experience of anti-religious views has made him wary of discussing the topic even when others bring it up, for fear of seeming like he is trying to force his views on anyone. He explained, "People I know like in the pub tend to be eh,... not religious. (...) I don't like to, try to push my views on anybody else, I try not to." The feeling that religion is something best kept to oneself and practised only in moderation is a view shared by the religious and nonreligious alike. When asked what he thinks of religious people, nonreligious Shayne expressed a similar attitude, "It just depends on how religious. Like some people who believe it I've not got a problem with, but other people if they actively force their religion on people, they – I don't, I don't think they should be doing that."

Perhaps as a result of the privatisation of religion and emphasis on individualism, the different aspects of religion as belief, practice, tradition and identity are not necessarily connected, as pointed out in Abby Day's (2009; 2011) studies of nonbelieving Christians. In the current study, one can observe three different ways of being religious or thinking about religion. These can be labelled religion as spiritual experience, religion as morality and religion as tradition and belonging. While some participants mentioned more than one of these, they tended to focus on one aspect of religion rather than a combination.

religion as spiritual experience

Some of the participants described religion as important for their inner spiritual life. For these people religiosity was described primarily as an individual feeling more than a group identity, and independent of other identities, such as family, nationality or local community. Many of these participants had converted or changed denomination as adults. Some were churchgoers and some were not, but they had in common that they talked about religion in terms of deep religious or spiritual experience, and the experiential element was emphasized over particular beliefs, scripture or dogma. These participants are what Abby Day (2011:165) calls 'theocentric' in that their religious beliefs are considered an essential part of who they are. This religious orientation may help them relate to people of other religions on the basis of religious experience or belief in universal principles such as God. Andrew said of his Christian faith that, "it allows me to connect with people who have similar thoughts, (…) But it also allows me to understand, eh, the Muslim world, and I understand that they're only trying to make exactly the same way but from a different angle."

A few mentioned the importance of religion as solace and focus in times of crisis, and the ability to "take comfort in the fact that whatever happens in life, God and Jesus are there" (Claire). However the opposite argument was also used, and Jenny, referring to the loss of a family member, said "If there's a God, why would he let it happen? But it's a strange world, so I think there's something out there." The choice to not be religious was also very personal for an Atheist in the sample. Kate, who had Christian parents and a religious education, said, "It just suddenly dawned on me that I'd never believed it and that I'd always felt a bit guilty. Now I just think, I don't – I don't believe it. I've got nothing at all against religion."

religion as morality

Many of the participants mentioned morality as an important aspect of Christianity, and for some it seemed to be the very definition of the Christian religion, quite irrespective of ritual practice, or belief in God, as is illustrated in the following examples:

> *Interviewer: You said you're a Christian.*
> *Susan: In the very, in a small 'c'. I don't go to church regularly because I don't fit it into my*
> *life. But I am a Christian. I have Christian beliefs.*
> *Interviewer: Could you mention any particular Christian beliefs that...*
> *Susan: Doing good for my fellow man. Things like that.*
> *Interviewer: Do you believe in God?*
> *Susan: Yes and no. Sitting on the wall (laughter).*

Tom: You can be a good Christian without believing in God I think. 'Cause Christianity is not just about religion: it's an attitude isn't it? (...) It's a set of values that you're given as a child: 'It's wrong to do this' 'You don't do that'. Alright, some of them coincide with the Ten Commandments and what have you, but it's not all based on religion is it?

