

# Christian privilege and experiences of oppression among people with a non-Christian background in Northern Ireland

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## **Abstract**

The article aimed to provide insight into how people with a non-Christian background experience Christian privilege in Northern Ireland (NI) and to consider implications for the counseling profession. The current qualitative study was located in a transformative paradigm; it intended to advance a social justice agenda in counseling. Data were collected in five mini focus groups and one individual interview from 15 participants with a non-Christian background. Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was used to analyze the data, focusing on semantic level content. Analysis of data led to one overarching theme and five related themes. The overarching theme Outsiders captured how non-Christian participants often experienced the normalization of Christianity as the dominant worldview as oppression; they frequently felt they were treated as strangers who did not belong. Related themes included: Systemic Invisibility, Different and Alienated, Treated as an Enemy, Demeaned, Attacked, and Under Threat, and Attempts to Force Religious Conformity. The urgent need for the counseling profession in Christian hegemonic societies to critically engage with the phenomenon of Christian privilege was discussed.

*Keywords: Christian privilege, oppression, counseling, Northern Ireland, social justice*

## **Christian Privilege and Experiences of Oppression Among People with a Non-Christian Background in Northern Ireland**

McIntosh (2010) characterized privilege as the automatic unearned psychological and structural advantages granted to individuals based on their actual or assumed dominant social group membership. Christian privilege can be understood as the “seemingly invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits accorded to Christians” (Blumenfeld, 2020, p. 2391). Christian privilege arises from Christian hegemony, an overarching power structure that confers certain advantages to Christians through a society’s “unacknowledged and/or unconscious adherence” to a Christian worldview (Joshi, 2020, p. 4). In such societies, Christian beliefs, practices, and values are the norm providing people with a Christian background significant privileges relative to those without a Christian background. This study defined Christian background as an individual raised in a family or household that identified with a Christian denomination, notwithstanding their present religious beliefs or lack thereof. Unbelief does not eliminate the advantages arising from a religion of origin’s foundational role in shaping value systems and understanding of religious norms (Edwards, 2018; Joshi, 2006). The benefits of Christian privilege will vary significantly according to a person’s multiple other social group memberships, denominational affiliation, and relationship with Christianity (Blumenfeld, 2009; Collins, 2000; Edwards, 2018). The unearned advantages of privilege are often invisible to those who benefit from them; many people may be entirely unaware of how their lives are shaped by Christian privilege (McIntosh, 2010). As non-Christians are often denied the advantages of Christian hegemony, the current study sought to explore how people with a non-Christian background experience Christian privilege in Northern Ireland (NI), a society traditionally dominated by Christian norms.

### **Christian Privilege, Oppression, and the Cost of Dominant Group Membership**

Although the causes of oppression are complex and multi-faceted, Christian privilege might nevertheless be one of the most extensive yet concealed contributors to the marginalization of non-Christian people (Blumenfeld et al., 2009; Case et al., 2013). Blumenfeld et al. (2009) considered Christian privilege and religious oppression to have a “symbiotic relationship” (p. xiv). When a Christian worldview is accepted as normal, universal, and superior, non-Christian perspectives tend to be relegated to abnormal, different, and inferior. This form of oppression can arise from the daily practices of a contemporary liberal society; cruelty or intent is not required (Young, 1990). The intricacies of religious oppression have not been comprehensively explored (Jordanova et al., 2015) and are likely shaped by an individual’s various other group identities (Collins, 2000; Joshi, 2020). A deficit of research addressing religious oppression has possibly concealed the prevalence of Christian privilege (Accapadi, 2009).

Whilst it cannot be equated with the oppression experienced by non-Christian people, the interconnectedness of humanity is such that systems of Christian privilege can exact a price from those who have a Christian background and otherwise avail of its benefits. As stressed by Goodman (2011), there is often an intellectual, material, moral/spiritual, psychological, and social cost to dominant group membership. This can include heightened feelings of guilt and fear, disconnection from those who are perceived as different, and ignorance of one’s own culture and history. Dismantling manifestations of Christian privilege could, therefore, not only promote equality for non-Christians encountering oppression but could potentially enable people with a Christian background to live a more fulfilled and authentic life.

It is important to acknowledge that Christian privilege does not prevail in every society and in certain countries people with a Christian background encounter widespread oppression. It is estimated that around 365 million Christians are persecuted for their faith globally, across 160 countries and territories (Open Doors, 2024; Pew Research Centre, 2024). Christians in Eritrea, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, and Yemen potentially endure the most extensive suffering including death, imprisonment, harassment, and intimidation (Open Doors, 2024). Even in Christian hegemonic societies, some people with a personal Christian faith consider themselves to be disadvantaged compared to non-religious groups. Research in Britain and NI indicated that a significant number

of self-identified Christians with a personal faith believed they were sidelined in an increasingly secular society (Christian Institute, 2009; Evangelical Alliance, 2024; Mitchell et al., 2015). Some Christians felt their freedom of religious expression was eroded by what they perceived to be unbalanced equality legislation, a hostile media, and intolerant social climate. The oppression arising from Christian privilege is therefore nuanced, historically dependent, and geographically situated.

### **Christian Privilege and the Counseling Profession**

In the last decade or so, there has been a significant and emerging body of multi-disciplinary research on Christian privilege; these studies predominantly focused on the socio-political context of the United States (U.S.) (e.g., Aronson et al., 2021; Blumenfeld, 2009; Blumenfeld & Jaekel, 2012; Ferber, 2012; Joshi, 2020; Markowitz & Puchner, 2018; Todd et al., 2020; Walls & Todd, 2014). However, within the field of counseling, religion continues to be an “often neglected” multi-cultural concern (Mintert et al., 2020, p. 2). To date, research on Christian privilege tends to be located within progressive counseling movements in the U.S. (Chan et al., 2018; Ratts & Geenleaf, 2018; Singh et al., 2020). Christian privilege has been largely overlooked in the counseling professions of the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland. Whilst issues of equality are gaining traction in these contexts, a culture of social justice is only beginning to emerge (Winter & Hanley, 2015).

