**Was there an English National Identity? A Troubled Historiographical Discourse**

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# *Abstract*

The historiography on English identity finds it difficult to agree on its definition. This paper aims to show that the debates around English identity should be understood as arising from the ingrained tensions between three topoi of discourse on the English national identity.

First, current historiography emphasizes the centrality of Protestantism to the emergence of an English identity. Despite the preoccupation of nineteenth-century historiography with the loss of faith and the secularization of the state, the country’s civil religion was still Protestant. In addition, English identity in the nineteenth century was apparently deeply indebted to the pivotal role of the empire, despite the empire representing a focal point of growing crises, especially at the end of the century. Third, political histories of this period characterize Britain as a liberal country. In fact, as the nineteenth century advanced, liberalism weakened the power of Protestantism by creating a more inclusive and secular British citizenry while also threatening the absolute dominance of the empire by calling for greater liberty for colonized subjects. Even today, current debates within historiography, as within Victorian society, reflect the centrality of Protestantism, political freedom, and empire as the focal points of the discourse on English national identity.

***Keywords***: British national identity, British empire, liberalism, Protestantism, secularization.

# *Introduction*

An abundance of writings on the national identity of England appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century. Liberal writers did not define Englishness in racial terms or as a transmitted character trait; rather, they focused on attributes such as freedom and freedom of thought, self-government, Protestant piety, initiative, and expansion (Nadler 2000, 224–244; Stapleton 2000, 256–260; Stapleton 1997b, 36). Conservatives wrote on English identity as part of their critique of industrial capitalism, emphasizing the pastoral, seafaring, freedom loving, and Protestant character of this identity (Heyck 1998, 199–201).

During the second half of the twentieth century, a growing volume of new historiography on English national identity began to appear. While current historiography on nationalism emphasizes the centrality of Protestantism to the emergence of an English and British identity, the historiography of religion in the nineteenth century was mostly preoccupied with the loss of faith and the secularization of the state. According to colonial history, English identity in the nineteenth century was deeply indebted to the pivotal role of the empire, but it remains unclear how central the empire was to the working classes. In contrast, political histories of Britain and Europe in the nineteenth century depict Britain, first and foremost, as liberal—a characteristic that receives only indirect attention in identity historiography.

The Victorian scholarship mentioned above would suggest that, secularization notwithstanding, Protestantism must have retained a centrality that the discourse of secularization obscures. The empire, at least in its guise as the emblem of English greatness and prowess, as seafaring or expansionist, whether present in the daily lives of the working class or not, was also of critical importance to writers when thinking of England. Finally, political freedom, although mainly evoked by liberals, was sometimes advanced by conservative writers, more often than not proving a common ideological ground (Colley 1992b, 101–144).[[1]](#footnote-1)

So which was it? Was England Protestant or a freedom-loving nation that granted civil rights to all faiths? Was England imperial or national? Regarding the inception of English nationalism, Krishnan Kumar comments on the historiographic disagreement, arguing that if scholars cannot agree on anything, they are probably all wrong (Kumar 2001, 41). However, they may all actually be right. Kumar objects to the very notion of Englishness because it would clash with the interests of a British Empire, and identification with Protestantism required quite the opposite of a sense of national interest. This paper proposes an alternative, comprehensive approach that could possibly accommodate these conflicting ideas. An examination of current historiography suggests that a synthesis of these three dominant themes as separate, albeit competing components of the whole may better describe British national identity than any one of them, which could offer only partial explanations. I will explore a synthesis that suggests both a merging of and a conflict between religion, political freedom, and empire as components of national identity, which would explain the divergent and conflicted renderings of English identity in the nineteenth century, as well as provide insight into the meaning of Englishness. As noted, despite their peaceful coexistence for long stretches of time, each of these three themes has built-in contradictions with the others, making very real their potential for clashing. Indeed, the period between 1870 and 1914 witnessed a growing tension between these approaches.

National identity is undoubtedly one of the most complicated concepts, its mere definition comprising an ever-growing and entire branch of historiography. Therefore, following Peter Mandler’s approach, I will use it the term here in the sense of the social capital that gives it meaning: a system of symbols, expressions, and institutions that convey the connection between state and nation, especially those expressions that contrast the self with the “other” (Mandler 2006, 281). British and English identities should be differentiated as well. I will deal predominantly with the English, although as late as the turn of the nineteenth century, the two were often used interchangeably.

