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

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# *Abstract*

Historiography on English identity finds it hard to agree on its definition. It is the aim of this paper to show that the debates around English identity should be understood as emanating from the ingrained tensions between three topoi of discourse on the English national identity.

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, civil religion was still Protestant. English identity in the nineteenth century is supposed to be deeply indebted to the pivotal role of the empire, yet empire was a focal point of growing crises, especially at the end of the century. Political histories of the nineteenth century characterize Britain as a liberal country. In fact, as the nineteenth century advanced, Liberalism undermined Protestantism by creating a more inclusive and a more secular British citizenship and was striking at the empire by calling for more liberty for colonized peoples. Yet, these very debates within current historiography as within Victorian society, reflect the centrality of Protestantism, political freedom and empire as the focal points of the discourse on national identity.

***Key words***: British National identity, British Empire, Liberalism, Protestantism, secularization.

# *Introduction*

The second half of the nineteenth century saw an abundance of writings on the national identity of England. Liberal writers did not define Englishness in racial terms or as a transmitted character trait. The characteristics they noted were freedom and freedom of thought, self-government, Protestant piety, initiative and expansion (Nadler 2000, 224-244; Stapleton 2000, 256-260; Stapleton 1997b, 36). Conservatives were writing 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).

The second half of the twentieth century saw the beginning of a growing volume of historiography on English national identity. Current historiography on nationalism emphasizes the centrality of Protestantism to the emergence of an English and British identity. Yet, historiography of religion in the nineteenth century is mostly preoccupied with the loss of faith and the secularization of the state. Colonial history claims that English identity in the nineteenth century is deeply indebted to the pivotal role of the empire, yet the jury is still out on the question of how central the empire was to the working classes. On the other hand, political histories of Britain and Europe in the nineteenth century depict Britain, first and foremost, as a liberal country, a characteristic that receives only indirect attention in the identity historiography.

The Victorian writings 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 English greatness and prowess, as seafaring or expansionist, whether present in the working classes’ daily life or otherwise, was very critical to writers when thinking of England. Political freedom, though mainly advocated by the Liberals, was sometimes advanced by the opposite side, proving a common ground, more often than not (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 can’t agree on anything, they are probably all wrong (Kumar 2001, 41). However, they may all yet be right. Indeed, the reason Kumar objects to the existence of Englishness is that it would clash with the interests of a British Empire, and identification with Protestantism required the opposite of a sense of national interest. Yet, a comprehensive picture might accommodate these conflicting ideas. Taking a new look at current historiography, this paper suggests that a synthesis of these themes as competing components could better describe British national identity than any partial explanation. I will explore a synthesis that suggests both a convergence 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. Each of these three themes had built-in contradictions with the others, though co-existing peacefully for long stretches of time. Yet, they also had clashing potential by their very definition, and came into growing tension by the end of the century between 1870 and 1914.

National identity is probably one of the most complicated concepts; its mere definition has comprised an entire branch of historiography that is growing in volume. Therefore, following Peter Mandler’s advice, I will use it 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 identity should be differentiated as well, and 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 practically rules out a role for religion in a modern society, as secularization and nationalism are perceived as concomitant parts of modernity (Israel 2006, 52).The general narrative is therefore that as liberal society advances, religion retreats, and, by the same token, toleration, 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 empty spot left by an ever receding Church (Asad 1999).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Yet, Protestantism and its place in English public culture and identity during the nineteenth century seems pivotal, though the definition of its exact nature draws the most varied opinions: from Kumar, who sees its centrality and believes it negates a national identity, to Linda Colley, who in her influential work extolls the centrality of Protestantism for the forging of the British combined identity in the eighteenth century (Colley 1992b, 329). The presence of Protestantism as a cornerstone of the English state is thus a matter of general consent. It was national identity, as Liah Greenfeld would have it, or a political culture, as Colley describes so vividly. As it was “enthusiastically endorsed by the mass of people”, Kumar would probably prefer to call it popular culture. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a long-term enduring pattern was being created (Jenkins 1975; Robbins 1993, 85-104; Smith 2008; Colley 1992b, 53(.[[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). The growing separation of religion and state during the nineteenth century did much to make the society more pluralistic, but religion was still a major preoccupation of Victorian society.