Perhaps due to a deficit of studies on Christian privilege, Christian hegemony has had an enduring impact on counseling; it is arguably a profession embedded with many Christian norms (Mintert et al., 2020; Schlosser, 2003). These invisible norms tend to be shaped by the culture of the U.S. Despite comprising less than 5% of the world's population, the U.S. is the primary producer of psychological research (Arnett, 2008). As Christians are the dominant religious group in the U.S., Christianity often informs the religious standards to which non-Christian people are compared. This comparison can result in the pathologization of certain non-Christian practices (Al'Uqdah et al., 2019; Blumenfeld, 2006; Schlosser, 2003). In counseling, pathologization can include practitioners misinterpreting certain gender roles within Islam as oppressive (Laird et al., 2007; Mintert et al., 2020), misconstruing the tendency of some Sikh people to discuss issues in a philosophical manner as avoidance (Singh & Gubi, 2012), or mistaking an emphasis on selflessness within Hinduism for insufficient personal boundaries (Navsaria & Peterson, 2007).

A further possible manifestation of Christian privilege in counseling is the generalization of Christian norms to diverse populations (Blumenfeld, 2009). The assumption that the Christian experience is universal and applicable to all might have contributed to the counseling profession's tendency to disregard non-Christian perspectives (Al'Uqdah et al., 2019; Flasch & Fulton, 2019). The experiences of Muslims and Sikhs are vastly under-represented in counseling research (Ahluwalia & Zaman, 2010; Al'Uqdah et al., 2019; Tarabi et al., 2020). Hindu conceptions of mental health are not widely understood (Avasthi et al., 2013). The body of literature pertaining to Jewish clients is sparse (Flasch & Fulton, 2019; Weinrach, 2002). The needs and experiences of non-religious people have been given scant attention (Brewster et al., 2014). Weinrach (2002) stressed that significant harm can be inflicted on non-Christian people when they are treated as invisible by the counseling profession.

Non-Christians might, therefore, avoid counseling, or experience hesitancy, for fear that their religious beliefs could be misunderstood or overlooked. Mistrust of practitioners can be a meaningful obstacle to non-Christian clients availing of mental health services (Rassool, 2016; Weatherhead & Daiches, 2010). Whilst research examining the use of counseling by specific religious groups is limited (Hussain, 2009), existing studies suggest that non-Christian people underuse mental health services (Mir et al., 2019) and report lower overall satisfaction (Mahmud, 2024; Moller et al., 2019). Although generalizations cannot be made about the appropriateness of counseling for non-Christians and multiple factors likely shape experiences in therapy, scrutinizing Christian norms would nonetheless appear vital to ensure the oppression that can arise from Christian privilege is not enacted through the possible pathologization of non-Christian practices and neglect of non-Christian people. In

a profession that espouses to be ethically committed to equality and the pursuit of social justice, there is an urgent need for action to address the inequity that tends to result from unexamined Christian privilege.

### **Christian Privilege in NI**

Exploring Christian privilege in the geographic context of NI is a complex and challenging endeavour. Since the formation of NI in 1921, many people living in this part of the world have endured considerable segregation, inequality, and suffering. NI was established following the partition of the island of Ireland when, following centuries of British colonization, the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland secured independence from British rule whilst the six northern counties remained part of the UK. From the outset, NI was controlled by a Protestant ruling class who maintained power through the political and economic oppression of the Catholic population (McGarry, 2002). In response to this injustice, from approximately 1968 to 1998, there was a violent conflict, resulting in over 3,500 deaths, between those who wished to end the division of Ireland and those who wanted to maintain the union with the UK (Thornton et al., 2004). Whilst widescale violence has ceased and NI is generally considered a post-conflict society following the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, significant tensions and societal divisions still remain. Broadly speaking, support for NI's union with the UK continues to reside in Protestant, Unionist, or Loyalist (PUL) communities, whereas support for the reunification of Ireland is generally found in Catholic, Nationalist, or Republican (CNR) communities.

Due to the historic prevalence of Protestant political hegemony within NI, critical differences exist between the experiences of Protestant and Catholic people in their experience of Christian privilege. However, whilst Protestants traditionally held greater degrees of control, the traditions, symbols, and beliefs of both Christian denominations are deeply embedded in institutions of power. Christian, to many differing degrees, is therefore a privileged identity due to historical factors, numerical dominance, and political affiliation (Blumenfeld, 2006). Most people who live in NI avail of Christian privilege; in the 2021 census, 80% of the population described their current religion as Christian, with 89% identifying their religion, or religion of upbringing, as Christian (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency [NISRA], 2022).

Throughout Ireland's history, Christianity has had an extensive influence on social and political life, with both Catholic and Protestant church leaders assuming an authoritative position in society. There is an enduring presumption in NI that politics and Christianity should converge. Christian morality is frequently espoused by the main political parties when legislating on social issues (Evans & Tonge, 2018). On becoming NI's First Minister in 2016, Arlene Foster declared that she made "no apology" for the Democratic Unionist Party's "very strong Christian values" (McBride, 2016, para. 1). Although there has been recent separation on issues of abortion and marriage equality (Evans & Tonge, 2018), Sinn Féin, presently the largest party in NI, has traditionally enjoyed a close and intertwined relationship with Catholicism (Evans & Tonge, 2013). The years of violent conflict in NI have entrenched the public dimensions of Christianity; genuine multi-culturalism has often been impeded by the tendency to consider NI only in terms of a Protestant Catholic dichotomy (Montgomery, 2013).

Whilst deeply divided between Protestant and Catholic, NI's education system overwhelmingly privileges Christianity. Most children with a Protestant background attend a state-controlled school. Under an arrangement from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the main Protestant denominations have significant and enduring rights of representation in state-controlled schools through their mandatory placement on school governing boards (Transferor Representatives' Council, n.d.). Most children with a Catholic background go to a school managed by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, an organization committed to delivering education in the ethos of the Catholic Church. Primarily under obligations arising from the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, a daily act of collective worship is mandatory in schools; in practice this has an "essential Christian character" (Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, 2015, p. 32). Religious Education (RE) is a further legislative requirement; the curriculum for children aged four to 11 years old focuses exclusively on Christianity. In 2022, the High Court ruled that RE for children in this age group was not conducted in a sufficiently "objective,

critical, or pluralistic manner” (Judicial Communications Office, 2024, p. 3). This ruling was upheld in 2024 following an appeal by the Department of Education (Judicial Communications Office, 2024).