# *Protestantism and the Nation—One under Heaven?*

### *Protestant Nation*

The vast historiography on secularization essentially eliminates any role for religion in modern society, as secularization and nationalism are perceived as essential concomitant elements of modernity (Israel 2006, 52).The general narrative is that as liberal society advances, religion retreats, and, by the same token, tolerance, both political and religious, spreads (Sidenvall 2005, 176). In fact, nationalism is sometimes perceived as the ideological and emotional legitimation of the modern state filling the vacuum left by an ever-receding Church (Asad 1999).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Nonetheless, Protestantism and its place in English public culture and identity during the nineteenth century seem to play a pivotal role. Despite the importance of the subject, there is agreement about the definition of its exact nature. Among the many examples are that of Kumar, who, perceiving Protestantism as central, believes it negates a national identity, and Linda Colley, who extolls the vital role of Protestantism in forging the combined British identity in the eighteenth century in her influential work (Colley 1992b, 329). Despite differences, there is a consensus that Protestantism is a cornerstone of the English state. It was tantamount to national identity, as Liah Greenfeld expressed it, or political culture, as Colley so vividly describes. Considering that it was “enthusiastically endorsed by the mass of people,” Kumar would probably prefer to label it popular culture. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, an enduring pattern was being created (Colley 1992b, 53; Jenkins 1975; Robbins 1993, 85–104; Smith 2008 (.[[3]](#footnote-3) Perhaps the very plurality and diversity of the British religious spectrum, Protestant and otherwise, prevented a major confrontation between church and state in British politics (Beckford 1991, 179). Although the growing separation of religion and state during the nineteenth century played a significant role in making society more pluralistic, religion remained a major preoccupation of Victorian society.

Even the historiography on secularization cannot overlook this omnipresence of religion in the nineteenth-century discourse on Englishness, if only because the exact meaning and scope of secularization are far from agreed upon. In the private sphere, the famous crisis of faith of the era was also, at times, a crisis of doubt.[[4]](#footnote-4) One study has rebranded Britain of 1800 to 1963 “a highly religious nation,” and the period as “the nation’s last puritan age” (Brown 2005, 9). The detrimental influence of urbanization and of the growing working classes on the nation’s religiosity has also been contested. The 1851 census showed that while industrialization indeed weakened loyalty to the established church, the religious influenced nevertheless continued growing in industrialized areas, depending on the local conditions (Wolffe 2008 74–5, 85).While actual Church attendance dropped during the nineteenth century,[[5]](#footnote-5) it is arguable that the claims of belonging and believing remained steadfast.[[6]](#footnote-6) Indeed, anti-Christianity or anti-clericalism remained a marginal phenomenon in England (Larsen 2001, 529; Beckford 1993, 180). Even avowed secularists like John Stuart Mill supported Christianity’s superiority (Alexander 2000, 90–94). As Asa Briggs noted, during the mid-Victorian years, “the religious climate was more exciting and important than anything else. The amount of pamphlet and periodical literature devoted to religious problems was far greater than that devoted to economic and social problems” (Briggs 1963, 49). Much of the Victorian *belles-lettres* treated religious questions as social issues. Religious books, both fiction and nonfiction, were among the highest ranked on bookstores’ best-seller lists during the years 1891–1906.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Furthermore, the Victorians’ worldview owed much to Puritan writings, especially to John Bunyan’s book (Fraser, 2002, 111). The old language typical of Bunyan and Protestant spiritual personal development was still used during the nineteenth century, even when God was omitted. The pilgrim depicted in Victorian literature was essentially a secular one, and symbols like the vanity mirror, prison of self, labyrinth of life, dunghill as the origin of the pilgrim, and the rescue of the shipwrecked pilgrim were perpetuated. All these emblems, as expressions of the conception of life as embattled progress, retained a Protestant language and discourse (Qualls 1982, 1–16). Although traditional Christianity was increasingly replaced with a humanistic secular version, cultural ties with the Protestant tradition were kept alive.[[8]](#footnote-8) At other times, Victorians employed rhetoric that, although religious in form, avoided the challenges posed to it by modernity (Ralls 1974, 256.). [[9]](#footnote-9)

Beyond Protestantism’s importance as a private religion is its role in shaping collective identity through the national and public functions of the Church of England. Not only did Parliament address religious issues pertaining to the status and government of the Church of England, but religion was also a complicating factor in the areas of education, Ireland, and party politics (Arnstein, Bright, Peterson and Temperley 1989, 150). Although the repeal of the century-old Test Act in 1828–1829 ruptured the alleged connection between members of church and state, the agitation for greater disestablishment in the 1830s was successfully deflected, and the symbolic status of the Church of England, at least, was left virtually intact (Wolffe 2002, 13; McLeod 2007, 17).

Over time, the relationship between church and state changed from one in which the church provided political legitimation to one that expressed a set of symbols that constructed identity (Hall 1992, 292). At the end of the nineteenth century, the Anglican Church was still the “main religious expression of national identity” (Wolffe 2006, p. 321).[[10]](#footnote-10) The Church certainly still regarded itself as representative of a spiritual worldview that extended beyond the confines of the Church’s authority. Cosmo Gordon Lang, Archbishop of York (1909–1928) and Archbishop of Canterbury (1928–1942), presented the church as “a sort of subconscious continuity which endures and profoundly affects the character of each generation of citizens who enter it” (Lang 1913, 1204; Marrin 1974, 6; Weldon 1902). As farfetched as this may have sounded, even at the time, the Church provided a symbol of national distinctiveness and cohesiveness, representing national continuity in Parliament, coronation and armistice ceremonies, the ancient universities, ecclesiastical courts, and historical buildings (Beckford 1993, 187–8). National ceremonies, especially new ones that needed a “traditional” hue, were all performed within the Church’s fold, space, and symbolic language. The thanksgiving on the recovery of the Prince of Wales (1872) at St. Paul’s expressed Gladstone’s notion of the religiosity of royal ceremony. The royal actors performed their parts as exemplars in a great morality play steeped in historical precedent and tradition. The centerpiece of each of the Jubilees, just as of the thanksgiving, was a religious service (Kuhn 1987, 155–156, 159, 162). Later ceremonies, including the royal funerals of the Duke of Clarence (1892), Victoria (1901), and Edward VII (1910), were all conducted in the same style (Wolffe 2006, 321–2).