Christianity is often taken to mean 'civility' for those without religious beliefs who nevertheless identify as Christian. Day (2009; 2011) also observed this phenomenon, coining the term 'aspirational nominalists.' All those who associated religion with morality in the interviews had a religious background, and while not everyone was churchgoing, many defined religion at least partly in terms of practice. For example, Vanessa, who was brought up in an evangelical church, said, "I think in order to say you're a Christian, you have to be a practising Christian and a praying Christian and a churchgoing Christian (…) I have Christian beliefs but wouldn't normally call myself a Christian." When asked if she would describe herself as a religious person, she simply replied, "I'm a moral person."

religion as tradition and belonging

Those who emphasized the traditional aspects of religion were not very religious themselves, but saw cultural value in religious tradition as a part of their national identity or sense of belonging to a family. Some also highlighted the importance of religious belonging for the sake of belonging to 'something'. Vanessa's account of a recent holiday in Rome illustrates this well, and provides an almost Durkheimian view of the social benefits of religion, "I actually felt quite emotional going into those Catholic churches, because I didn't belong to something. And I - I was actually envious almost of what these Catholics have."

While one participant (Sarah) said explicitly that she went to church primarily to see her friends, it was clear from the other interviews with active or formerly active church members that the social aspects of religion were important to them. Family was also emphasized as extremely important and everyone, religious or not, mentioned Christmas, often together with nonreligious traditions such as birthday celebrations and Sunday lunches, as important for keeping the family together. For many participants family tradition was also an important aspect of being Christian, and this gave them a Christian identity regardless of their beliefs, as described by Day (2009:265-267).

Mark: Well, as a child I was always fetched up as a Christian. With church and everything else. So was my daughter. And so we're still Christians although we don't go to church. (...) I think it gets passed down through the families.

When asked to elaborate on why he calls himself a Catholic, when religion does not influence his life, 19 year-old Liam referred to his relatives, "It's like aunties and stuff, they go to church. It's important to them. So that'll make it a little bit more important to me, just because it's important to my family."

National Identities

National identity appeared to be important to most participants, but only in some situations. Many mentioned that they felt particular national pride in connection with sports, and going abroad, and some also said that they felt pride in having a democratic government or welfare system. However, despite everyone choosing at least one nationality label to describe themselves when they were asked to

pick five labels, national identity seemed remarkably non-salient for most respondents apart from during national sports games and travels abroad. This largely replicates the findings of Steve Fenton (2007) from a larger interview-study conducted in Bristol. Rather than replicating the typology of ethnic, civic and cultural national identities found in the quantitative analysis (Storm, 2011b), the interviews in which respondents were allowed to speak freely point to a greater distinction between those to whom nationality is acknowledged as important and those to whom it is not.

While some seemed indifferent, others explicitly denied the relevance of national categories, pointing out their arbitrary nature. Peter, a highly educated participant, said, "really, national boundaries are flexible and fluid and they're shaped to suit different things, so I don't see them as anything other than a kind of, you know, cultural construct." Jenny even denied feeling more British or English when going abroad, somewhat paradoxically, referring to the availability of Chinese and Indian food as making her feel like she was in Britain, "So you still feel like you're at home 'cause you have your takeaways at home." Some of the respondents also seemed to change their attitude during the course of the conversation. For example, Shayne expressed great pride in being British, but when asked in what situations he felt that his national identity was important to him, admitted that "Eh, I don't think it's that important to be honest."

The distinction between British and English also seems irrelevant for most, and the terms are used interchangeably or depending on context. This might be because of the dominance of England in the United Kingdom which has rendered the distinction unimportant within England (Kumar, 2000). However it is worth noting that some had strong opinions on the matter. A 'Northern' English identity was also important to most respondents, who expressed the differences between the North and South of England as very significant. Unlike national differences which were merely hinted at and downplayed (possibly for fear of appearing racist), there was no evidence of such discretion when it came to regional stereotypes. For example, Claire was quite adamant that people "really aren't as friendly in London as they are here." For those to whom national identity was important, it was mainly expressed in two ways, which can be described as Reactive and Intuitive national identification.[8]

reactive national identification

In the process of identification labelled 'reactive national identification,' national identity becomes significant because it is important to others of a different nationality. This was clearly the case for those who had strong opinions on feeling English rather than British, and related it to a worry about devolution, and a feeling that England should have its own identity separate to the other British nations.