Despite the dominance of Christianity in NI, there are multiple long established non-Christian communities. In the 1870s, the first Jewish synagogue was founded. A Muslim place for prayer was built in Belfast, NI’s capital city, over 100 years ago (Belfast Islamic Centre, 2023). Large scale migration from the 1960s onwards led to the foundation of NI’s Chinese community, many of whom follow the practices of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism (Gallagher, 2007). 1950 saw the creation of the Local Spiritual Assembly for those of the Bahá’í faith (Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of Belfast, n.d.). Belfast presently has two Hindu temples, with Hindu people moving from Punjab and Southern India from the early 1900s (Marshall, 2018). However, whilst the recent census indicates that increasing numbers of people with a non-Christian background are making NI their home (NISRA, 2022), the freedom to practice a non-Christian religion does not necessarily equate with societal acceptance or endorsement.

As stated earlier, this study aimed to explore how people with a non-Christian background experience Christian privilege in NI. It attends to an overlooked form of privilege in counseling; one that has been largely absent from academic discussion in the profession. Unlike previous studies which have typically focused on the U.S., this study contributes to the development of theory by providing novel insight into Christian privilege in NI’s systems of power. Embracing a social justice perspective to understand the issues facing non-Christian people in NI provides an opportunity to improve counseling services and consider systems-level interventions that could help build a more inclusive society. The results of the study were part of a Ph.D. thesis and were used to generate a descriptive account of Christian privilege that served as a stimulus to facilitate counselors with a Christian background to explore their perceptions of religious privilege.

## Methods

### Researcher Positionality

I, the first author, collected and analyzed all the data. I identify as a White, presently middle-class, cis-gender, able-bodied, heterosexual woman. Although I do not align with any religious group and would describe my worldview as agnostic, I consider myself to be a beneficiary of Christian privilege having been raised in a culturally Protestant family in NI. Recognizing how I personally benefited from Christian privilege was instrumental in the conceptualization of this study; I wanted to leverage my privileged identity and become an ally to non-Christian people in NI. Ally behaviour is critical in the movement toward social justice in counseling; it can help prevent responsibility for activism resting solely with those who are enduring oppression (Lister et al., 2020; Perrin et al., 2014).

Whilst I am presently employed in Higher Education, I worked as a social worker and counselor for many years in communities encountering widespread socioeconomic disadvantage. Working in these settings informed my understanding of mental health not solely as individualized occurrence, but as a symptom of unjust socio-political realities. My belief that “social action is inextricably linked to healing” was foundational in this study’s social justice orientation (Bartoli et al., 2015, p. 249). Throughout this study I did not try to eliminate or bracket my social justice values, rather I sought to recognize and integrate this bias through transparent and careful reflection (Todd and Abrams, 2011).

### Research Paradigm

This study is located within a transformative paradigm; it places a priority on social justice and seeks to evoke reflection and change in counseling (Mertens, 2009). The research adopts a largely constructionist perspective as it contends there are multiple versions of reality shaped by context, but it diverges from a purely constructionist standpoint by emphasizing the role of power in governing what is considered real (Mertens, 2009; Ponterotto, 2005). Over time, societal values have created “crystallized” realities that are assumed to be “natural

and immutable”; these realities privilege dominant groups (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Transformative research endeavors to confront this status quo in the interests of equality (Ponterotto, 2005).

### **Recruitment**

For this qualitative study, 15 people with a non-Christian background were recruited. A sample of this size provided a manageable amount of data to develop a “rich story” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 56). In response to an email advertising the study, 10 people were recruited from community organizations affiliated with a range of non-Christian worldviews and five were recruited from Higher Education. In this initial email, I outlined the criteria for participation, explained I was interested in exploring what it was like to live as a non-Christian person in NI, and indicated that participation would involve taking part in a small group discussion. An additional information sheet was attached providing further details on the voluntary nature of participation, the potential risks and benefits of taking part, the role of confidentiality, complaint procedures, the specific steps involved in focus group participation, and the intended use of the results. This information sheet also explained that the overall purpose of the research project was to explore how counselors in NI view Christian privilege and discussed how the experiences of non-Christian participants would be used to develop a description of Christian privilege that would be given to counselors as a reflective aid. Connecting with a contact person in a community organization was a successful method of engaging non-Christian participants; each contact person personally recruited several participants. Trust between the researcher and a marginalized group can be enhanced by the endorsement of community figures (Amer & Bagasra, 2013).

Consistent with the experiences of other researchers (e.g., Blumenfeld & Jaekel, 2012; Case et al., 2013), I received several objections to the exploration of Christian privilege based on the alleged bias it exhibited toward people with a personal Christian faith. I responded to each person who expressed concern by clarifying that the study did not intend to critique personal theology or belief but was interested in exploring how Christianity functioned in society from the perspective of social justice and inclusion.

### **Participants**

Each participant had been brought up in a family or household that identified as non-Christian, was English-speaking, 18 years or older, and lived in NI at the time of data collection. Four participants identified as having a Hindu background, three a Jewish background, four a Muslim background, three a non-religious background, and one a Pagan background. One participant described their ethnic background as Egyptian, four as Indian, two as Jewish, three as Pakistani, and five as White. Five participants identified their gender identity as female and ten as male. The youngest participant was 20 years old, and the oldest was 74 years old. The mean age of participants was 38 years old.

### **Procedures**

Focus groups were selected to collect the data for this study because of their empowering and consciousness raising potential; they can offer a greater sense of agency than individual interviews by shifting the balance of power toward participants (Wilkinson, 1998). Five mini focus groups were conducted, each with a minimum of two and a maximum of four participants. Mini focus groups provided time for an in-depth discussion of a sensitive topic (Braun & Clarke, 2013). One participant, Ada, asked if she could take part in an individual interview. At Ada’s request, her interview was held in the company of other participants, thereby retaining the collective nature of a focus group.