Even the historiography on secularization cannot rule out this omnipresence of religion in 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 re-branded 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 can show that while industrialization had indeed weakened loyalty to the established church, the industrialized areas were under growing religious influence, although highly dependent on local conditions (Wolffe 2008 74-5, 85). [[5]](#footnote-5) The dropping of active participation during the nineteenth century, could be counterbalanced by the claim that belonging and believing held strong.[[6]](#footnote-6) Indeed, anti-Christianity or anti-clericalism remained a marginal phenomenon in England (Larsen 2001, 529; Beckford 1993, 180). And even avowed secularists like John Stuart Mill propounded 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). A large portion of Victorian *belles-lettres* dealt with religious questions as social issues. Religious books, both fiction and non-fiction, were among the highest ranking on the best-seller lists of bookstores during the years 1891-1906.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Furthermore, the Victorians' world-view owed much to Puritan writings and especially to John Bunyan's book (Fraser, 2002, 111). The nineteenth century still used the old language typical of Bunyan and Protestant spiritual personal development, even when God was left out. The pilgrim depicted in Victorian literature was essentially a secular one, 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. And these emblems, one and all, as expressions of the conception of life as embattled progress retained a Protestant language and discourse (Qualls 1982, 1-16). Although historical Christianity was often replaced with a humanistic secular version, the cultural ties with the Protestant tradition were kept alive.[[8]](#footnote-8) At other times Victorians employed a rhetoric that, though religious in form, avoided the challenges posed to it by modernity (Ralls 1974, 256.). [[9]](#footnote-9)

Beyond the importance of private religion is Protestantism’s role in shaping collective identity, through the public and national role of the Church of England. Parliament dealt not only with religious subjects pertaining to the status and government of the Church of England but also with religion as a complicating factor in education, in Ireland, and in party politics (Arnstein, Bright, Peterson and Temperley 1989, 150). The repeal of the Test Act in 1828-9 divorced the alleged connection between members of church and state. But, the agitation for disestablishment in the 1830s was withstood, and at least the symbolic status of the Church of England was left virtually intact (Wolffe 2002, 13; McLeod 2007, 17).

Over time, the connection between church and state has changed from one in which the church provided political legitimation to one that expressed a set of symbols which construct identity (Hall 1992, 292). [[10]](#footnote-10)At the end of the nineteenth century, the Anglican Church was still the “main religious expression of national identity” (Wolffe 2006, p. 321). The church certainly still regarded itself as representative of a spiritual worldview beyond itself. 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). Farfetched as this may have sounded, even at the time, the church did provide a symbol of national distinctiveness and cohesiveness, and it certainly represented national continuity in Parliament, in coronation and armistice ceremonies, in the ancient universities, in ecclesiastical courts, and in historical buildings (Beckford 1993, 187-8). National ceremonies, especially new ones that needed a “traditional” hue, were all 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 with 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 in the same vein (Wolffe 2006, 321-2).

Westminster Abbey as the place of burial for national figures can exemplify 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 non-religious) standing. Among them was Charles Dickens (d. 1870), who had moved from the Established Church to Uniterianism 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). On the other hand, David Livingstone (d. 1874), a member with 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 an agnostic and may have been a deist (Darwin 1879; Brooke 2009, pp. 67-72), and Alfred, Lord Tennyson (d. 1892) had 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 and thus to create for itself a national face (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 basic components of the polity as national values: the monarchy, Parliament, the armed forces and the empire, lending to these rituals legitimacy and the aura of continuity and tradition. By such means was a sense of ethnic identity generated (Bocock, 1985, 220-221, 224).

Religion as a central and largely consensual component of national identity was emphasized by the fact that there never has been a religious party, per se, in British politics.[[12]](#footnote-12) Religious questions have had political reverberations, and political parties had characteristic religious affiliations among their voters. But above all political diversity Protestantism reigned as common denominator vs. the religious other, especially the Catholic (Colley 1992a, 317; Kotler-Berkowitz, 536, 541, 550). The drive for no-popery in mid-century and against ritualism at the end of the century both epitomized the broad social alliance that Protestantism could muster, even if it failed in the end (Machin 1982, 277-8; Whisenant 2001, 477). The royal commission that subverted their aim in the name of “an appreciation of the continuity of the church,” re-affirmed 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 to another pivotal ideal – political freedom. National myth has connected the fight for civil and religious liberties and the centrality of Parliament since the seventeent century as the source and reason behind the flourishing of English economic and political power. Liah Greenfeld contends that already during the reign of the Tudors, English nationalism was republican. The popular expression of Protestantism in the eighteenth century was in part the contrast with Catholic monarchies, and identified instead 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, I will try to show in what follows in this section, that by any definition of those who were self-proclaimed liberals, or recognized as such by others, it was avowed as an English trait and that it had an ambivalent relationship with other such self-avowed “traits” (Bell 2016d, 91-2, 97).

