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Vacant Seats & Empty Pews: Religious Change in Northern Ireland

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The Exceptional Hypothesis Revisited

- Although previous research from the late 1990s suggests that by any standards Northern Ireland has remained a deeply religious society (affiliation, belief, church attendance)
- Also, some evidence of creeping secularisation in the late 1990s – disavow a religious affiliation and lukewarm attachment to churchly religion – Privatisation of religion/believing without belonging

- Religious Affiliation
- Church Attendance Rates
- Belief in the Main Tenets of the Christian Faith

- Loyalty Survey (1968)
- Social Attitudes Survey (1978)
- Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey (1989-1991 and 1993-1996)
- Northern Ireland Election Survey (1992)
- Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (1998-2008)

Religious Identification 1968-2008

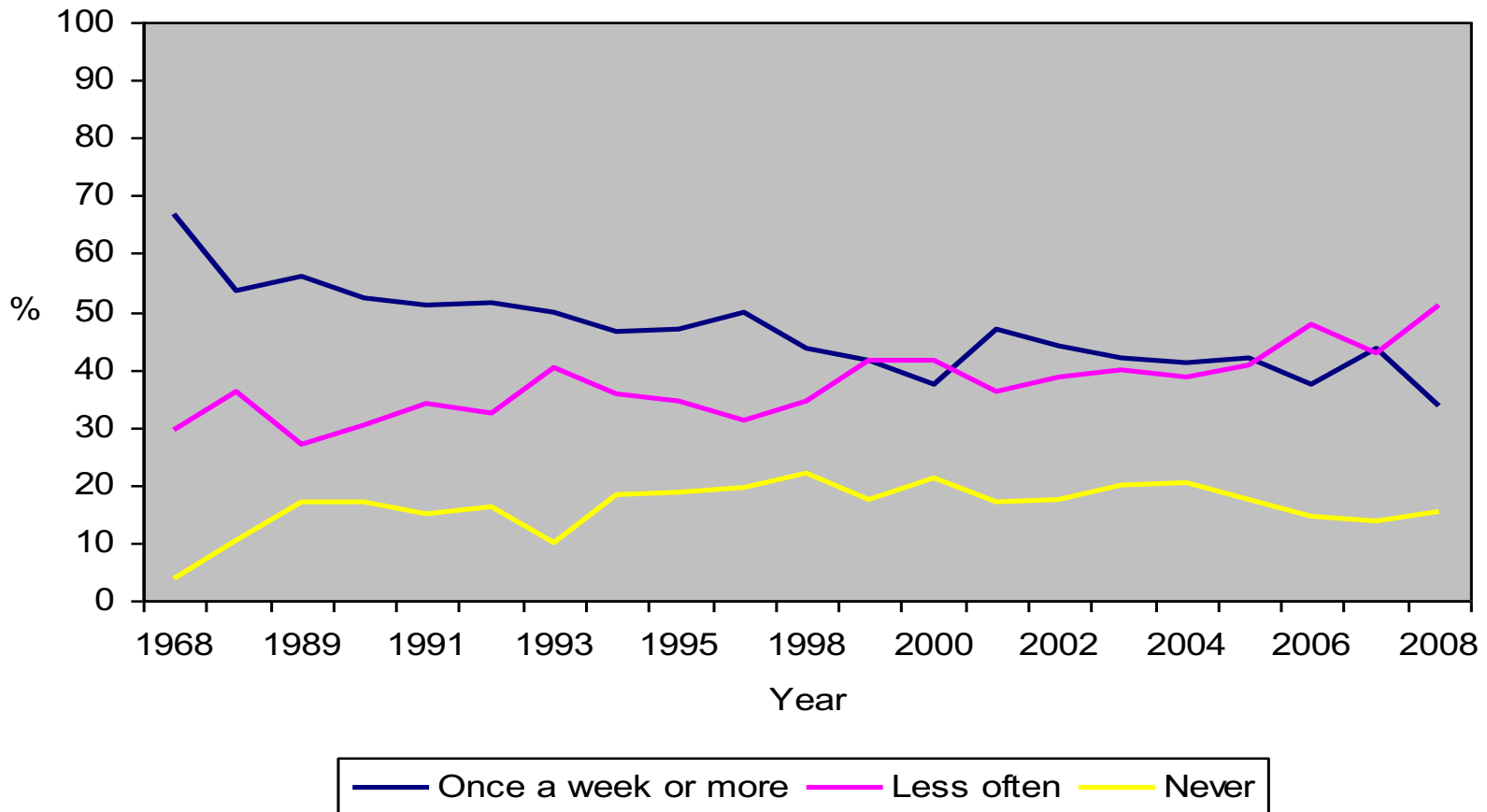
	Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presb	Meth	Other Christian	No religion
	%	%	%	%	%	%
1968	41	22	28	5	4	<1
1978	32	23	30	5	6	3
1989	37	18	23	4	7	12
1998	39	16	22	3	12	9
2008	37	17	22	4	7	13