At the beginning of each focus group, participants were provided with an opportunity to ask questions, or voice any concerns. Ground rules for safe group interaction were then agreed. Participants were asked to share their experiences as a non-Christian person living in NI. A semi-structured interview guide was used as a framework for discussion (See Appendix A for the protocol). The interview guide was developed from themes in extant privilege literature. These themes included media portrayal, political representation, education, sense of societal belonging, and, if appropriate, experience of observing religious practices. Open questions around these areas

were used as prompts to facilitate interaction among participants. The mean focus group length was 58 minutes, the shortest group lasted 33 minutes and the longest 80 minutes. I recorded and later transcribed the interviews, with participant consent. Whilst time consuming, transcribing the interviews myself helped develop familiarity with the richness of the data. I listened to the recordings several times to check the accuracy of the transcriptions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the university Ethics Filter Committee. Confidentiality was embedded throughout the research process. To safeguard participant anonymity, data were securely stored, and all identifying details removed. In advance of signing consent forms, participants were provided with detailed information explaining key aspects of the study (e.g., the overall purpose, what participation would involve, confidentiality, right to withdraw, possible advantages and disadvantages of taking part, and the anticipated use of the results). Consent was actively negotiated throughout; it was not viewed as an isolated incidence. Due to the potentially distressing research topic, the emotional safety of participants was considered a priority. As a counselor, I have professional skills that aid the exploration of sensitive issues. However, to avoid any potential confusion, appropriate boundaries were maintained between the role of researcher and counselor. All participants agreed their data could be used in future publications. To avoid the possibility of coercion, no financial or other incentives were offered to participants.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis (TA), a qualitative pattern-based method of analysis. Reflexive TA was selected for its capacity to produce accessible, rich, and intricate patterns in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Results that are accessible, particularly to a non-academic audience, can amplify a study's transformative impact (Mertens, 2009). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, analysis involved: familiarization with data, creation of initial codes, theme development, review of themes, and defining and naming of themes. Analysis focused on semantic level codes which examined explicit or surface content; this form of coding acts as a "mirror for participants' language and concepts" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 207). Semantic codes were considered the most effective way to recognize participants' experiences of oppression as legitimate versions of reality. Data were considered significant if it addressed the research question; value was not determined by frequency of occurrence. In the presentation of results, terms such as frequently, most, many, some, or all are used to denote the consistency of a theme across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Each participant was asked to review a summary of the themes; the seven who responded expressed support and did not suggest any changes.

### **Cultural Competence**

Throughout the research process, to address any of my potential biases toward non-Christian people, I placed a priority on developing cultural competence, which I understood to be my ability to "accurately represent reality in culturally complex communities" (Mertens, 2009, p. 89). Cultural competence necessitates a researcher engage in extensive self-reflection to recognize the power imbalances that can occur between them and the groups they are researching (Mertens, 2009). During the conceptualization of this study, my journey involved prolonged engagement with a range of social justice organizations committed to the rights marginalized groups, critical self-reflection in relation to my personal experiences of privilege and contact with non-Christian religious institutions. In the course of data collection, I focused on creating a respectful and honest relationship of trust that positioned participants as experts on their lived experience. To enhance transparency, I shared my positions of privilege, professional standing, and motivations for the study with each participant (Mertens, 2009). Throughout data analysis, I maintained a detailed reflexive journal and engaged in frequent, in-depth discussions with the project supervisors around the potential impact of my Christian background.

## Results

### Outsiders

Analysis of data led to one overarching theme and five themes. The overarching theme, Outsiders, captures how, in the experience of participants, they were treated as outsiders from the dominant Christian majority. Outsiders is developed through five themes: Systemic Invisibility, Different and Alienated, Treated as an Enemy, Demeaned, Attacked, and Under Threat, and Attempts to Force Religious Conformity.

#### *Systemic Invisibility*

This theme considered how participants perceived their non-Christian backgrounds to be disregarded in NI's systems of power. Many participants commented that politicians from the main parties appeared indifferent; they rarely recognized the existence of non-Christian people. As Adam noted, "they [politicians] are not interested ... there is nothing."

Most participants felt NI's education system ignored their worldview. Throughout her school life, Ada, thought the curriculum omitted Islam stating, "in most of the schools I went in like, it [Islam] wasn't really taught at all."

The tendency of the media to either discount non-Christian people, or deliver a misleading representation, was discussed by most participants. Arjun described the media's depiction of Hindu culture as trivialized and superficial, "it's only entertainment purpose, you know, that's not like Hinduism they are preaching, they are only doing the Bollywood." Hassan believed positive portrayals of Muslims were entirely missing in the media with a disproportionate focus placed on the negative stating, "the good stuff never gets covered and comes out always the bad stuff"

Due to the systemic invisibility of non-Christian backgrounds, most participants found many people in NI to be ill-informed of non-Christian worldviews, as Ahmed shared, "I think there is a lack of knowledge, like they said people don't know much about what Islam is, you know what the fundamental beliefs are." Most participants described how they had to educate people in NI about their non-Christian backgrounds. Sarah discussed how she often had to redress the ignorance created by the education system:

That's why the burden falls on us so much to explain things because they're not learning it in school so, so all the education you have is from your friends, so it falls to me to teach everybody about Judaism and like, it's tiring.

Informing Christian people about their worldview was a time consuming and demanding task for many participants.

#### *Different and Alienated*

This theme explored participants' experiences of being treated as different from the Christian majority and how this frequently led to a sense of isolation. For Simon, feelings of difference due to his Pagan background were one of the first things he observed when he moved to NI, "pretty much from the first day I got here, when I was introduced to my in-laws, I really noticed the fact that I am not Christian." Ben and Adam discussed how they were regularly singled out as Jewish. The emphasis placed on Ben's Jewish background lessened his sense of belonging in NI, "the fact that it [Jewish background] is pointed out, so you can never really become fully assimilated." Adam highlighted how people with a Christian background were not referred to by their affiliation to Christianity explaining that it is "not nice guy Catholic or nice guy Protestant." Sarah revealed how her alienation from the Christian majority was often implicitly communicated in subtle interactions. Even when people were respectful of her Jewish background, they often framed it as something exotic or unusual:

People who are trying to be respectful are like 'Oh my God you're Jewish, I've never met a Jewish



person before, that is so cool, like tell me all about it' and they're trying to be friendly, but they are still making it clear it's you and them and that you don't belong.