As the place of burial for national figures, Westminster Abbey exemplifies the use of the Church as a national space of commemoration. Figures who had been awarded a place in the nation’s eternal memory were interred in Westminster Abbey, regardless of their own religious (or nonreligious) standing. Among them was Charles Dickens (d. 1870), who had shifted from the Established Church to Unitarianism and back. Leaving Mr. Chadband (*Bleak House*) to teach the public the ridicule of conventional religiosity, Dickens himself retained a remarkable lack of specificity in terms of doctrine (Walder 2007, 1–16; Wolffe 2002, 185). David Livingstone (d. 1874), a member of the London Missionary Society, was a Scottish Congregationalist (Wolfee 2002, 217). Charles Darwin (d. 1882), despite his proverbial nod to convention in his writings, thought it best to describe himself as agnostic and may have been a deist (Darwin 1879; Brooke 2009, pp. 67–72), while Alfred Lord Tennyson (d. 1892) went through a spell of Catholicism in spite of being the poet laureate of the Protestant establishment (Taylor 2009, 285–312). In all these cases, personal faith had little to do with their place of burial. They all prove the ability of the Church to widen its acceptance, thus, creating a national face for itself (Wolffe 2002, 167).

As most of the religious culture alluded to here is secular in its concerns and institutions, the religion would be best defined as “civil religion” (Bellah 1967).[[11]](#footnote-11) The Church of England was the perfect vehicle for civil religion in England. Its diverse character as an alliance “of sects, a protective umbrella for the most wide-ranging variations in doctrine and liturgical practice,” emphasizes the state as the organizing influence (Yates 1998, 384). Thus, the Church of England’s Erastianism constitutes it as a civic-religious organization focused on England, despite being part of universal Christianity (Beckford 1993, 194). In its centrality for state rituals, as well as for schools and communities, it provided a means of socialization into the polity as a set of national institutions: the monarchy, Parliament, the armed forces, and the empire, lending to these rituals legitimacy and the aura of continuity and tradition. By such means a sense of ethnic identity was generated (Bocock, 1985, 220–221, 224).

That there has never been a religious party, per se, in British politics underscores religion as a central and largely consensual component of national identity.[[12]](#footnote-12) Religious questions have had political reverberations, and political parties had characteristic religious affiliations among their voters. But above all the political diversity, Protestantism reigned as the common denominator vs. the religious other, especially Catholicism (Colley 1992a, 317; Kotler-Berkowitz, 536, 541, 550). Both the no-popery drive in the mid-19th-century and the movement against ritualism at the end of the century illustrated the broad social alliance that Protestantism could muster, even if it ultimately failed to prevail (Machin 1982, 277–8; Whisenant 2001, 477). The royal commission that subverted its aim in the name of “an appreciation of the continuity of the church” reaffirmed, yet again, the Church’s civic national role (Machin 1982, 301).

### *Protestantism and/vs. Political Freedom*

In historiography, as well as in popular perceptions of the modern English state, the centrality of Protestantism is assured by its association with another pivotal ideal—political freedom. Since the seventeenth century, the national myth has connected the fight for civil and religious liberties and the centrality of Parliament as the sources and reasons behind the flourishing of English economic and political power. Liah Greenfeld contends that during the reign of the Tudors, English nationalism was already republican. The popular expression of Protestantism in the eighteenth century, in contrast to Catholic monarchies, instead identified, in part at least, with parliamentary government and peaceful progress (Kumar 2000, 589). In the nineteenth century, Walter Ralls reminds us, “A correct definition of liberalism according to Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* must include as a cardinal tenet the ‘Protestantism of the Protestant religion’” (Ralls 1974, 244). Indeed, liberalism was then, and is now, contested ground. But, in what follows in this section, I will try to show that by any definition of those who were self-proclaimed liberals, or recognized as such by others, Protestantism was an avowed English trait and had an ambivalent relationship with other such self-avowed “traits” (Bell 2016d, 91–92, 97).