Family religion by current religion

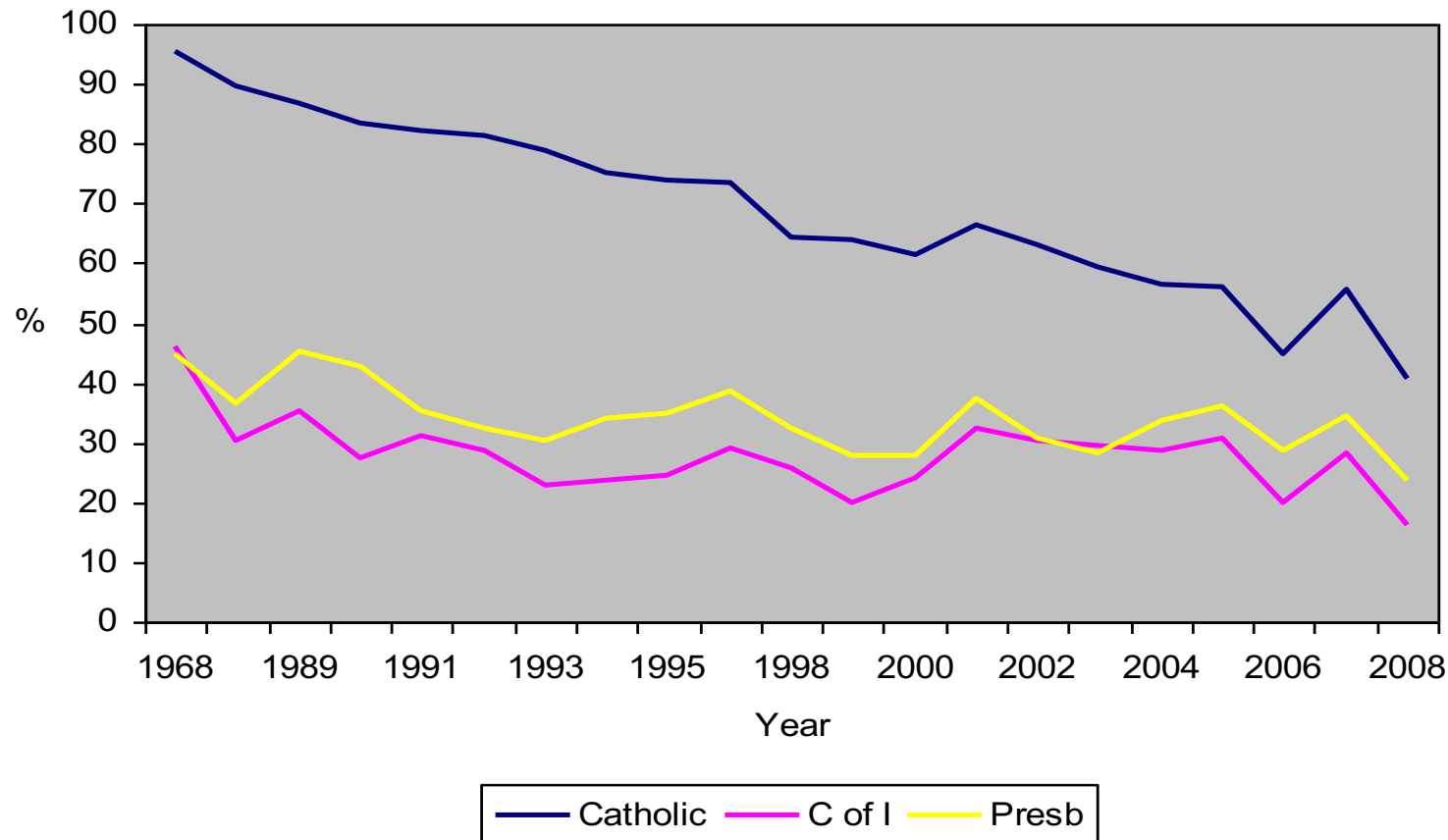
Religion now	Family Religion					
	Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presb	Meth	Other Christian	No religion
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Catholic	92	1	0	0	2	3
Church of Ireland	0	73	5	3	2	1
Presb	0	7	76	9	7	2
Meth	0	2	2	65	1	1
Other Christian	1	7	8	11	76	4
No religion	7	10	9	12	12	89

