I should begin by explaining something of the context of the research I am discussing today, which was carried out between 2009 and 2013. There was a subsequent second phase of my project which is still ongoing, and which will be the main focus of my presentation in the second session after tea.

I am an historian by training but am a longstanding member of the Religious Studies Department at the Open University. Hence I sought to bring together my historical interests with analysis of contemporary religion. My doctoral research and first book in the 1980s was focused on the organized early Victorian anti-Catholic movement in England and Scotland. When I returned to this subject area in recent years, I was interested in how taking the ‘long view’ of anti-Catholicism could have applications not only to understanding present-day Northern Ireland, but in providing useful comparisons and contexts for understanding Islamophobia across the UK. I found an ideal partner in the Institute for Conflict Research in Belfast, with their expertise in on-the-ground community based research complementing my skills as an archival researcher. The project has so far generated two books - *Protestant-Catholic Conflict from the Reformation to the Twenty-First Century* and *Irish Religious Conflict in Comparative Perspective* – as well as several journal articles.

My recent work has been primarily concerned with Northern Ireland and – to a lesser extent - with England rather than with Scotland, but I hope aspects of it will nevertheless be of interest and relevance to a Scottish audience, in providing a comparative context for recent concerned discussion of sectarianism here. In order to set the scene in this way, I’d therefore like to begin with my perspective on the recent reports and other literature on sectarianism in Scotland.

In some ways I am surprised that since James Macmillan’s ‘Scotland’s Shame’ lecture in 1999 sectarianism has attracted so much attention both from academics and from government. In other ways though, I am pleased that the issue is being addressed so purposefully. Let me explain this somewhat paradoxical reaction rather more.

When in the 1980s I was doing research on Victorian anti-Catholicism, I shared the general perception that my subject - in Scotland as well as England – was primarily a matter of historical rather than contemporary interest. I remember interesting conversations with a couple of distinguished elderly gentlemen who could recall hearing open air Protestant preachers and political activists in interwar Edinburgh, but they presented their recollections as evidence of how much Scotland had changed during the intervening half century. Other scholars in the 1980s took a similar view. Bill Murray’s *The Old Firm*, published in...
1984, documented the strength of sectarian identifications in the Celtic-Rangers rivalry, but implicitly presented the issue as one confined to football. Steve Bruce’s book, *No Pope of Rome*, which came out in 1985, analysed nineteenth and early twentieth century Protestant political movements, but Bruce came to the conclusion that such attitudes had now largely died out. The title of Tom Gallagher’s book, *Glasgow: The Uneasy Peace*, published in 1987, indicates that he was not quite so optimistic, but nevertheless he perceived the trend as being towards a more ‘neighbourly and tolerant’ Scotland.

Twenty years later, however, the balance of literature and activity was beginning to look very different. James Macmillan’s lecture in 1999 prompted Tom Devine to coordinate a substantial volume of essays that came out the following year. While, as Devine acknowledged, there was a lack of clear consensus, the majority of contributors supported Macmillan’s view that sectarianism was a serious ongoing problem in contemporary Scotland. In response, however, Steve Bruce coordinated a further book which appeared in 2004 and argued that perceptions of sectarianism greatly exaggerated reality. Nevertheless, it is Macmillan’s and Devine’s view that has proved more influential. In 2006 the Scottish government published an Action Plan on Tackling Sectarianism, and then in 2012 it set up the Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism, and subsequently committed significant funding to anti-sectarian projects.

The Advisory Group has acknowledged that the impacts of sectarianism are diverse in both manner and extent and that, in historical perspective, ‘sectarianism is not what it was’. It recommended further research so that action can be grounded on evidence rather than allegation. Nevertheless it was clear that there is a continuing problem to be addressed.

The rediscovery of sectarianism in Scotland in the early twenty-first century is surprising insofar as it would be reasonable to assume that it is not in fact more prevalent now than it was in the 1980s. Clearly, however, it has become less acceptable, even in its less overt forms. I would speculate that this increased sensitivity to the issue is attributable in part to the growth of nationalism, and hence to discomfort with evidence of internal divisions within Scottish society. It also, I suspect, reflects the wider renewed awareness of religious and quasi-religious influences on the international scene.