> *Margaret: I never thought about it to be quite honest, until you get Scottish parliaments and Welsh parliaments. (..) that is what's made me feel more English.*

> *Caroline: The others, Scotland and Wales are becoming so fiercely patriotic to release themselves from England, yeah. But it's good. It's good that we've risen now. We can wear the rose, and are proud to call ourselves English.*

While Scotland and Wales are the most cited 'others' in this respect (Fenton, 2007), some also reacted to European integration and to other countries where they have had travelled or have had

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8   This distinction is only based on the data, and not on any typology from the pre-existing literature.

friends. However, the presence of people of other nationalities and ethnicities within Britain was very rarely mentioned at all as justification for feeling more English or British, apart from in reference to people who they thought were expressing national sentiments for the wrong reasons. For example, while many felt proud of national symbols, like the flags, the anthem and the Queen, they equally expressed frustration at the racist connotation of some symbols, particularly the St. George flag.

> Kate: I don't think showing the Union Jack or something along those lines makes me a
> racist, 'cause it's not. It's our national flag. But I do despise the way that some people use
> the national flag, especially the cross of St. George, in a ...just in an aggressive display.

It is important to stress that the reaction to others does not necessarily mean that the national identification it results in is a purely negative one. Defining oneself by what one is not often leads to positive identifications with both cultural symbols and political bodies. Claire, for example, saw the 'separating' aspects of national identity as a way of unifying people of different religious and cultural backgrounds within the country, and said, "I like having some way of seeing yourself as a group of people regardless of your religion as well. I think that's nice. So I like the multicultural aspect of being British."

intuitive national identification

Another observed tendency was to express a national pride consciously and explicitly devoid of content, including contrast or opposition to others. This is national identity for its own sake, or as Shayne expressed it when asked what he thought the most important British values were, "you've got to be proud of who you are (...) you've got to feel British, it's just like a strong belief of self-pride. You're really proud of who you are. So that's a good thing – shouldn't be ashamed of who you are." The sentiment seemed based on intuition or emotion rather than conscious reasoning, and as in interviews with people about their moral judgments (Haidt, 2012:40), the participants often could not justify why it was important to them. This type of national identification typically came up in conversations about sports, the one issue where none of the respondents seemed to have any reservations about expressing patriotic sentiments. These dialogues with Susan and Liam are fairly representative:

> Interviewer: I was wondering in what situations you feel that your nationality is important
> to you?
> Susan: None, except you've got to have an allegiance to something. If you support a
> football team you've got to support one or the other. You can't not support because it's no
> fun. (Laughter)
> Interviewer: Do you support a football team?
> Susan: No. I don't care about football, but if England is playing, yes, I'll want England to
> win.

> Interviewer: Why is it that you're proud of being English or British?
> Liam: I don't know. I'm just proud. Eh, probably the football side of it. Supporting your
> team, supporting your country. Just how I feel (laughter). Not really like a good way to

explain it to be honest. ... (pause) I am proud. (laughter).

Like Vanessa, who envied Catholics for belonging to 'something', intuitive national identification is based on the idea that group identity has value in itself and is something to aspire to.

'I don't think there is any British values –it's about individual values'

When it came to the positive content of their national identity, most who expressed pride either struggled to articulate what exactly it was about their nation that they felt pride in or dismissed the question by referring to one or both of the above processes of identification.

Most participants, when asked to identify the most important British values, replied with something quite general like 'respect', 'freedom' or 'equality'. Interestingly, however, when asked to identify what their most important personal values were, most respondents replied with exactly the same concepts. It seems most people projected their own value systems onto that of the nation. While the reverse process is possible, there was a distinct lack of consensus among participants in what they saw as the main national values, indicating that people did not simply adopt a fixed set of collective value priorities as their own. Just as religious identity was observed to take on the meaning of the participant's values and morals, so it is with nationality. In other words, the individual's view of what is good and right becomes associated with every identity label that person happens to identify with, so that if respect is important then the British are generally respectful of one another, and Christianity is a religion characterized by its respect for one's fellow man.