- Alternative measure of religion
- Previous research points to the rise of ‘nominal’ adherents – those who claim a religious affiliation but do not regularly attend religious services

Patterns of church attendance 1968-2008



Weekly church attendance 1968-2008



- Religion weakens as a public institution but retains a presence in people's private beliefs
- Believe in God but see no need to participate in their religious institutions
- Believing without Belonging (Grace Davie)

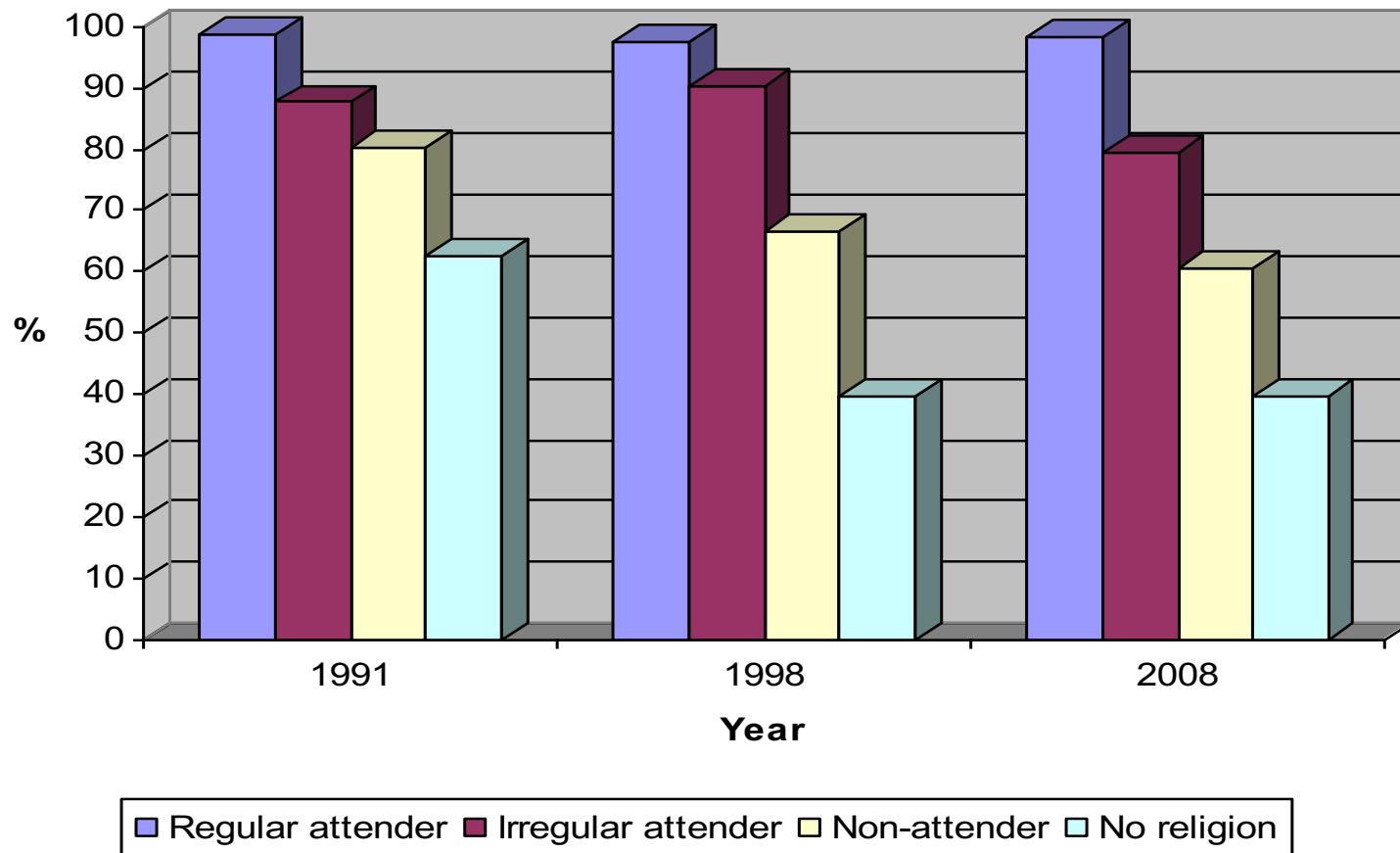
Differences in belief

% who believe

	God	Life after death	Heaven	Hell
Catholic	83	76	85	65
Regular attender	91	82	96	71
Irregular attender	80	71	78	62
Non-attender	63	74	74	54
Protestant	80	72	80	69
Regular attender	95	92	98	86
Irregular attender	79	71	78	69
Non-attender	60	47	57	44
No religion	40	40	33	28

- Although key beliefs are more widely accepted among regular church attenders
- Also held to a considerable degree by irregular and non-attenders
- Particularly so for a belief in God
- Not the case among the non-affiliated
- Evidence to suggest that this absence of a religious faith is a relatively recent phenomenon among the non-affiliated

Belief in God by church attendance



- Previous research suggests that they differ markedly from the religiously committed in terms of their social composition
- Young, male, well-educated, single/divorced and drawn from the ranks of the unemployed