There is also an interesting parallel here with the United States where at a similar period in 2003 two books appeared that argued that anti-Catholic attitudes remained prevalent, Mark Massa’s *Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* and Philip Jenkins’s *The New Anti-Catholicism*. Indeed I see Scotland and the United States, with their ongoing debates as to the extent to which sectarianism is a contemporary problem, as standing in an
interesting middle position between Northern Ireland where the continuing prevalence of sectarianism seems axiomatic, and England where it is not perceived as an issue in the present day. But are these national contexts quite so different from each other as this kind of thinking suggests?

I’ll come back to this question later, but I’d first like to say rather more about our Northern Ireland research. One starting point for this was the historian’s characteristic frustration with what the archival record does not usually tell us, that is the subtleties of human attitudes and motivations. Having extensively studied anti-Catholicism in the past, I was keen to get a better understanding of the relationship – or lack of it – between religious conviction and sectarian behaviours than one can ever get from historical written sources alone.

Between 2010 and 2012 we conducted 66 semi-structured interviews, in three sample areas of Northern Ireland, Greater Belfast, County Armagh, and the west of the province, including Derry, Omagh and Strabane. We aimed for a wide range of age-groups - although we did not include under 18s - and a balanced sample by gender, community and religious practice. 52 of the interviews were anonymous, but 14 of them were with identified individuals who had played significant roles during the Troubles, for example Lord Eames, Harold Good, Bernadette Devlin-MacAliskey and Raymond Murray.

The overall conclusion was perhaps unsurprising, but is nevertheless worth emphasizing. The interviews suggested there was little or no correlation between active religious practice and pronounced sectarian attitudes. A minority of our churchgoing sample had quite negative views of the ‘other’ community, but so did a similar proportion of the non-church-goers. The key determining factor was rather the degree of regular contact people had with members of the ‘other’ tradition, whether in forms of church-based ecumenical activity or in secular community groups.

Indeed some of those with the strongest religious convictions were also those most uncomfortable with sectarian identifications. Some of our interviewees from ‘Protestant’ communities preferred to identify themselves as ‘Christians’ or as members of a specific church, because they perceived ‘Protestant’ as a political and sectarian label rather than a religious one. A comparable tendency was also present among some of our younger ‘Catholic’ interviewees.

On the other hand even well-intentioned people involved in peace-building initiatives could still hold to stereotypes, for example that Catholics have a strong sense of community – or more negatively that they all think the same way – or that Protestantism promotes individual initiative - or more negatively, division and fragmentation.
While churchgoing in Northern Ireland has declined substantially in recent decades that does not necessarily equate to a decline in other aspects of Christian practice or of a sense of religious identification. For example some of our non-churchgoing interviewees claimed to pray regularly; Protestant parents sent their children to Sunday School; Catholics might maintain other devotional practices. Moreover, it is apparent that residual religious identities are still liable to be reasserted at moments of crisis or insecurity – as for example in the recent loyalist flag protests. Religion remains an important point of reference in Northern Ireland popular culture.

I would therefore argue that declining churchgoing and general secularization are not necessarily leading to a decrease in sectarianism, at least not in the short term. The declining influence of the churches has lessened their potential to stimulate a specifically theological sectarianism, but few of them would now seek to do this in any case. Decline has, however, lessened their capacity to influence popular sectarian impulses in non-confrontational directions – when I interviewed Robin Eames he spoke of his frustration at his own impotence in the face of the Drumcree standoffs between Orangemen and the Garvaghy Road residents in the late 1990s. The recent flag protests have also exposed the inability of the Protestant churches to exercise significant influence over their own nominal adherents.