The ideal of the sovereignty of Parliament was deeply ingrained and shared across parties and ideologies. The self-congratulatory notion that the 1688–1689 order was the perfect combination for the preservation of liberty was strongly challenged at the end of the eighteenth century. However, the outcome of these challenges was that the “sense of liberties enshrined in common law and the acceptance of parliamentary sovereignty” became the defining characteristics of British liberalism (Sykes 1997, 1–6). In political histories, nineteenth-century England is best associated with Liberalism with a capital L, especially after 1846, as the Liberals established something approaching political and cultural hegemony, to such an extent that at the end of the century. Liberalism would predominate over religious thought and movements as well (Wolffe 2002, 162–169(. For most of the nineteenth century, England’s image was promulgated as a nation crusading for the extension of constitutional liberties throughout Europe (Parry 2006).

The idea of parliamentarian liberty was closely related to the idea of the nation bound by law, a long-standing and widely-proliferated notion that lasted at least until the mid-nineteenth century (Colls 2002, 23–30). Peter Mandler expressed it as an inhibition of the development of biological racism and organic nationalism, and Julia Stapleton viewed it as a convergence of liberalism and nationalism (Stapleton 1997a, 256–60). Even in Edwardian England, thinking about the nation remained informed by “a broad-based liberalism that cut across the boundaries” (Stapleton 2005, 154).

Yet, it was not entirely a happy marriage. The idea of political freedom did not fully correspond with Protestantism, and the discrepancies and conflicts between the two discourses help explain why the secularization theory holds strong, along with the growing evidence for the prevalence of Protestantism. Indeed, Protestantism and a liberal concept of nationalism not only coexisted side by side, but also competed side by side. Colley, whose argument about the importance of Protestantism to English identity in the eighteenth century was mentioned earlier, also believes that Catholic emancipation at the beginning of the nineteenth century demonstrates the shrinking of “the importance of religious zeal and intolerance” (Colley 1992b, 329). Indeed, the growing inclusiveness of British citizenship seemed like the route along which the Anglican Church and the British state traveled further apart, giving rise to the idea that Protestantism was waning (Colley 1992b, 329). The emancipation of the Catholics (1828) and the Dissenters (1829) broke the monopoly of the Church of England, and the inclusion of Jews (1858) broke the monopoly of the Christian religion as a prerequisite for full political rights. The Liberal Party was historically committed to this distancing between church and state by its policy of political inclusiveness. But John Russell—and he was not the only one—thought it was a consequence that could be resisted: “Our object, is if possible, to conciliate the Dissenters, and having framed our measures with that end, strenuously to resist the separation of Church and State” (as cited in Sykes 1997, 23–4; Feldman 1994, 3). He also thought that the emancipation of the Jews, of which he was a proponent, would not erode Britain’s Christian ethos (Feldman 1994, 40–41). In fact, some of those supporting civil rights for Jews did so with the hope of the Jews’ subsequent grateful conversion (Valman 2001, 18; Feldman 2015, p. 100). Thus, it is likely that Christianization and de-Christianization were occurring simultaneously (McLeod 1996, 3–6; Wolffe 2008, 93).

Another way this uneasy relationship manifested itself was in the coexistence of legal emancipation with Protestant culture as the basis and rationale for the exclusion of others (Wendehorst 1999, 194–196). During the very limited emancipation envisaged by the short-lived Jew Bill of 1753 (repealed the following year), the opposition dubbed it “Rohmish works”[[13]](#footnote-13) and juxtaposed English freedom and Protestantism with Jewish emancipation. Lord Russel, who supported the emancipation of the Dissenters and the Jews, published the “Durham Letter” against Papal Aggression as a reaction to the return of a Catholic hierarchy in England, thereby provoking an anti-Catholic wave (Altholz 1964, 93). Jews and Catholics, emancipation notwithstanding, retained the identity of “the other,” both culturally and socially. Catholics, particularly Irish Catholics, were treated more violently than Jews, with recurrent eruptions against them throughout the nineteenth century, compared to one violent attack against the Jews in Wales in 1911 (Panayi 1996, 3; Ward 2004, 122). [[14]](#footnote-14)

Catholicism could have been conceived as part of the same Christian faith community, couched in toleration, especially given the context of the inclusive trends of the Anglican Church at the time; Catholics were certainly part of a long history in England.[[15]](#footnote-15) A constant trickle of converts to Catholicism, along with the growing tolerance with which they were accepted and the fact that the Irish could become “British gentlemen,” point to such common ground.[[16]](#footnote-16)

However, as noted, on the whole, Catholics suffered more frequent and more violent attacks than Jews in the form of riots, religious intolerance, and vicious expressions of hatred (Endelman 1986, 109; Panayi 1996, 3; Ward 2004, 122). Indeed, eruptions of hatred against religious minorities did not necessarily emanate from religious convictions. The Irish Catholics were influenced by what John Hewitt called

…the history:

The savage complications of our past;

our luckless country where old wrongs outlast,

in raging viruses of bigotry, their first infection…

(Nairn 1977, 213). Or perhaps it was ethnic or racist discrimination (Hall 2000, 204–221; Poovey 1993, 204). After all, the writings against the small Catholic Italian immigrant community in the 1890s were also couched in racist terms, describing the immigrants with “ineradicably bad…degraded habits…innate and lasting as they are” (Sponza 2006, 64).[[17]](#footnote-17) And yet, in an era of growing racial thinking, religious overtones still provided the special color of the discrimination, which coexisted with an environment of legal and political liberal nationalism.