Muslim participants discussed how their sense of separateness from many people in NI resulted in feelings of loneliness. Ada stated, "I don't really want to settle here in the long term, I would rather go somewhere in England or something, so if I was to stay, I would say it would be quite lonely." Due to isolation and loneliness, Ada, Ahmed, and Syed could not foresee a future in NI.

### ***Treated as an Enemy***

This theme examined participants' experiences of being treated as enemies who presented a threat to society. Muslim participants often felt they were viewed as a terrorist threat, inclined toward intense violence. Ada believed most people in NI did not understand Islam was a peaceful and non-violent religion:

Often people tie violence with Muslims but ... we're not allowed to like harm another human being or anything, so like if you look into Islam ... it's actually like a very peaceful religion and against violence like totally against harm, so I feel that people don't know that.

Participants from every non-Christian background felt they were treated as a threat to Christianity and faced the allegation they were evil. Ravi discussed the misconception that Hinduism was "like the devil." Ben and Adam explained Jewish people were sometimes viewed as "Christ killers" and "devil worshippers." Anna and Connor shared that people with a non-religious background were frequently positioned as amoral. Simon mentioned the accusation that Pagan people "wanted to burn churches down." Hassan recalled the description of Islam as a "satanic religion" in 2015 by a renowned religious leader in NI, comments initially endorsed by then First Minister, Peter Robinson.

Many participants were viewed as an economic threat. Adam mentioned the accusation all Jewish people were disproportionately wealthy stating, "I mean the number of times ... they say 'all you Jews are rich.'" Ravi, Meena, and Arjun encountered claims they were depleting the Northern Irish economy by unfairly taking employment they were not entitled to. Ravi described the accusations made toward Hindu people, "whenever you come here [people with a Hindu background] our job opportunities, we lose our job opportunities."

Given the perceived widespread belief that non-Christian people were dangerous, most participants felt compelled to demonstrate they were not a threat to society. To promote understanding of their religious culture, Hindu participants arranged educational activities for the wider community. Arjun noted how politicians were specifically invited to these events, "we normally invited them [politicians] to an event or function ... they come to know ... this group is not like hard core." These meetings endeavored to challenge misconceptions of Hindu extremism. Similar events for people with a Christian background were held by Muslim participants. Hassan described how he believed these gatherings promoted a positive understanding of Islam, "we're meeting different people and things like this, this helps people give them a better understanding of Islam definitely." Syed and Hassan hoped these interactions would dispel the tendency to conflate Islam with terrorism.

### ***Demeaned, Attacked, and Under Threat***

This theme captured participants' experiences of degrading treatment, threatening, and hostile behaviour. Many participants described how they sometimes felt demeaned in NI. Michael believed Christianity was so established as the norm that all other non-Christian worldviews were positioned as commodities, devoid of any value beyond what could be bought or sold, "I feel like Christianity is so much the [pause] status quo that other religions that, or atheism, are seen as goods or products that you can just use." Anna shared how she felt people with a non-Christian background were not always recognized as full members of society, "I feel like a lot of people don't realize that everyone, because we're all humans in this society, we're all members of society that we all have the authority to say, to speak our minds."

Attacks of property were discussed by some participants. Arjun remarked that cars belonging to Hindu people were damaged on multiple occasions outside their religious meeting place. Ben described intentional damage to a synagogue in NI. Sarah mentioned that her family's garden was vandalized, "we had some stuff broken in our garden too and mum was like really sure it was because we're Jewish." Simon shared how he installed security cameras after the windows of his home were broken as retaliation for his Pagan worldview, "I had my windows put through a couple of times because of my [pause] belief system."

Frequent verbal and physical attacks were described by the Hindu participants. Items were thrown at Meena and Arjun. As racial slurs were included in these incidents, Meena was uncertain if they were assaulted for their racial or religious background, or both, stating, "bad experience from the kids over here because they were seeing in a group, or this color people first time or something and they saying, calling us 'Paki' and throwing the milk and things like that."

Muslim participants shared how Britain First, an anti-Islamic Christian supremacist political organization, held a rally targeting NI's Muslim population. Syed mentioned how the physical risk posed by Britain First resulted in police protection for local mosques, "I think there were police forces and stuff outside mosque to protect us." The danger faced by some Muslim participants appeared to have an explicitly political agenda.

### ***Attempts to Force Religious Conformity***

This theme explored the coercion participants experienced to conform to Christian beliefs and practices. Pressure was exerted through NI's education system and could manifest in personal relationships.

Sarah explained how religious education was, in essence, Christian education stating, "it's not religion, it's like Christian education." Mandatory Christian prayer at a school assembly was described by Michael, "they [students] had to go to assembly and there was like an event going on and they were all asked to pray, and they were all forced into prayer and that's quite scary."

The institutionalization of Christianity in NI's schools was profoundly challenging for participants who were parents. The only action they could take to avoid their children's almost exclusive exposure to a religious worldview contrary to their own was to remove them from activities that most, if not all, their fellow classmates would be participating in. The complexity of this choice was highlighted by Anna who had to decide between her child being taught the Christian New Testament or having him sit alone in a school corridor:

My son is being tested on the miracles of Jesus, what are your options? At Primary school [children aged four to 11 years old] the option is to sit in the hall, sit out of things, but I think that's very clearly an example of discriminatory practice.

To be excused from Christian education and practices, non-Christian children must have permission from authority figures at school. Deva discussed how anxious and fearful this process made her son feel:

My son was feeling when he was in P1 P2 [aged four to six years old], he was feeling like, they go from mass, they have like a mass session, he was really scared to say 'I'm not a Christian, I don't want to go.'

Christianity's dominance within the education system could leave Hindu participants' children confused about their religious and cultural identity. Meena shared how her children were relatively ignorant about Hinduism yet acquainted with the teachings of Christianity:

Children's come home [from school] 'mummy what is Hinduism, why are we not having confession, why are we not having holy communion?', because our kids haven't an idea why we are not following that because that's the only thing he is experiencing.