A parallel point is worth applying to Scotland: I do wonder whether the upsurge of concern about sectarianism among secular authorities and organizations reflects an implicit recognition that, outside the Western Isles, the churches are no longer able to moderate its impact in the way that they did in the past. Moreover secularization can also breed insecurity and instability as people lose traditional cultural reference points. In such a context a predominance of secular assumptions and growing religious illiteracy can lead to misunderstanding and antagonism towards remaining actively religious minorities. It is noteworthy that the most widespread and virulent opposition to Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to Britain in 2010 came not from Protestants but from secularists.

So I come back to the question I posed earlier of how distinctive various national contexts are. A strong implicit assumption running through the recent academic and policy literature on sectarianism in Scotland is that the problem is a distinctively Scottish one, which will have correspondingly specifically Scottish solutions.

Nevertheless I do want to suggest some ways in which a wider comparative perspective may both be helpful in understanding and addressing sectarianism in Scotland and suggest ways in which the wider world can learn from Scotland.
First, a historical point. When one looks at Catholic-Protestant relations across the English-speaking world during the nineteenth century, it is the similarities rather than the differences that are most apparent. Whether in Scotland or England, Ireland, the United States, Canada or Australia, there were widespread local rivalries between Protestant evangelical clergy and ultramontane Catholic priests, local and national political disputes regarding the real or imagined ambitions of the Catholic Church, community tensions in overcrowded urban settings fuelled by a perception of economic competition especially in periods of scarcity of unemployment. Outbreaks of actual sectarian violence were by no means universal and were not normally prolonged, but my point is that they could occur in many and various locations. They were not obviously more severe in Scotland than elsewhere – for instance Scotland was spared the ugly Murphy riots of the late 1860s which troubled a number of English towns and cities, as the Protestant agitator William Murphy never came north of the Border.

I’d therefore suggest that if we think that early twenty-first century Scotland still has a greater problem with sectarianism than, say, England or Australia, the roots of that divergence are to be found in the more recent past. A parallel point can be made about Northern Ireland, where the particular intensity and persistence of sectarianism can be attributed primarily to the specific political circumstances that developed from the 1880s onwards with the Home Rule issue polarizing communities on religious lines. Here a changing political context offers hope for the long term, but in the short term attitudes on the ground are likely only to change slowly.

Affinities in Scotland with Northern Ireland’s divisions may be a partial factor here, but the weight of analysis is against it being a major one. However, the development of the Old Firm football rivalry following the formation of Celtic Football Club in 1887 corresponds quite closely to the chronology of the polarization of positions in Ireland following the First Home Rule Bill in 1886. Certainly the singing, flags and banners of the respective sides came closely to mirror Ireland’s divisions, although, as Murray notes, the rivalry was also positively encouraged by both clubs because it was good for business and gate revenues. Football has indeed been a very distinctive factor in Scotland, or more specifically in Glasgow, with the prominence of sectarian connotations in Celtic-Rangers confrontations lacking parallels elsewhere, except to a more limited degree in Hearts-Hibs rivalries in Edinburgh. However there is little evidence that the Everton-Liverpool rivalry, which is sometimes cited as an English parallel, has the same sectarian edge.

A further distinctive feature of Scotland has been a continuing tradition of high profile anti-Catholic polemicists, from Jacob Primmer at the turn of the
twentieth century through John Cormack and Alexander Ratcliffe in the interwar period, to Pastor Jack Glass in the recent past. As Steve Bruce points out, such figures revealed the limits as well as the continuities of sectarianism insofar as their aspirations to lead mass movements never came close to fulfilment. However what they did do was to assert an extreme position that could make more moderate antagonism look relatively respectable and also maintained the perception and folk memory of sectarianism as an enduring feature of Scottish life.

In comparative perspective segregated education seems less significant as a factor. England and Wales have also had separate Catholic school systems, which received some state grants from as early as 1847, and were given regular support from the rates under the 1902 Education Act. Such Catholic voluntary aided schools continue to flourish alongside Anglican ones, as well as secular foundations, without obvious sectarian consequences. It is true that ‘Rome on the rates’ was a prominent complaint of Protestant agitators following the 1918 Education Act which brought Scottish Catholic schools into the state system. It is also arguable that in the past non-Catholic Scottish schools, like their Northern Ireland counterparts, had a more sectarian ethos than their counterparts south of the Border. Nevertheless my point is that any sectarian consequences are rooted in such contextual factors rather than segregated education in itself.