The ever-growing conflicts between the two discourses that permeated English public life in the nineteenth century were not overwhelming because they agreed with or complemented each other, as some believed at the time. Nor did they rule each other out, as some of the literature on national identity suggests. Rather, the very conflicts kept both discourses alive and pivotal to the self-identification of the English polity.

# *Empire—Connections and Contradictions*

### *Empire and Nation*

The historiography on English identity places the discourse on empire alongside those on religion and political freedom, but it also cuts sharply through them. There is a voluminous literature on the connection between English and British identities and the empire (Kumar 2000. 606). The idea of empire encompasses a broad range of perspectives, from being promoted as a driving force to negating its existence in the public mind. At the one extreme stands Linda Colley, who believes the empire to have been so important to the formation of a unifying British identity by providing an ultimate “other” that the dissolution of that empire could explain the dissolution of a united British identity (Colley 1992a, 316, 327–8). Her thesis is rather reminiscent of the descriptions given by former Prime Minister Arthur Balfour of a civil servant posted in the far reaches of the empire as living a strong sense of difference: a different creed, a different race, a different discipline, and different conditions of life (Balfour 1910). The common “other” facilitated the common identity, or perhaps, the empire’s common interests provided its cement.

Kumar, turning the problem on its head, argues that this was why the empire was not part of English nationalism but rather the core reason for the suppression of that nationalism. Nonetheless, he reaffirmed the centrality of empire for English collective culture and symbolism (Kumar 2000, 589, 592; Kumar 2006, 427). Similarly, conferring centrality by negation, is Mira Matikkala’s book that claims two clashing identities for late nineteenth century England—the constitutional and the imperial (Matikkala, 2011).[[18]](#footnote-18) John Mackenzie cites a long list of popular outbursts and agitations about foreign affairs and empire. The uproars over and public interest in foreign affairs in the final four decades of the nineteenth century might bear witness to that conclusion (Mackenzie 1986, 1–16). John Wolffe claims that attitudes toward the empire varied over time, but by 1890, the empire had captured the imagination of the country, even of the Nonconformists (Wolffe 2002, 221). Despite all the foregoing, Bernard Porter and Andrew Thompson argue that there were few specific occasions when the imperialists’ aims were easily accepted in British politics and that, instead, it was apathy that constituted the dominant response to empire in Britain (Porter 2004; Thompson 2005). The centrality of empire is elusive in the literature about English identity, perhaps because there was no “ordered system of ideology” about empire. Even when the British contemplated India, they vacillated between a sense of similarity and difference.[[19]](#footnote-19) In such a case, what seemed apathy to one could well pass as vacillation to another.

Stephen Howe believes that the end of the nineteenth century was the time when ideas about the empire and its importance were at their most enthusiastic and most widely spread. He strongly qualifies this assessment, however; in a review of literature that casts doubt on the centrality of empire he ultimately calls for a distinction between formal and informal empire and questions jingoism, Britain’ foreign policy in general, and support for naval expansion (Howe 2008, 160–4). Such a call pointedly reminds us that the empire may have had different meanings for different people at the time and, thus, seems ever present to some researchers but absent to others.

As I will show in the following sections, current research provides ample evidence that empire was central to the discourses on self-identification, through both connections and contradictions.

### *Empire and Protestantism*

The empire’s diffusion in English cultural symbolism is best assessed by its relational coincidence with Protestantism and political freedom. Conservatives and liberals alike had intrinsic connections with imperialism. Since the late Walpolean era, agitation in favor of the empire was equated with liberty and property (Wilson 1988, 79, 94, 105, 109). In 1878, Robert Herbert, Fourth Earl of Carnarvon, promoted the idea of empire by advancing the other two ideals of liberalism and Protestantism as the essence of English duty: to provide “a system where the humblest may enjoy freedom from oppression and wrong equally with the greatest; where the light of religion and morality can penetrate into the darkest dwelling places” (Carnarvon 1878). Uday Mehta argues that imperialism stemmed from liberal assumptions about reason and historical progress. The ingrained rationality in liberalism ensured its judgmental position toward the unfamiliar, and its position of power ensured its sense of mission and reform (Mehta 1999, 12–18). Thomas Metcalf points to the urge for reform and universalism that made India fertile terrain for experimentation with liberal notions of administration (Metcalf 1995, 28–30).

Likewise, empire’s close relationship with religion is expressed through their mutual contradictions no less than by their common ground. But their conflicts kept both in the public eye and politically relevant as part of the collective discourse of what was or was not “English.”

