Moral Transformation of Religious Conflict: Believers & Bonfire in Belfast, Northern Ireland

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The purpose of this project was to investigate the cultural and historical implications of contemporary religious changes among two case studies of millenarian movements, drawing specifically on ethnographic field research already conducted in a Hmong village in Northern Thailand, and continuing research on conflict transformation among the Protestant and Catholic communities of Belfast, Northern Ireland. Drawing from both written and visual ethnographic methodology, the aim of this project is to use the unique qualities of a visually supplemented narrative to illustrate and explicate how people within these millenarian movements interpret religious conflict as an “enchanted” (Gell 1994) narrative of persecution, actively transforming the experienced narrative to ostensibly collapse the sacred into the mundane, the physical with the metaphysical, and the “fallen” with the “sublime” (Webster 2013).

The focus of the research I conducted for my ORCA grant project took place between July and August 2018 in Belfast, Northern Ireland and Dublin, Ireland. I investigated the perceived narrative of religious conflict by living in Belfast for four weeks and spending time with locals in Protestant, Baptist, and Catholic congregations. I attended Bible study sessions as well as spent time interviewing them as they performed what they believed to be their religious obligations, such as conducting “street preaching” sessions wherein they would preach to passersby along the busy streets of the Belfast city center. Throughout this time spent with informants, I took photographs and video in an observational documentary style, capturing moments which allowed for the illustration of the cultural context—the visual meanings and semiotics which went beyond gesture into a more metaphysical realm speaking to the “enchanted” world I was attempting to access.

Perhaps the most visually dramatic examples of ritual which I investigated were the rituals which are held every year on the Eleventh of July, the night before the Orange Order holds its parades on the twelfth of July commemorating the victory of the Battle of the Boyne. I documented the days leading up to the burning of these multi-story high bonfires, which are stacks and stacks of wooden palettes built up into massive structures by the Protestant community in locations throughout Belfast. These towering wooden forms loom as tall as the buildings next to them, sometimes taller—and when the celebrations begin, public transportation shuts down as local authorities attempt to keep safety throughout the city. These bonfires are seen as a celebration of Protestant pride and unity with the United Kingdom. Protestant families gathered to watch the burning, with Orange Walks parading effigies of Catholic figureheads or burning Irish flags to the beat of traditional flutes and drums. However, the predominant sentiment from those I interviewed was not a feeling of violence or anger—a large number of the people participating in these dramatic demonstrations were, rather, there to participate in the spectacle itself rather than to support the cause. While some of the bonfires may be lit out of a desire to enact change in the community, the community gatherings at these bonfires created a liminal space where families, friends, and even random spectators could gather to see a massive display of fire and theatrics. Local firemen hosed down adjacent buildings to prevent property damage as the intense heat from the bonfires radiated outwards from the sweeping flames—meanwhile, music was blasted, people danced, people drank, people sang songs of Loyalist pride, people took videos and selfies and posted on social media.

I attempted to use the immersive documentary short film experience of these bonfires as a means to investigate not only cultural narratives of conflict, but narratives of tradition itself—the rituals which continue to evolve within themselves as the society itself evolves. While some bonfires in Belfast may not
be at the same extreme state of cultural tension and religious divides which they were during the Troubles, the bonfires still hold a cultural significance in how that narrative of conflict has evolved.

Beyond this, interviews with street preachers in the area demonstrated how burning itself was a visual symbol—when leaving the Orange Order, one street preacher told me that he burned his flag as a symbol of departing from his old ways of structured religion. This same street preacher fervently believed that he was enacting change on the world around him by devoting himself to the life God expected of him—brining people to “their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” through street preaching for five hours every morning. The last morning I spent with this street preacher in Belfast, the local shopping center he usually stood outside had completely burned down. As I filmed him, he testified that he knew that these flames were God’s power—“that’s how he teaches us, he burns things down and tells us to start anew.” However, while the bonfires and traditions of burning continue in Belfast, the belief and narratives are continually evolving to contain different meanings as participants impart new meaning into them within new cultural contexts.

Figure 1 – Spectators cheer as a bonfire is burned in celebration of the Eleventh of July, a Protestant demonstration of pride and unity with the United Kingdom and the victory of the Battle of the Boyne.