The ideal of the sovereignty of Parliament was deeply ingrained and was shared across parties and ideologies. The self-congratulatory notion that the 1688-9 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 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 the extent that at the end of the century it would carry its sway over religious thought and movements as well (Wolffe 2002, 162-169(.For most of the nineteenth century, England’s image was propagated as 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 the Law, which was an old and widely proliferated standing 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 as a convergence of liberalism and nationalism (Stapleton 1997a, 256-60). Even in Edwardian England, thoughts 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 entirely correspond with Protestantism, and the discrepancies and conflicts between the two discourses could 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 were not only co-existing side by side but also competing side by side. Colley, whose argument about the importance of Protestantism for 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 road by which the Anglican Church and the British state travelled farther 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.”(cit in Sykes 1997, 23-4; Feldman 1994, 3). He also thought that the emancipation of the Jews, of which he was one of the proposers, would not erode Britain's Christian ethos (Feldman 1994, 40-1). In fact, some of the supporters of civil rights for Jews did so with a hope of their grateful conversion (Valman 2001, 18; Feldman 2015, p. 100). So, Christianization and de-Christianization were probably going on simultaneously (McLeod 1996, 3-6; Wolffe 2008, 93).

Another way this uneasy relationship manifested itself was in the co-existence of legal emancipation with a culture of Protestantism as the basis and excuse for exclusion of others (Wendehorst 1999, 194-196). Already during the very limited emancipation envisaged by the Jew Bill of 1753, the opposition dubbed it “Rohmish works” and juxtaposed English freedom and Protestantism with Jewish emancipation.[[13]](#footnote-13) Lord Russel who supported the emancipation of the Dissenters and the Jews was the one who published the “Durham Letter” against Papal Aggression as a reaction to the re-erection of Catholic hierarchy in England, thereby arousing an anti-Catholic wave (Altholz 1964, 93). Jews and Catholics, emancipation notwithstanding, retained the position of “the other” both culturally and socially. Catholics, especially Irish Catholics, were treated more violently than Jews, with repetitious 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 when given the context of the inclusive trends of the Anglican Church at the time; they were certainly part of a long English Catholic history.[[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, on the whole, Catholics suffered more often and more violent attacks than Jews from 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 a religious background. 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 religious overtones still provided the special color of the discrimination, in an era of growing racial thinking and coexisted with an environment of legal and political liberal nationalism.

The constantly growing conflicts between the two discourses that permeated English public life in the nineteenth century were not dominant because they agreed with and 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 right through them. There is a voluminous literature on the connection between English and British identities and the empire (Kumar 2000. 606). It covers the full range from being a driving force to a negation of its existence in the public mind. At the one end stands Linda Colley, who believes the empire to have been so important in the formation of a British unifying identity by providing an ultimate “other”, that the dissolution of that empire could explain the dissolution of the united British identity (Colley 1992a, 316, 327-8). Her thesis rather reminds one of the description 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 common interests in the empire provided the 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 – constitutional and imperial (Matikkala, 2011).[[18]](#footnote-18) John Mackenzie, cites a long list of popular excitements and agitations about foreign affairs and empire. The outbursts about 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, the attitude toward the empire varied over time, but by 1890 it had captured the imagination, even of the Nonconformists (Wolffe 2002, 221). Despite all, Bernard Porter and Andrew Thompson argue that there were few specific occasions when imperialists had their way easily in British politics, and that it was apathy that constituted the dominant response to empire in Britain (Porter 2004; Thompson 2005). Possibly, the centrality of empire is elusive in the literature about English identity because there was no “ordered system of ideology” about the 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. But he then strongly qualifies the assessment, reviewing literature which casts doubt on the centrality of empire, ending up calling for differentiation between formal and informal empire, jingoism, Britain's foreign policy in general, and support for naval expansion (Howe 2008, 160-4). Such a call pointedly reminds us that the empire could mean different things to different people at the time, and thus seem ever present to some researchers but absent to others.

As I will show in the following sections, current research provides ample proof that empire was central to the discourses on self-identification both by connections and by 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, 4th Earl of Carnarvon, promoted the idea of empire by putting forth the other two ideals 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 towards 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 a ready terrain for experimentation with liberal notions of administration (Metcalf 1995, 28-30).