The interconnection between empire and religion can be dated from the Glorious Revolution when the British were free from Catholicism and slavery and achieved the freedom to trade where they chose (Armitage 2000, 142–169; Ralls 1974, 249). The spreading of Protestantism as a mission of salvation and truth was a potent factor since the eighteenth century (Rowan 2007, 10–39). Providentialism connected the imperial spirit to a religious sense of duty, thereby utilizing the greatness that Britain had achieved for the benefit of spreading the faith, providing a legitimation and justification for the empire. This sense of mission was especially propagated during the Opium Wars, during David Livingstone’ mission to Africa and his short visit to Britain in 1857, and as a reaction to the Indian Mutiny (Stanley 1983, 73, 75, 79, 81–91; Wolffe 2002, 215–217; Porter 1985, 598). In the mid-nineteenth century, the spread of Christianity and British trade were expected to be mutually dependent (Porter 1985, 597). The rehabilitation of Cromwell’s memory during the Victorian period emphasized this connection between Protestantism and empire (Ben-Israel 1991, 262–3; Worden 2000, 115, 122–135).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a considerable rise in enlistments and donations to the missionary societies, especially after Livingstone’s death and following the visit of the singing Evangelicals, Dwight Lyman Moody and Ira D. Sankey. Sentiments intensified throughout the 1890s, reaching a peak in 1896. Mission stories were central in Sunday schools, providing a platform for both national pride and religious fervor (McLeod 1996, 145–6). The mission was central to Victorian faith, not merely an item in a row of philanthropic works (Thorne 2006, 146). Using the missionary box, Sunday school lessons, and juvenile missionary auxiliaries, the missions helped create an imperial culture that reached “even the most isolated village” (Thorne 1999, 157). At the turn of the century, colonial administrators had come to appreciate the contribution of the missionaries in preparing the way for the white man and in spreading civilization, despite their opposition to the harsher expressions of imperialism. Although sometimes critical of the culture they left behind, but still proud to carry the flag, missionaries also deliberately promoted imperial expansion and, on occasion, even took part in its administration (Williams 1994, 395–7). [[20]](#footnote-20)

However, religion and empire were two blessings whose messengers rarely thought too well of the other. The religious enthusiasm that drove the missionaries also fed the anti-slavery movement at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Williams 1994, 382–3). Later in the century, missionaries and commercial interests parted ways over the missionaries’ strong objection to the trade in gin and opium. At best, practical experience varied from place to place, with no underlying theological basis (Porter 1985, 599). As providentialism was discarded in favor of racist legitimation of the empire among British officials, Protestant missionaries stayed committed to racial equality, at least in principle (Porter 1985, 617–8).[[21]](#footnote-21) The missionaries’ viewpoint was always universal and global in scope, sometimes above and beyond the empire, even at times unintentionally carrying an egalitarian message. Providing interpretations to local cultures and enhancing education, they occasionally supported national movements and anti-imperialist activities, willingly or not. Although British Protestant missionaries were not outright anti-imperialists, their attitudes were ambivalent because they demanded fair treatment and justice (Porter 2004, 283–315).

### *Empire and Liberty*

The empire’s centrality to English self-identification was similarly kept alive through its contradiction of liberalism or political freedom. From the seventeenth century, following the reading of Roman history, empire was perceived as the opposite of republicanism and as a cause of loss of freedom (Armitage 2000, 126–139). Imperial historians like Thomas Metcalf and postcolonial critics such as Javed Majeed have elaborated on the connection between English liberalism and empire (Metcalf 1995, 28–65, 160–214; Majeed 1992). At least part of the tension between religion and empire was really based on the incursion of empire on the freedoms of colonized people. Thus, the ambivalent relationship between religion and empire was tied to the problematic relationship between empire and political freedom.

John Stuart Mill, like many Victorians, advocated the continued rule of the British empire as an avatar of liberty, notwithstanding his later phase of “melancholic colonialism” (Bell, 2016b, 290–292). The discrepancies between imperial rule and a theory of liberty were very apparent in Mill’s writings. His appeal to recognize the Indian rebels in 1857 as political, not criminal, offenders reflects a clear consciousness of the friction between imperial rule and the preservation of freedom. Mill advocated for curbing democratic rule; he preferred the empire under technocratic administration, which was expected to rule more fairly than democratic institutions (Sullivan 1983, 600–602).[[22]](#footnote-22) The clash between empire and the principle of political freedom could not have been put more succinctly than did Sir Henry Maine: “the virtually despotic government of a dependency by a free people” (Maine 1875).

Matikkala, following Miles Taylor, shows how, by the turn of the nineteenth century, the contradictions between empire and political freedom had become glaringly apparent (Taylor 1991, 1–23). Liberal intellectual circles were growing wary of nationalism and imperialism as interconnected phenomena, preferring the civic ideal. Indeed, T. L. Hobhouse agreed that imperial rule was dependent on authoritative rule and was, therefore, to be rejected for impeding the advent of democratic citizenship (Stapleton 2005, 156). In 1904, Augustine Birrell, then president of the National Liberal Federation and who later took office in the 1906 Liberal administration, was looking forward to “a future in which no true Liberal could breathe, a future of Imperialism, of Caesarism, of Empire” (Thompson 1997, 162). By the late 1880s, intellectuals such as James Anthony Froude and James Fitzjames Stephen feared that the very growth of liberalism was ruining the empire in Ireland and in India (Peatling 2007, 175–176).[[23]](#footnote-23) The young John Maynard Keynes identified this as a cult of “patrophobia” in intellectual life (Stapleton 2005, 156).