- Our results lend some support to these findings

Church attendance by background

	Regular attender %	Irregular attender %	Non-attender %
Male	38	48*	61*
Single	18	26*	35*
Under 45 years	34	48*	53*
Tertiary education	33	32	30
Employed	53	64*	58

- For men and women this lower religious commitment among the young
- is not just a life cycle effect
- but represents an overall shift in behaviour over the last two decades

(Per cent who attend church less than weekly)

	Men					Women				
	1990	1999	2008	Δ^1	Δ^2	1990	1999	2008	Δ^1	Δ^2
18-26	54	67	81	+13	+14	42	64	73	+22	+9
27-35	59	68	81	+14	+13	36	63	71	+27	+8
36-44	58	69	77	+11	+8	30	54	70	+24	+16
45-53	50	65	77	+15	+6	30	46	65	+16	+18
54-62	40	50	68	+10	+12	32	44	64	+12	+21
63+	37	44	63	+7	+19	36	40	40	+4	+<1
All	48	60	73	+12	+13	40	52	62	+12	+9

- Creeping signs of secularization evident in the late 1990s have continued to endure and intensify over the last decade
- Non-affiliated group has continued to grow at expense of their religiously affiliated counterparts
- However, the most dramatic changes is in relation to religious practices – nominal adherence now become the norm
- Northern Ireland has not abandoned its religious roots - that vast majority claim a religious affiliation and a significant majority continue to espouse the main tenets of the Christian faith – notably a belief in God

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