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

Interconnection could be dated from the Glorious Revolution when the British were free from Catholicism and slavery, and achieved a 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 so as to utilize the greatness that Britain has won 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's mission to Africa and his short visit to Britain in 1857, and as a reaction to the Indian Mutiny (Stanley I983, 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 in donations to the missionary societies, especially after Livingstone’s death and after the visit of the singing Evangelicals, Dwight Lyman Moody and Ira D. Sankey. It reached a new peak in the 1890s, particularly in 1896. Mission stories were central in Sunday schools, providing a platform for both national pride and religious fervour (McLeod 1996, 145-6). The mission was central to Victorian faith, and 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 came 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. Sometimes critical of the culture they left behind, but still proud to carry the flag, missionaries sometimes deliberately promoted imperial expansion and even took part in its administration (Williams 1994, 395-7). [[20]](#footnote-20)

However, religion and empire were two blessings whose carriers rarely thought too well of each other. The religious enthusiasm that drove the missionaries also fed the anti-slavery movement in the beginning of the nineteenth century (Williams 1994, 382-3). Later in the century, missionaries and commercial interests parted ways, with 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 favour 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. Sometimes, without intending to do so, they carried an egalitarian message. Providing interpretations to local cultures and enhancing education, they sometimes supported national movements and anti-imperialist activities, willingly or not. Though British Protestant missionaries were not outright anti-imperialists, their attitude was 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 contradictions of liberalism or political freedom. From the seventeenth century, following the reading of Roman history, empire was perceived as the opposite of republic and as a cause of loss of freedom (Armitage 2000, 126-139). Imperial historians like Thomas Metcalf and postcolonial critics like Javed Majeed have problematized 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, as many Victorians, advocated the continued rule of the British empire even his later phase of “melancholic colonialism”, as an avatar of liberty (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 Indian rebels in 1857 as political, not criminal, offenders shows a clear consciousness of the friction between imperial rule and the preservation of freedom. Mill wanted to see democratic rule curbed, and he preferred the empire under technocratic administration, which would rule more fairly than democratic institutions (Sullivan 1983, 600-602).[[22]](#footnote-22) The clash between empire and the principle of political freedom couldn’t have been more succinctly put than by 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 the empire and political freedom became 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 later to take 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 Mayanrd 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 some 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 aggrandisement, 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 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, was against nationalism, supported the empire and supported 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 raised far less interest.[[25]](#footnote-25) So, what was construed as decolonization by the opposers was to others an affirmation of the empire in a moral garb.

Electoral results seem 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 figured large in British politics, the Conservatives reigned supreme, except for the short interlude of 1892-1895, until 1906. 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 the 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 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 was reflecting 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 has touched the most central ideals of English culture could not be marginal to the way that English people identified themselves and their political culture.

# *Conclusion*

The concept of national identity came under heavy fire. Roger Brubaker and Fredrick Cooper, claim that the concept of identity should be exchanged for “identification” or “self-presentation”. Their main contention with the concept is that it cannot connote its literal meaning: a group of people cannot have one sense of self, stable and “identical” at all time, 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 set 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 ideals and symbols are more stable and more central then others, even when they are self-contradictory (Sökefeld 2001, 527-544).

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

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1. Krishan Kumar ascribes a very similar list of attributes to the English identity, yet sees them as reason 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 doesn't 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 on the 2001 census only a small minority is devoid of all connection with religion or religious institutions (McLeod 2007, 228, 259). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 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 whether the universe could be explained and its value measured by glass and iron. Kingsley exclaimed he preferred civilization to sanctity [Catholic and therefor false and superstitious] versus civilization which in a higher sense of sanctity. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Smith sees a religious element to all nationalisms but particularly for Protestant nation (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-eighteenth centuries Britain's Imperial rivals were not of one religious colour 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, 22-4). [↑](#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 includes 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 more 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. 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 and symbolized his conviction that spreading the Gospel through the empire was a service to the queen (Williams 1994, 396). Porter is emphasizing 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 central also later in the century (Williams 1994, 389-90). In the last quarter of the nineteenth century missionaries were increasingly bringing forward racial differences (Thorne 1999, 92). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Although 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 stand (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, though settler colonies were justified on different grounds from the Raj, but 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, and that God had given Britain the stewardship of those great liberal principles, and 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 though 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 detrimental effects it would have on the empire (Mandler 2000, 237; Kumar 2000, 575-608; Stapleton 1997, 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)