On the other hand, ongoing concern with sectarianism in Scotland does prompt the converse reflection that the perception that such attitudes have disappeared in England and Wales may well be over-complacent. There has yet to be a parallel analysis in England to that undertaken in Scotland, or indeed by Jenkins and Massa in the United States, but I suspect that if such a project were to be pursued, it might yield some similar conclusions. For example, while November 5 bonfires have generally lost any sectarian content, a residual anti-Catholicism can still be discerned in some of the more elaborate and traditional celebrations in southern England. And the media and popular hostility stirred by recent revelations of child abuse were directed against the institution as well as the guilty individuals.

However, the probably more significant point to be made about contexts outside Scotland is to observe that there are significant similarities in the content of anti-Catholic polemic and other forms of religious and racial antagonism such as Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. I would give two examples: first, adverse reactions to distinctive forms of women's dress, whether nun's habits or the Islamic burqa, and second, the perception of extra-territorial loyalties, whether to the Papacy or to the Islamic ummah. In both the US and in England I would argue that since the early 1980s we have seen the transference of hostilities and suspicions on to Muslims that were historically directed against Catholics. The
Tell MAMA website, set up in 2012 to monitor hate attacks against Muslims, has already recorded well over a thousand incidents. Although it operates throughout the UK, the predominance of such occurrences is in England – in the aftermath of the Lee Rigby murder in May 2013 it recorded over 50 attacks on English mosques, but only 4 such outrages in Scotland, 2 in Wales and just 1 in Northern Ireland. It is logical to suppose that the growth of Islamophobia has been slower in Scotland than in England in the light of the substantially smaller proportion of Muslims in the population – 1.4% in 2011 as opposed to 5.0% south of the Border. The corollary it would seem is that intra-Christian sectarianism remains more of an issue than elsewhere.

This argument carries the disturbing implication that the decline of one kind of quasi-religious antagonism may well be associated with a rise of hostility to another group. It is therefore important that otherwise admirable projects to mitigate intra-Christian sectarianism in Scotland are mindful of this wider context and highlight the unacceptability of religious hate of any kind, if they are to avoid such regrettable unintended consequences. Conversely however the endeavour to tackle Islamophobia south of the Border would benefit from the kind of investment currently being made in efforts to combat sectarianism in Scotland. There is, for example, a notable contrast between the excellent resources provided on the Education Scotland website and the lack of any comparable provision by the Department for Education in London. The Westminster government continues to invest considerable resource in the Prevent programme to counter so-called Islamic extremism; the wider context requires a similar investment in countering Islamophobia. Improved understanding of Islam among the general public would itself help to reduce the sense of being an embattled minority in which radical and violent Islamist ideas can fester.

A final point is to emphasize that there historically there has been no inevitability that religious DIFFERENCE leads to sectarianism and religious CONFLICT. In a global context peaceful co-existence between different religious traditions and different strands of the same world religion have been and are widespread. Nevertheless, as recent history also shows, such situations can easily be destabilised, sometimes by people with the best of intentions who are seeking to remove underlying tensions. On the other hand, well-judged leadership initiatives really can make a difference, but historical experience suggests that good timing and presentation are crucial.

In this connection it is important to have a broad-based understanding of the concept of ‘security’ in its relationship to religion, which has been a focus of my recent work. ‘Security policy’ too often seems to be focused on the need to identify and neutralise dangerous individuals or disruptive behaviours. It also,
however, needs to recognize the need of communities to have a sense of what has been called ‘cultural security’, otherwise their insecurity is liable to manifest itself in forms of self-assertion that are offensive or even dangerous to others. Even in a predominantly secular age, cultural security has significant residual religious points of reference. The challenge, in relation to Catholic, Protestant and Muslim alike, is to walk the precarious tightrope between affirmation and confrontation.