



# Research Update

## Religion in Ireland: No longer an exception?

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### Introduction

Until the final decade of the 20th century, religious patterns in Ireland were exceptional in Western Europe. The high levels of religious practice of Roman Catholics were explained as a form of assertion of Irish identity in the face of British Imperialism (Nic Ghiolla Phadraig, 1988; Martin, 1978). However, religious observance is just one facet of social change in Ireland over the last 20 years. Access to good survey data allows us to trace religious change over time, and link this to the broader social and cultural changes. The most recently collected data are from the **International Social Survey Programme** (ISSP), in which 44 countries jointly field attitude surveys. The 2008 Religion III module replicates some questions asked in earlier studies in 1991 and 1998, and so provides an opportunity to trace the trends over the recent period. This paper will concentrate on the ISSP data for the Republic of Ireland. Religious minorities have insufficient numbers to allow more detailed analysis, and so this Research Update focuses mainly on the Roman Catholic (RC) majority.

sense of diversity in religious as well as other cultural matters.

The main impact of immigration in religious terms has been to dilute the Catholic majority in the population and increase ethnic diversity, in particular among the religious minorities, as most immigrants are of other affiliations (see Table 1). The impact of immigrants on Protestant churches has been quite dramatic, notably within the Methodist Church, of whom only just over half (53%) are of Irish nationality, with a fifth (21%) from the United Kingdom (UK) and 18 per cent from Africa. Some religious categories are new to the Census summary tables and most of their members are non-Irish. Muslims (of whom 29% are of Irish nationality), and Orthodox (with 13% of members who are Irish nationals) are the largest new categories. At the same time, the category 'No religion' has trebled over the period of the ISSP studies.



former Catholic has a non-Christian affiliation. 'No religion' is the category selected by the largest group of ex-Catholics (5%). 'No religion' is more frequent among Anglican/Church of Ireland respondents (15% of those who are of Irish ethnic background), whilst a further 17 per cent are now Catholics.

The 2008 ISSP data allow us to compare current religious affiliation with religion of upbringing. Almost all respondents who were raised as Catholics (93%) still claim this affiliation, and only one

### Religious affiliation

The ISSP surveys of 1991, 1998 and 2008 map religion over a period of rapid economic and social change. In 1991, unemployment rates in Ireland were still high. Emigration was still the only option for significant proportions of the labour force. By 1998 Ireland had neared the peak of an unprecedented, rapid economic boom. Labour shortage was now the issue and levels of immigration which broke global records in their rapidity in proportion to the indigenous population ensued, mainly in response to the economic opportunities. Immigrants officially accounted for ten per cent of the population by 2006 (Statistical Yearbook of Ireland, 2008:5) and provided a new

Table 1: Census Religious Affiliation in Ireland, 1961-2006

	%					
	1961	1971	1981	1991	2002	2006
Roman Catholic	95	94	93	92	88	87
Church of Ireland (including 'Protestant')	4	3	3	3	3	3
Muslim	0	0	0	0	1	1
Other Christian Religion	0	0	0	0	1	1
Presbyterian	1	1	<0.5	<0.5	1	1
Orthodox	0	0	0	0	<0.5	1
Methodist	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Other stated religions	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	1	1	1
No religion	<0.5	<0.5	1	2	4	4
Not stated	<0.5	2	2	2	2	2

(Census, Religion Volume, various years, rounded up)

## Declining authority and sexual norms

The influence of Catholicism has declined in other respects over this period. Decreasing numbers of clergy and other religious communities means that their presence in schools, hospitals and welfare institutions has virtually vanished. Legislative changes in areas of family law, sexuality and human reproduction have produced a secular state in all matters other than abortion and civil partnership (although a Bill to introduce the latter is anticipated). In 1995 a referendum to enable the introduction of divorce legislation was passed by the slimmest of majorities. This both reflected and helped to change the cultural norms regarding marriage. For example, civil marriages accounted for 23 per cent of all weddings in 2006 compared with 6 per cent in 1996. Two in three civil marriages were the first marriage for both bride and groom. Pre-marriage counsellors report that the vast majority of couples getting married have been cohabiting, and 2006 Census figures show that cohabitation is the fastest increasing family type (from 8% in 2002 to 11% in 2006). Whilst some couples eventually get married, others remain unmarried. The proportion of all births that were outside marriage increased from 12 per cent in 1988 to 33 per cent in 2008 (Vital Statistics, 2003:266; Statistical Yearbook of Ireland, 2008:85).