Some participants experienced attempts to impose Christianity in their interpersonal relationships. Anna described how certain people tried to convert her to Christianity. These conversations tended to communicate the explicit message that Christianity was a more sophisticated worldview than atheism, "I thought God that is the

most patronizing thing I have ever heard [pause] because I'm a thinker I'll come round to your [Christian] point of view." Simon had the experience of people coming to his home uninvited, referring to him as a "Satanist" and a "heathen" if he did not conform with a Christian worldview. These visitors warned he would face eternal suffering by burning in "hell" if he did not convert to Christianity.

The results revealed that participants experienced being treated as outsiders in NI. Non-Christian people were perceived to be overlooked within the power structures of Northern Irish society. Participants felt they were often treated as different from the Christian majority, resulting in isolation. Many believed they were frequently considered an enemy who posed a dangerous threat. Instances of demeaning treatment, verbal, and physical attack were reported with participants experiencing pressure to conform with Christian norms.

## Discussion

The current study offered unique insights into how participants tended to experience the normalization of Christianity in Northern Irish society as oppression. These experiences did not exclusively exist on an individual level, but were often manifestations of the ascendancy of Christianity in NI's systems of power.

The results demonstrate that participants frequently felt ignored by the media, politicians, and the education system. This aligns with Joshi's (2009) contention that, in a Christian hegemonic society, non-Christian people are commonly "rendered invisible, illegitimate, and unworthy of attention beyond the level of a novelty or stereotype" (p. 51). This invisibility could be viewed as a manifestation of cultural imperialism, characterized by Young (1990) as "the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm" (p. 59). Cultural imperialism can make minority groups invisible whilst simultaneously reducing them to a stereotype. Within liberal democracies, Young regarded cultural imperialism, alongside exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and violence, to form the five expressions of oppression.

The study provides evidence that due to systemic invisibility, many people in NI appeared to participants to be uninformed of, and unfamiliar with, non-Christian backgrounds. This finding concurs with the work of several authors who suggested that ignorance of non-Christian worldviews can be an expression of Christian privilege (Blumenfeld, 2006; Joshi, 2009; Kivel, 2013). Most people with a Christian background can live in NI and remain oblivious to non-Christian perspectives; their lack of understanding is unlikely to cause any undue disadvantage or difficulty. However, non-Christian people must be acutely acquainted with Christian norms to navigate daily social and political life (Blumenfeld, 2006).

The results suggested how ignorance of non-Christian worldviews among people with a Christian background was frequently redressed by participants. The burden of informing privileged groups is often borne by people with a minority group background, as Lorde (2017) reminded us, "Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world" (p. 95). The current study, therefore, illustrated how Christian privilege, like many other forms of dominant group advantage, can be a "constant drain of energy" for those who do not avail of it (Lorde, 2017, p. 95).

Participants indicated their experiences of being treated as different, and separate from, the Christian majority in NI. This finding highlights how, in the context of Christian normalcy, non-Christian worldviews tend to be positioned as the other (Joshi, 2020). Othering is characterized by exclusion, alienation, and ascribed inferiority; it manifests in the "the ability to be distinguished from the familiar, the accepted, and the known" (Eliyahu-Levi & Semo, 2023, p. 1). Othered communities and individuals are often segregated and isolated from the society in which they live. Kivel (2013) suggested that anyone who is not considered a White Christian man has historically been deemed the other by many of the institutions of mainstream Christianity.

Throughout history, Christian hegemonic societies have been inclined to position non-Christians as a threat to justify oppression and exclusion from power (Joshi, 2020; Kivel, 2013). As demonstrated in the results, the nature of the alleged danger can differ according to non-Christian group. For centuries, Jewish people have

been treated as a threat to the economy, national security, and Christianity itself (Vellenga, 2018). People with a non-religious background are often deemed a moral threat, perceived to lack the virtue and integrity possessed by those who have a Christian background (Edgell et al., 2016). Muslim people are increasingly framed as supporters and perpetrators of terrorism; violence is often portrayed as an Islamic norm. Joshi (2009) maintained that in the present U.S. and European socio-political climate, race has become an indicator of religion resulting in anyone with brown skin potentially considered Muslim and subject to terrorist stereotypes. The distrust and fear directed toward non-Christian people in a Christian dominated society stands in sharp contrast to the trustworthiness that can be attributed to those with a Christian background, particularly White men (Kivel, 2013).

To rationalize oppression, people from many minority groups have been accused of posing a danger to the status quo. Myths of Black men as an inherent sexual threat to White women were propagated in the U.S. to defend lynching and other forms of racial violence (Davis, 1982). Various branches of the Christian Church in NI have traditionally referred to non-heterosexual people, particularly gay men, as dangerous and predatory figures (Duggan, 2012). Discourse surrounding the rights of transgender people has tended to focus on the perceived risk to the safety of cis gender women, despite research indicating that such fears are not “empirically grounded” (Hasenbush et al., 2019, p. 80). The British Government historically stereotyped many Catholic people in NI as a terrorist threat to justify policies of internment, collusion with loyalist paramilitary groups, and violent militarized policing (Cassel et al., 2006; Gethins, 2006; Lowry, 1976). This study, therefore, contributes to understanding the interconnections between multiple forms of oppression; examining these can help “unravel” the “comprehensive ideological tapestry” (Ferber, 2012, p. 74) that is used to validate inequality and its enactment in stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination.

The current results demonstrated that, for some participants, oppression manifested in the form of violent verbal and physical attacks. Aggression of this nature is systemic; it has social justice implications beyond the actions of the individual perpetrator, since victims are targeted solely because of their actual or perceived minority group status (Young, 1990). This type of hostility is often a “social given that everyone knows happens and will happen again” (Young, 1990, p. 62); it is inclined to be normalized and arguably legitimized within society.