The similarities in individual and national values are to be expected considering that "[f]or ethnic identity to have personal importance it must provide the individual with something he or she considers valuable" (Eriksen, 1993:33). As some participants explicitly noted, belonging to a group can be considered valuable for its own sake, and connecting one's own values to those of others is a way of expressing that one is a part of a whole. Abby Day criticises scholars for being too focused on the 'content of belief' (Day, 2011:192), and points out that it is often the experience of belonging which is the 'object of worship' (2011:194). Thus, individual expressions of collective identities do not render them meaningless. However, they do not require a consensus about what the collective identity is or should be, and could lead to uncritical conflation of personal and collective values. Some participants realized their own bias, such as these two women who, when being asked what they thought the most important British values were, hesitantly replied:

> *Susan: I would like to think, but unfortunately I can't say it is true, that people care about each other. And that we're more patient than perhaps some other nationalities. And hopefully tolerance. But it isn't always the case.*

> *Michelle: I think there's values that I have, but I don't think I'd summarize how everybody in Britain thinks (...) I don't think there is any British values – 'cause it's so mixed up. I think it's about individual values.*

'Going to the pub is more British than going to church'

Nominal Christianity without either strong beliefs or practices was a recurring theme, but for

some it was also associated with national identity and national tradition. When asked directly, most of the participants did not associate being Christian with being British, but there were exceptions. One described Britain as a 'Christian country', but she also denied that one had to be Christian to be British as an individual. On the contrary, she took Christianity to mean liberal values and respect for individual religious freedom.

> *Caroline: This country, whether or not it appears to be or not, has its values in Christianity. It's a Christian country first of all. [...] That that is our identity, regardless of how many people do or don't believe […] the laws that you're following actually, are really based upon Christian known truth, and freedom. And it's that, it's that freedom of being able to be who you are and what you are– but, within, within the core of England, of what England is.*

Tom, who hesitated to describe himself as a Christian and who neither believed in God nor went to church, did think it was important to be Christian to be British, but he also saw 'being Christian' primarily as following and respecting western liberal values such as 'democracy and fairness'. He used the word 'Christian' as another word for 'civil', and as such the religious background was actually irrelevant on reflection. Thus, he also saw no problem with being both Muslim and British, for example. He also mentioned that his daughter-in-law was of Asian background, "She's Indian descent. But I think she's got – I think she's got Christian values. We never talk too much about religion. But, I think she's got the same kind of values as, as the rest of us."

In addition to using the term 'Christian' about civil and moral virtue rather than religious affiliation, it was frequently used interchangeably with ethnic or national labels, such as English. Similarly, 'Asian', 'Pakistani' and 'Muslim' were used interchangeably to describe the religious minorities in the borough.

The one who most succinctly summed up the relationship between national and religious identity was Kate, the Atheist with a Christian background, who replied to the question of whether it is important to be Christian to be British in this way:

> *No. I find that a very hypocritical part of 'People who claim to be British, they should be more like us if they want to live here. We're a Christian country.' The only people I've ever heard say that have never set foot in a church in the last decade unless they've been to a wedding, a funeral or a christening. I find that very hypocritical. (...) I think going to the pub is more British than going to church.*

When Christianity is seen as a requirement for being British it may be because Christianity is understood to mean civil morality or western liberal and democratic values. The reference to Christianity can thus be seen as a way of expressing a 'culturally racist' (Balibar, 2007) reaction against traditions and values that are experienced as foreign and threatening. What is deemed to be at stake is the survival of 'British', 'Western' or 'liberal' culture as a whole, quite aside from any individual's religious beliefs and practices. Kate's reflections were common to many participants, especially the younger ones who described Britain as a place where one's religion was of little importance, but where Christian identifications lingered.

Attitudes to Immigration and Diversity

All participants initially responded 'no' when asked whether ethnicity was important to them. Many also pointed out valuable friendships and relationships that cross national or denominational lines, and common values like respect, decency and good manners were stressed as the key to integration and conflict avoidance. Still, most of the conversations turned to more problematic issues associated with ethnic and cultural diversity at some point, and religious division was frequently mentioned in relation to immigration. However, it is unclear to what extent these labels were used as coded references to race.