Nonetheless, criticism of empire was limited, conditional, and restricted. Even some radical advocates of democracy saw benefits in a version of empire (Howe 1993, 37; Bell, 2016c, 242; Bell 2016a, 328). In an address to a large gathering of Liberals in 1899, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman differentiated between a “vulgar and bastard imperialism” of aggrandizement, and the “responsibilities of Empire,” which were “the heritage handed down by our fathers” (Campbell-Bannerman 1899; Thompson 1997, 155). Radical liberals could well notice the beneficial role of empire in the spreading of liberal ideas. The Baptist leader and Fabian, John Clifford, who resigned from the Fabian Society in 1899, believed that the retention of the empire was not only concomitant with but really conducive to the advancement of liberal ideals. Important intellectuals like James Fitzjames Stephen, A.V. Dicey, and Herbert Spencer were Liberal Unionists. Lord Acton, the only Catholic among them, opposed nationalism, supported the empire, and advocated home rule only with great reluctance.[[24]](#footnote-24) Even the idea of devolution was not necessarily regarded as a means for breaking up the empire. At least in its federalist garb, devolution was sometimes accepted as a means for creating an effective balance of national and imperial unity with local nationalism, which could be applied to Ireland or to “home-rule-all-around.” At the time of the constitutional conference in 1910 and again for a few months during 1913–1914, the federalist idea received support among the politically influential, the unionists, and the liberals alike. To Wales and Scotland, devolution was far from synonymous with decolonization, and sparked far less interest.[[25]](#footnote-25) So, what was construed as decolonization by the opposers was, to others, an affirmation of empire in moral garb.

Electoral results seemed to suggest that the voting public was distancing itself from anti-imperialism. From 1885 to the First World War, during the very period when imperial issues loomed large in British politics, the Conservatives reigned supreme until 1906, except for the short interlude of 1892–1895. The disintegration of Nonconformism as the political basis of the Liberal Party was the real reason behind this development, and it was an imperial issue that caused the first rift between Congregationalism and the Liberal Party. Most Congregationalists remained loyal to Gladstone during the Home Rule crisis in 1886, but not all of them. This rift widened significantly during the Boer War, when loyalty to the empire and the very patriotism of critics of the government’s policy were called into question (Thorne 1999, 164–5).

Research on political agitation and debates around home rule, free trade, and other imperial issues has shown that they also invoked the language of “identity.” The growing support at home for the national movements in Ireland and India was perceived as an open challenge to political freedom as an ideal. The argument around free trade and home rule was carried out under the assumption that a stand on these issues reflected on the English character. It was an argument that threatened the empire but strengthened its centrality to the discourse of identity. It is safe to surmise that a phenomenon that involved the most central ideas of English culture could not be marginal to the way that English people identified themselves or their political culture.

# *Conclusion*

The concept of national identity has come under heavy fire. Roger Brubaker and Fredrick Cooper have claimed that the concept of identity should be exchanged for “identification” or “self-presentation.” Their main contention is that the concept cannot really express its literal meaning: a group of people cannot have one sense of self—stable and “identical”—that remains constant at all times and over time (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 1–47). The large body of research that tries to map the meaning of Englishness in the nineteenth century seems to prove this rule. However, if identity is to be construed not as a rigid concept, but rather as a discourse on ideals and symbols that should inform and shape the public life of a political group, then historical research about Englishness shows that some ideas and symbols are more stable and more central than others, even when they are self-contradictory (Sökefeld 2001, 527–544).

The articulation of a national identity invariably included secular concepts of liberty and citizenship with a self-perception of a Christian, Protestant, anti-Catholic nation with imperial aspirations. Generally, participants in the national identity discourse did not consciously acknowledge that these three components were potentially contradictory, or at best, contending. Many believed the contradictions could be addressed. The relation between religion and political freedom, disrupted from the very beginning of the century and especially by their connections with empire, became increasingly troublesome as the century wore on. By understanding the contours of discourse, it is obvious that national identity is not monolithic, but is constructed through its disagreements as much as by the consensuses formed around accepted foci.