Amnesty International has described the prevalence of hate crimes in NI, criminal offenses that are motivated by hostility toward a person’s race, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or transgender identity, as “deeply worrying” (Amnesty International, 2023a, para. 1). In recent years, religiously motivated hate crimes in NI include the gathering of people in Ku Klux Klan robes at an Islamic Prayer Centre (Weaver, 2018), and the flying of Nazi flags outside a mosque (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2023). Crimes of this nature can have profound consequences for the individual, with a sense of fear and isolation lingering long after the event (Michael et al., 2022). Their injurious impact can spread throughout the wider community, delivering an intended message of intimidation to all those who share the victim’s targeted identity. The current study, therefore, suggested that whilst a Christian background will not provide immunity from every kind of aggression or attack, Christian privilege might offer some degree of protection from the many forms of “hostility, distress, and violence” (Joshi, 2006, p. 131) certain non-Christian people can experience as part of their daily lives in NI.

Offering support for the work of Joshi (2006), the current results provide evidence that the omnipresence of Christianity in an education system can result in non-Christian children being “singled out and segregated”; they can be “literally on the outside looking in” (p. 132) if they do not confirm to Christian norms of belief and practice. Conversely, children with a Christian background are likely to receive a religious education at school that coincides, at least in part, with the religious upbringing they have received at home.

For participants in this study, attempts to convert them to Christianity were often experienced as an attack on their non-Christian background; proselytizing was frequently imbued with the assumption of Christian superiority. The results, therefore, concur with Blumenfeld’s (2009) assertion that evangelism can be “an imposition, manipulation and a form of oppression” (p. 18). Regardless of the intent of the perpetrator, it can contribute to the marginalization and outsider status of non-Christian people.

## Limitations

Due to the relatively small number of participants in this study, the results cannot be generalized; a limited number of non-Christian backgrounds were included in the sample as well. This study did not specifically adopt an intersectional approach. Whilst beyond its scope, this undoubtedly restricted appreciation for the complex range of experiences non-Christian people can have in NI. Other intersectional factors, specifically race, ethnicity, and/or nationality, likely shaped the experiences of some participants. As religion is often presumed from race or ethnicity, it can be difficult to “*disentangle*” these forms of oppression (Jordanova et al., 2015, p. 1728). Although providing a potentially empowering forum for data collection, focus groups could have been an intimidating environment for some participants restricting their disclosure of personal information. Additionally, certain participants might have found it difficult to voice a dissenting opinion in a group setting.

As I conducted the interviews, and transcribed and analyzed all the data, the potential impact of my privileged identities and personal biases cannot be discounted. Despite my efforts to develop cultural competence, my Christian background could nonetheless have been a source of unease, leading some participants to withhold or minimize certain experiences of oppression. There were moments when a few participants appeared apologetic when sharing their experiences of injustice, perhaps concerned that I might perceive it as a personal critique. As those in dominant groups can diminish forms of oppression that do not explicitly impact their own lives, it is possible I underestimated the significance of some instances of marginalization. Furthermore, I could have unintentionally discounted participant experiences that challenged my pre-existing view that significant harm can be caused by unexamined Christian hegemony.

## Implications

The following section will consider implications for counseling training, practice, and research. Whilst the implications mostly focus on the socio-political context of NI, they are likely relevant for counselors working with marginalized groups in other Christian hegemonic societies.

### *Implications for Training*

The results demonstrate that the normalization of Christianity as the dominant worldview in NI was frequently experienced as oppression by people with a non-Christian background. However, many counselors could be ill-equipped to respond to the challenges facing non-Christian clients (Flasch & Fulton, 2019; Mintert et al., 2020). Most counselors in NI will avail of Christian privilege as they have been brought up in a household that identified as Christian (NISRA, 2022). Their formative education will probably have taken place in an intensely Christian setting, in a political and social environment that often disregards and potentially persecutes non-Christian people as outsiders. Despite this profound socialization, counseling training programs tend to omit Christian privilege and often minimize religion as a multi-cultural consideration (Magaldi-Dopman, 2014; Mintert et al., 2020; Vieten et al., 2013). Research from the field of White privilege implies that unexamined experiences of Christian privilege are likely to limit a counselor’s competence with non-Christian clients (Mindrup et al., 2011). It is recommended, therefore, that Christian privilege should be integrated into counseling training in NI as a critical component in developing multi-cultural competence. Training could assist counselors to examine how living in, and potentially benefiting from, a Christian hegemonic society might shape their professional work.

To facilitate awareness of Christian privilege, educators could incorporate training initiatives to explore experiences of oppression among non-Christian people (Walls & Todd, 2014). Examining the systemic obstacles and societal hostility often endured by non-Christians could provide some counselors with valuable social comparison information to consider how their lives differ from those without a Christian background, potentially revealing previously concealed areas of privilege (Johnson, 2005). Recognizing how they have personally benefited from Christian hegemony might be deeply challenging for some counselors with a Christian background, particularly those who experience Christianity as a source of denominational, gender, racial, and/or sexual orientation oppression (Accapadi, 2009; Kivel, 2013; Todd, 2010). Adopting an intersectional approach that validates these

painful experiences whilst recognizing that contradictory experiences of privilege can also exist, could therefore be beneficial (Ferber and O'Reilly Herrera, 2013; McIntosh, 2012).

### ***Implications for Counseling Practice and Social Justice Integration***

Given the far-reaching oppression experienced by non-Christian participants, the results strengthen the call for counselors to utilize their power and professional standing to advocate for social change (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018; Wilcox et al., 2022). Relying on traditional approaches to counseling could place responsibility for change exclusively with a client whilst systems of oppression are left intact.

The following proposals are specific steps a counselor could consider when working in collaboration with a non-Christian client whose difficulties stem from systemic injustice. They include actions any practitioner could take to challenge the inequality that can arise from Christian privilege both inside and outside the counseling profession. The proposals might be particularly useful for counselors who experience uncertainty around action as a barrier to their engagement with social justice (Winter & Hanley, 2015; Winter, 2019). The recommendations stem from the six levels of counseling and advocacy intervention stipulated in the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, public policy, and international/global (Ratts et al., 2015).