There was widespread concern about too rapid ethnic change in Britain and in the local community. Tom was concerned that "Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities is (sic) growing and the white population is shrinking. So, pretty soon we're going to be the minority." But on the whole, racial generalisations were virtually absent from the conversations and the emphasis was largely on differentiation rather than inferiorisation (Wieviorka, 1995). For example, Margaret envisioned increased tensions as a result of cultural differences, without laying the blame, arguing, "when you leave something to fester it will do, and it will get worse. And it'll get worse on both sides." No one expressed concern about crime, terrorism or other threats to physical security in connection with immigration. Instead the main issue seemed to be cultural and value differences. Whether using the words 'English', 'Christian' or 'White', participants seemed largely to be referring to a vague notion of the cultural community they perceived themselves to be a part of. Rather than expressing negative attitudes, most seemed torn between the benefits of diversity and the benefits of homogeneity and stability in a society.

This became particularly clear when we were talking about the local community. When asked about the diversity of the immediate local area, more than half of the participants described the town as white, although some preferred to use the word "English", possibly avoiding the subject for fear of appearing racist or overly concerned about race (Byrne, 2006:72). Michelle, who could be called white British, but not English, related the reluctance to accept outsiders to national identity, "I think the people from [the town] are very 'white British'. Very 'England' as well. Not so much British actually. […] There's a sense of pride of being from [the town] and being English." Michelle and many others experienced this local nationalism as conservative rather than explicitly racist, although one could argue that there are elements of racism in the conflation of local, national and racial identity. The town was described as a place resistant to many aspects of social and economic change, including deindustrialisation, educational reforms and local government initiatives, but with that comes resistance to immigration and racial and cultural diversity. Vanessa, who had moved from a more ethnically diverse area close by, and who felt generally positive toward the influence of different cultures, said about her neighbourhood, "I like how our community is. No, I wouldn't want it to alter. And I do think, ehm, different backgrounds coming in would alter it. It would significantly alter it, you know."

While resistant to local change, participants identified the growing division between neighbouring communities as one of the main problems with cultural and ethnic integration. Claire, a teacher, described it this way, "On the side where my school is it is all Bangladeshi community. On the other side it's all white lower working class community. And the road divides the two and never the twain shall meet." When asked about the reason for the lack of mixing, most replied that they didn't know why and found it puzzling, but felt powerless to change it. Kate described her initial shock at discovering the segregation upon moving into a more ethnically diverse area, but admitted that she didn't do much to challenge the norms.

Several respondents mentioned that they thought there was a lack of open debate about questions of cultural diversity and integration and many were clearly worried during the interview as well, constantly reassuring the interviewer that they were not prejudiced, and lowering their voice when topics like integration and cultural difference came up, even when their opinions were not at all controversial. The tendency for white people to avoid or circumvent the topic of race has been observed in other studies, such as Bridget Byrne's (2006:72) study of white mothers. This makes it more difficult to know whether the beliefs and opinions expressed are sincerely held or just a reflection of what the participant thinks the researchers want to hear. Apart from the oldest participants, all seemed well trained in using inclusive language and avoiding cultural specificities, much like the American teenagers interviewed by Christian Smith (2005:160). They did this by listing more than one religious minority for example, recounting the views of friends, relatives or 'people' rather than their own views, or qualifying whatever they said with the caveat that it was just their opinion. However, some of the interviews quoted here illustrate that at least some saw it as an opportunity to express themselves outside of what they seemed to regard as a tyranny of political correctness.