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1. Krishan Kumar ascribes a very similar list of attributes to the English identity, yet considers them reasons for the absence of nationalism (Kumar 2006, 427). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kumar claims that Protestantism is international and therefore anti-national (Hutchinson, Reynolds, Smith, Colls, and Kumar 2007, 200) versus Robbins (Robbins 1993, 85). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Others see Protestantism as a more inclusive, even universal identity (Colls 2002, 18). Missionaries, including Catholics, retained their national identity (in the twentieth century), even against the Pope’s orders (Hastings 2003, 15–33). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Secularization is sometimes depicted as a process at the individual level (Eastwood and Prevalakis 2010, 95; Larsen 2006, 229–238). This thesis does not go unchallenged (Howard 2006, 207). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As late as the 1960s, only 10% of MPs defined themselves as atheists or agnostics, and the 2001 census showed only a small minority declaring themselves as lacking any connection with religion or religious institutions (McLeod 2007, 228, 259). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This still holds true at the remarkably low rates of participation of the end of the twentieth century, at least in rural England (Winter and Short 1993, 635–651). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to *Bookman*, another recurrent subject is the empire) Basset and Walter 2001, 208). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Biblical vernacular was important (Bar-Yosef 2005, 14–16, 61–182). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ralls refers to Kingsley’s “solution” for the challenge of the crystal palace exhibition to religion as it raised the question of whether the universe could be explained and its value measured by glass and iron. Kingsley exclaimed that he preferred civilization to sanctity [Catholic and therefore false and superstitious] versus civilization with a higher sense of sanctity. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Smith sees a religious element to all nationalisms but particularly for Protestant nations (Smith, 2009, 76–7). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Its political, cultural and imperial aspirations cannot easily be related to the birth of a baby in Bethlehem's stable,” as Grace Davie so correctly remarks (Davie 1996, 112). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Kumar claims that the “Protestant Nation” lost meaning at the end of the nineteenth century, because Britain was no longer facing Catholic rivals (Kumar 2000, 590, 605 note 69). However, even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Britain’s imperial rivals were not of one religious color, and included Swedes and Dutch as well as Catholic (French) rivals. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cited from a caricature alluding to the bill as an act that would bring in the pretender (Rabin 2006, 163–7; also Singer 2002, Rohmish works 22–24). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. No Catholic was elected to Parliament on an English seat between 1852–1865 (Altholz 1964, 94). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The idea of unity in the Church of England in the middle of the nineteenth century (Sidenvall 2005, 119). The Oxford Movement took upon itself to reconceive the Church of England’s Catholic heritage (Pickering 1989, 25). The emergence of the Broad Church in response emphasized the Church’s ability to register and contain a widening doctrinal disagreement (Morris 2005, 58). However the formulation of the idea of an all-inclusive Trinitarian Christianity by Thomas Arnold was widely denounced (Brown 2001, 189). Even in the twentieth century, English heritage included all Christian buildings, but no other religion (Kushner 1992, 3–4). Matthew Arnold suggested a natural “affinity” to the Celt (Young 2008, 149). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. By the final decade of the nineteenth century they were more easily accepted. But apparently for other, and conflicting reasons, which did not include greater acceptance of Catholicism per se (Sidenvall 2005, 174–5; Howe 2008, 163). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Unlike the debate against Italian Roman Catholic priests in the 1840s, who were perceived as reactionary and intolerant and, thus, negating the spirit of progress and freedom (Sponza 2006, 60–62). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. One reviewer suggested that the clash might be between British and English identities, A. Martin (Wainwright 2013, 504). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The lack of a cohesive and consistent view included India (Metcalf 1995, x). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Especially to the point is Temple Gardiner’s comparison of Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee procession to the procession of Jesus, which symbolized his conviction that spreading the Gospel through the empire was a service to the queen (Williams 1994, 396). Porter emphasizes the ambivalence at the turn of the nineteenth century because of eschatological leanings among missionaries (Porter 2004, 283–315). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The connection between mission and civilization is also central later in the century (Williams 1994, 389-90). In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, missionaries increasingly brought forward racial differences (Thorne 1999, 92). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bentham and James Mill believed Ireland and India should be retained for humanitarian or political reasons (Sullivan 1983, 605, 610–14). Lynn Zastoupil believes J.S. Mill was less of a reformist or utilitarian than his father until the last years of his career (Zastoupil 1994, 4). James Mill made a similar claim (Metcalf 1995, 31). John Stuart Mill differentiated between India and settler colonies, as was usual in Victorian Britain (Bell 2016b, 274). He defended the rule of both, although settler colonies were justified on different grounds from the Raj. Nevertheless, the inner tension is clearer in the case of India. He became more aware of settler violence in his later years, (Bell 2016b, 287–8, 290–295). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The compound between Liberalism and empire in Stephen’s thought was complex (Stapleton 1998, 243–263). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Indeed, Clifford had the full trio: he thought Britain had to have Christian principles applied to problems of the state in foreign affairs, that God had given Britain the stewardship of those great liberal principles, and that the empire was the means for their fulfillment (Thompson 1997, 167). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Federalist ideas for the United Kingdom were sometimes mistaken with the “home rule all around” movement during 1886–1899 but were not seriously considered; federalist ideas per se gained interest among the politically influential only after 1910. Gladstone, although interested in the federalist solution, did not see how to reconcile it with the sovereignty of the Westminster parliament (Kendle 1989, 57–85, 106–127). On the other hand, Mandler believes English nationalism to have been rare because of the likelihood of causing detrimental effects on the empire (Mandler 2000, 237; Kumar 2000, 575–608; Stapleton 1997, 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)