1. Support a client to locate their difficulties in the context of Christian hegemony. The hostile environment non-Christian people can encounter in NI is likely to have a significant impact on their psychological well-being; existing research indicates a correlation between certain mental health issues and experiences of religious oppression (Jordanova et al., 2015; Nadal et al., 2012; Rippy & Newman, 2006; Wu & Schimmele, 2019). Facilitating a client to develop critical consciousness and recognize the sociological origins of their difficulties can reduce self-blame, promote empowerment, and foster intrapersonal change. To develop this structural perspective, it would appear critical that a counselor actively educate themselves on the impact unjust structures can have on mental health and well-being (Bartlett et al., 2022).
2. Assist a client to cultivate communication skills to discuss experiences of oppression within their personal networks. Whilst these conversations have the potential to enhance interpersonal support, care, and understanding, they could be particularly challenging in NI as a potential legacy of the conflict has been the avoidance of religion in everyday conversation, including within mental health services (Carlisle, 2015). Counselors working in this context might therefore find it helpful to reflect on the historical residue of evasion and hesitancy that could exist when discussing a person's religious background. It also could be pertinent to explore with a client the defensive reactions that can sometimes occur when talking about Christian privilege with those who benefit from the phenomenon (Blumenfeld & Jaekel, 2012; Walls & Todd, 2014).
3. Critically consider organizational policies that could enact Christian privilege. Christian norms are ubiquitous within Northern Irish society and are likely replicated within counseling organizations (Mintert et al., 2020; Schlosser, 2003). For those oppressed by Christian hegemony, the overt celebration of Christian holidays, display of Christian symbols, or adherence to a Christian calendar could serve as poignant reminders of experiences of otherness (Accapadi, 2009; Kivel, 2013; Mintert et al., 2020; Weinbaum, 2009). Questioning such religious and cultural norms in counseling institutions could remove potential barriers and support the inclusion of non-Christian clients.
4. Partner with a client to identify religious or non-religious community organizations who are working to further the rights of marginalized groups. Whilst often overlooked in mainstream discourse, NI has a rich history of effective grass roots activism, most notably in feminism and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer rights (Deiana et al., 2022; Kilmurray, 2016). During the conflict in NI and in the years of peace building that followed the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, many community groups built connections across the Protestant/Catholic divide in pursuit of human rights. These groups have a wealth of institution-

al expertise in disrupting the status quo. Engagement with such organizations could provide an important source of solidarity, support, and collaboration for clients who wish to engage in self or group advocacy.

5. Petition government officials on issues of religious equality to foster change in public policy (Mintert et al., 2020). As the religious curriculum for NI's schools is presently being revised and has been subject to recent legal action, advocacy could focus on the urgent need for genuinely inclusive education that equally represents a plurality of religions and beliefs. In addition to creating a more equitable environment for non-Christians, removing the embedded nature of Christianity in education could potentially lessen the profound denominational divide between Catholic and Protestant young people. A further pertinent focus for lobbying could be the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, surveillance legislation in the UK which places a mandatory duty on counselors and their multi-disciplinary colleagues employed in a range of settings in Scotland, England, and Wales to report indicators of violent and non-violent extremism among their clients. Many leading human rights and community organizations have stressed that this legislation disproportionately targets Muslim people (Amnesty International, 2023b; Grierson, 2021; Liberty, n.d.). Counselors have consequently reported increased fear and distrust of counseling among Muslim clients, highlighting the importance of advocacy in this area ("I am Realising That Fear and Suspicion are More in the Relationship," 2015).
6. Use reliable media outlets to keep informed about international events that are likely to impact non-Christian clients. A meaningful example can be found in the Israel/Gaza war. For several decades, graffiti, murals, and flags in support of Israel or Palestine have been commonly displayed as "proxy tribal" identifiers throughout NI (Carroll & O'Carroll, 2023, para. 11). Based on their common experiences of perceived terrorism, those who identify as PUL in NI tend to share a deep affinity with Israel. People within CNR communities, who often view themselves as subject to colonial occupation, typically express strong support for the rights of Palestinian people. The violent escalation in the Israel/Gaza war has markedly intensified these affiliations in NI, undoubtedly heightening the fear and exclusion experienced by many non-Christian people. It would, therefore, be pertinent for a counselor to remain cognizant of developments in these global affairs.

### ***Implications for Research***

The far-reaching oppression experienced by the non-Christian participants in this study emphasizes the urgent need for additional research on Christian privilege. Future research could examine how multiple social groups identities, specifically race and ethnicity, converge to shape the oppression experienced by non-Christian people in NI. Christian privilege can vary significantly according to local norms and context. Studies in other geographic locations in Ireland and the UK would, therefore, be vital in developing a meaningful picture of the oppression that can arise from this complex phenomenon. Due to the paucity of research guiding counselors who wish to engage in advocacy on behalf of non-Christian clients, the findings support Mintert et al.'s (2020) recommendation that further studies are required to identify the social justice interventions that are effective in promoting religious inclusion in the counseling room and beyond.

### **Conclusion**


The current research informs the present debate on social justice by providing evidence that Christian privilege is "real, historically significant, ongoing, and damaging" (Small et al., 2022, p. 357). In being the first study of its kind to explore Christian privilege in NI, it highlighted the exclusion, isolation, and danger non-Christian people can encounter in their daily lives. In a society that has traditionally silenced and overlooked voices outside of the Protestant/Catholic polarity, this study offered unique and critical insight into painful experiences of oppression that arise, at least in part, from Christian hegemony. In doing so, the study underscored the urgent need for the counseling profession in NI to uphold its commitment to equality by incorporating Christian privilege as a


vital factor in training to ensure competent multi-cultural practice. This article offered specific recommendations to equip counselors to engage in advocacy and become agents of change alongside, and on behalf of, their non-Christian clients. Dismantling the unjust systems that arise from Christian privilege in NI could not only improve the lives of non-Christian people but could assist a still fractured post-conflict society to move toward greater integration, inclusion, and religious equality.


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### **Declaration of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in relation to this work.



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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

1. What knowledge or understanding do you feel most people in Northern Ireland have of your non-Christian background?
2. How is your non-Christian background talked about or discussed in Northern Ireland?
3. What reactions do you get when you express or share your non-Christian background in Northern Ireland?
4. What challenges (if any) do you encounter in Northern Ireland when trying to follow the practices associated with your non-Christian background?
5. How would you describe what it feels like to be someone with a non-Christian background living in Northern Ireland?
6. Are there any specific difficulties someone with your non-Christian background can face in Northern Ireland?
7. What else should I know to understand your life as someone with a non-Christian background living in Northern Ireland?