All of the respondents seemed to be torn between what they viewed as nice, tolerant attitudes that they are were proud to hold, and attitudes that they felt were slightly 'wrong' or unpopular, such as nationalist or ethnocentric attitudes. It is the typical liberal conundrum, illustrated in examples such as pride in England for its democratic system of governance, or thinking Christianity is better than other religions because it is more open and tolerant. However, it is also clear that many respondents struggled because their feelings and attachments were in conflicted with their principles of tolerance, equality and respect. These identities were neither liberal nor conservative, 'racist' or 'cultural relativist', and they were predominantly expressed as inclusive rather than exclusive identities. Most of the participants seemed to want exotic multiculturalism, friendly diversity and Little England[9] familiarity. When this combination is not perceived to be realized, the problems are often attributed to "the insurmountability of cultural differences" (Balibar, 2007:84).

Discussion

Religion, ethnicity and nationality are similar in that all are ways of identifying, not so much with an abstract vision of a social group, but with one's own history, family and the norms, language and traditions that are grounded in personal relationships (Day, 2011). These identities are extended to include an imaginary community of likeminded people, but this does not necessarily mean a conscious exclusion of people not belonging to this community, although it may be an unintended consequence. Because they have a similar significance as cultural heritage, national and religious identities can be conflated, even in a predominantly secular context. However, religion did not have the same salience for the identity of all participants in the study.

Those who identify with Christianity but report that their religious beliefs are not personally important to them emphasize the traditional, moral and cultural aspects of religiosity, linking it to family, nationality or ethnicity. In contrast, for those who are personally deeply religious, their faith has a different spiritual and social meaning than their nationality. Hence they come to occupy separate mental categories in the participants' conception of their own identification. Britain is seen as both Christian and secular depending on the context, but those with a strong Christian identity tend to emphasize the collective secularity and religious diversity of Britain, while maintaining the importance of their personal religious identity to their own life experience. This separation of personal and national

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9   "Little England" or "Little Englander" is a term used to reflect nostalgia over nationalism and resistance to globalisation.

religious identity was also expressed by the one participant who expressed a clear Atheist identity.

In the interviews, the collective identities of the nation and religion were often expressed intuitively as important, and usually described as having the qualities of the participant's personal values, thus creating coherence between the self and the group. Because of this close link between individual and national identities, one would expect those who were active Christians to also describe the nation as Christian. This seemed not to be the case, however. Since religious people felt their own faith to be at odds with the majority view, both their individual religiosity and the secular identity of Britain emerged with more clarity for them than it did for others (Kinnvall, 2004:753; Vassenden & Andersson, 2010). In Beyer's (2010) 'post-Westphalian condition', religious and national identities are experienced as separate entities, but this seems only to be the case for those whose religious identity is conscious and articulated.

According to Realistic Group Conflict theory, ingroup favouritism and outgroup hostility may derive from actual or perceived conflicts of interest between groups. In other words, religion would only increase in salience as long as religious divisions are seen as a basis for group identities and conflict. The threatened identity does not have to be at the national or individual level. Intermediate social identities such as the family and the local community have identities of their own as 'Christian', 'English', etc. which could also be influential for how individuals conceptualize religion in relation to the nation. For example, it is perfectly plausible that individual immigrants could be liked and respected and immigration could be tolerated and even encouraged at the national level, and yet the threat to local homogeneity and distinctiveness could be seen as reason for opposing immigration. Hence, as pointed out by Bobo (1983), it is important to take into account both individual- and group-level identities when determining outgroup attitudes.

Conclusion

While religion and other cultural issues are increasingly relevant, and even central to debates of immigration and integration (Kalra & Kapoor, 2009:1407), the increased focus on minority religions in the public sphere does not necessarily make majority religion more important. As this and previous (Storm 2011a; 2011b) studies have shown, the association between religious identity, national identity and anti-immigration is often strongest among those whose religious identity is weak or ambiguous. Terms for religious, ethnic, regional and national collectives were used interchangeably as expressions of the same traditions and values. This study shows that taking into account the collective as well as the individual levels of identification is crucial for understanding the complexity of associations between attitudes and identities. In addition, the findings highlight the importance of personal salience, a factor that is often ignored in survey research.

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