There have also been changes relating to sexual and reproductive norms – see Table 2. Indeed, premarital sex is now seen as acceptable behaviour by a majority in all age-groups up to 54 years. However, the same liberality does not extend to sexual relations with someone other than one's spouse, which is seen as 'always wrong' by a clear majority of all age-groups. Sexual relations between adults of the same sex are much less disapproved of than in earlier years.

Research in 1973 indicated blanket condemnation of abortion by 74 per cent (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 1976). Since then, however, these views have relaxed. Nevertheless, Table 2 shows that abortion is acceptable to a sizeable minority in the case of a defect in the baby, but this is not the case where

low income is cited as a reason for the abortion. There are no significant differences in the views of men and women on this issue, however age-group is a predictive factor. A majority of younger respondents (aged under 54 years) see abortion as wrong only sometimes or not wrong at all in cases where there is a defect in the baby. In addition, smaller majorities of the younger than of the older age-groups see abortion as wrong where the family has a very low income.

## Confidence in the church

The mid-1990s marked a series of exposés of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) by some priests and others in the religious orders. Prosecutions, tribunals of inquiry and protests continue to keep this issue prominent in people's minds, the most recent being the Commission of Investigation into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin led by Judge Yvonne Murphy. The scandal of clerical CSA is likely to be a factor in declining levels of confidence in the Church.

Table 3 shows that the decline in confidence in the church and religious organisations is quite high, particularly between 1991 and 1998, which was the period when prosecutions and

allegations of CSA against members of the clergy and religious first occurred. Just over a third of respondents from all age-groups below 54 years expressed 'very little' or 'no confidence', whilst more than one half of those aged 65 years or over expressed 'complete' or 'a great deal' of confidence. Despite the changes in time shown in Table 3, however, confidence in churches and religious organisations still exceeds confidence in parliament, in business and industry and in the courts and legal system, but not that in schools and educational institutions.

## Church attendance

Survey data has showed a gradual process of decline of religious practice in Ireland from the 1960s onward, which could be linked in to indicators of modernisation. Lower levels of religious practice are associated with the more 'modern' sections of the population, that is, young, urban, better educated, and employed. For example, in 2008, whilst 79 per cent of respondents aged 65 years or over attended a religious service at least once a week, only 19 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 years did so. Table 4 indicates that while 90 per cent of Catholic survey respondents attended a religious service at least once a week in 1973, this plummeted to 62 per

Table 2: Sexual and reproductive norms 1991, 1998, 2008

	%					
	Almost always wrong			Not wrong at all		
	1991	1998	2008	1991	1998	2008
Sexual relations before marriage	49	40	23	35	43	60
Sexual relations with someone other than spouse	91	84	84	3	6	4
Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex	78	70	43	13	20	42
Abortion if defect in the baby	-	55	51	-	26	26
Abortion if family has very low income	-	78	80	-	10	9

Table 3: Confidence in the church and religious organisations

	%		
	1991	1998	2008
Complete confidence	16	7	7
A great deal of confidence	32	19	21
Some confidence	35	46	45
Very little confidence	11	19	17
No confidence at all	6	10	11

cent in 1998 and further still to 43 per cent in 2008. This pattern is mirrored by responses for all respondents, regardless of their religion.

The extent, of the most recent levels of decline, signals the crossing of a new threshold, perhaps comparable to the projected melting of the polar ice caps. Does this signal an inevitable 'disappearance of religion' or simply mark a new phase of religiosity in Ireland? Or can the decline be measured in other aspects of religious adherence such as belief, prayer or religious ethics? The decline may be traced to the period subsequent to 1998, the year in which the Belfast agreement on Good Friday ushered in new relations between the Republic of Ireland and the UK. Perhaps there was also a sense for people that the old ethnic incentive to be different in religious affiliation and identity no longer applied.

It has been argued that religion has been 'privatised' in recent years, meaning that attendance at public church services has fallen, whilst private practices, such as personal prayer, have increased (Davie, 1994). However, ISSP data for Ireland shows an even more marked decline has also occurred in the frequency of personal prayer. Over 70 per cent of respondents in 1991 claimed to pray several times a week or more, whilst less than half of respondents in 1998 and 2008 did so. This indicates that the trend is to withdraw from all religious behaviour, not just from public practice.

## Religious beliefs

Alongside a withdrawal from all religious behaviour has been a decline in belief in God. Respondents were asked to identify which of six statements came closest to their own beliefs. Table 5 indicates that belief in God among Catholics in Ireland has declined, particularly since 1998.

What is particularly striking about this table is the percentage of self-declared Catholics who are atheist, agnostic or do not believe in a personal God. Thus, one in six (16%) 'belong but do not believe', to turn Grace Davie's phrase around. Davie argued that, in Britain and in other parts of Western Europe, religion was an increasingly privatised

Table 4: Percentage at least weekly church attendance 1973-2008\*

	%								
	1973	1978	1981	1984	1985	1990	1991	1998	2008
All	92	91	83	-	88	81	65	57	40
RC	91	-	87	87	-	85	68	62	43

\* %s for 1973-1990 are Eurobarometer statistics based on Figure 3.4 from Fahey, Hayes and Sinnott, 2005:42

Table 5: Closest to respondent's belief about God

	%			
	RC 1991	RC 1998	RC 2008	No religion 2008
I don't believe in God	1	1	3	31
I don't know whether there is a God, don't believe there is a way to find out	2	3	4	20
I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power	3	7	9	13
I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others	9	11	14	17
While I have doubts, feel that I do believe in God	25	30	25	9
I know God really exists and have no doubts about it	60	47	46	11

affair. Whilst others argued that secularisation was in train, Davie's view was that people were still religious, but less churched – that is, they believed but did not belong (Davie, 1994; Andersen and Lavan, 2007). Looking at all ISSP respondents in 2008, 23% of Protestants 'belong but do not believe'. Furthermore, of those respondents who claim to have no religion, over one third 'believe without belonging'. When belief in God is linked to level of Mass attendance for Catholics, there is a significant, but low correlation. However, beliefs and behaviour are sometimes at variance, since eight per cent of those attending church at least once a week claim not to believe in God or in a personal God, whilst over one third of the most irregular attenders have no doubts about the existence of God.

In contrast to changing ideas of God, other beliefs have remained constant and widespread since 1998. For example, in 2008, there was confidence (definite or probable) in life after death (82%), heaven (87%), hell (58%) religious miracles (71%) and agreement with the view that 'God concerns Himself with human beings' (71%). Non-Christian beliefs are also endorsed by

significant minorities – reincarnation (32%), Nirvana (24%) and belief in supernatural powers of deceased ancestors (38%).

## Conclusions

While levels of religious adherence and affiliation in Ireland are still high by international standards, the recent period of prosperity coincided with major changes in both the social composition and the religious ethos. A more diverse, urbanised population, with a higher standard of living and education by comparison with the 1970s and 1980s, is also much less conformist in religious practice, prayer, belief in God and sexual and reproductive norms. Material, legal and cultural changes have ushered in a more secular society. Churches and religious organisations evoke less confidence than formerly and their scope for influence and power has diminished. Despite this change, there are also areas of continuity, with beliefs regarding an afterlife and fidelity in marriage showing little change. Given the most recent economic downturn, it will be useful to explore these themes in years to come.

## Key Points

- Church attendance at least once a week by Catholics has fallen from 91 per cent in 1973 to 43 per cent in 2008.
- This fall is particularly marked in the younger age-groups – 18 per cent of 18-24 years by comparison with 79 per cent of those over 65 years attend at least weekly.
- Frequency of prayer has also declined.
- Belief in God, with no or some doubts has dropped from 86% in 1991 to 70% in 2008. It had been as high as 96% in 1973.
- Sexual and reproductive norms have become more liberal-secular, with a majority in all age-groups approving of premarital sexual relations and a significant shift regarding abortion and same-sex sexual relations.

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