



Vacant Seats and Empty Pews

Bernadette C. Hayes and Lizanne Dowds



Northern Ireland was always a deeply religious society by any standards and certainly remained so well into the 1990s (see Fahey *et al.*, 2006). Despite some inroads by the forces of secularization, Northern Ireland continued to defy the expectations of secularization theorists and remained exceptionally religious by European standards. To what extent is this true today? Nearly ten years on, has the flicker of secularization which emerged in the late 1990s continued to flame and expand throughout the new century? Using a range of nationally representative survey data from the late 1960s onwards, the following analyses focuses on the nature and extent of religious change within this society.

First, a small group of non-affiliated individuals have emerged in recent years. This group – the proportion of the religiously non-affiliated in the population – is often taken as a key indicator of secularization. The numbers who constitute this group have grown considerably particularly since the late 1970s, rising from just 3 per cent of the adult population in 1978 to 12 per cent in 1989. Although the proportion who explicitly stated that they had ‘no religion’ declined slightly in the late 1990s, where it hovered at around 10 per cent for much of the decade, it currently stands at 13 per cent or around one in every eight adults in the population. Second, there is

some evidence to suggest that the increase in the ‘no religion’ category has coincided mainly with a decline in the relative size of the two main Protestant denominations – Anglicans and Presbyterians – and seems to have emerged largely at their expense. The Presbyterian share of the adult population dropped from 30 per cent to 23 cent in the period 1978-1989, the same period in which those claiming no religious affiliation grew. The Anglican share also declined somewhat, from 23 per cent to 18 per cent. Over the same period, the relative size of the Catholic population actually increased from 32 per cent to 37 per cent. This is not to deny, however, the recent decline among

Trends in Religious Affiliation

It is clear that a large majority of the population continues to identify with one of the main religious denominations. Back in 1968, 96 per cent of individuals claimed to belong to either the Catholic faith or the three main Protestant denominations (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian or Methodist) and although that proportion has declined significantly by 2008, it still constitutes an overwhelming majority at 80 per cent. Among the two main religious traditions, Protestantism continues to dominate, albeit to a much lesser extent than in the past. For example, in 1968 whereas a clear majority of individuals – 55 per cent – claimed to belong to one of the three main Protestant denominations, by 2008, the equivalent proportion was just 43 per cent. This is not to discount, however, the 7 per cent who constitute the ‘Other Christian’ denominations, the vast majority of which may be considered Protestant variations (see Mitchell, 2006). The trends in Table 1 also show two other important patterns.

Table 1: Religious Identification, 1968-2008

	%					
	Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presbyterian	Methodist	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

Source: Loyalty Survey, 1968; Social Attitudes Survey, 1978; Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, 1989; Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 1998 & 2008.

Table 2: Childhood Religious Identification by Current Religious Identification

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

Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys, 2000-2008.

self-identified Catholics – from 41 per cent in 2007 to 37 per cent in 2008. The net effect of these changes is that the non-affiliated category is currently the fourth largest group in Northern Ireland society, after Catholics, Presbyterians and Anglicans, and almost the same size as the latter.

Further analysis suggests the continued presence of the non-affiliated group. (see Table 2). Comparing childhood religious identification and current religious identification, the results suggest substantially different levels of ‘transmission’ between the various groups. The strongest transmission occurs among Catholics, with the second highest among those who were brought up in families that had no religion. More specifically, those from families without a religion were substantially more likely to pass their religious outlooks onto their children at a level far higher than the Protestant churches and only three percentage points lower than Catholic families. If this level of transmission were to continue it would suggest a significant growth in the proportion of those who claim explicitly no religious affiliation.

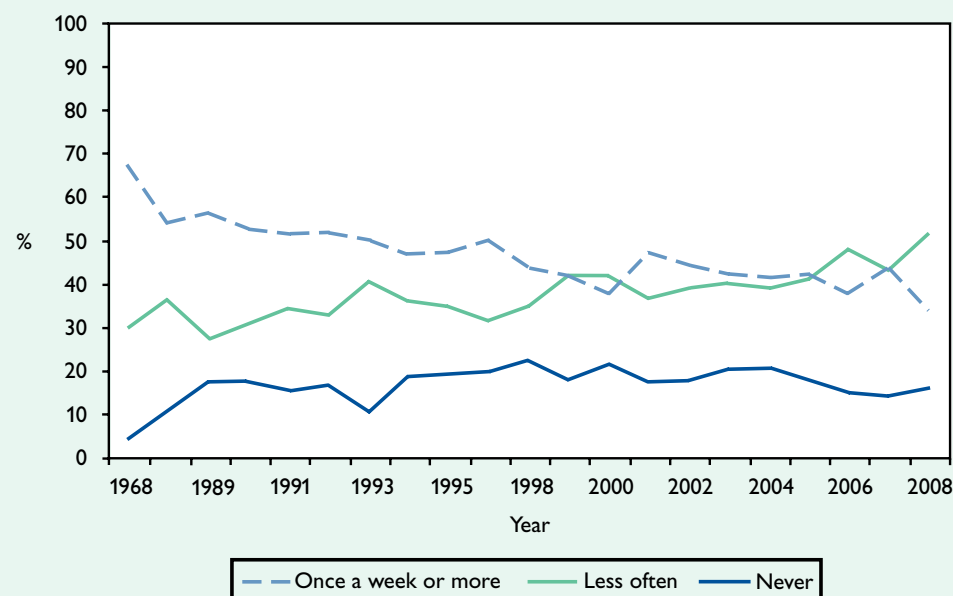
Church Attendance Rates

Given that fewer people are claiming a religious identification, do those who do affiliate actually attend church? Previous research suggests that while levels of religious affiliation remain high in many countries, there has also been a rise in ‘nominal’ adherents – those who claim a religious affiliation but do not regularly attend religious services (see De Graaf and Need, 2000; Fahey *et al.*, 2006). Figure 1 suggests that there is some truth to this in Northern Ireland. Whereas two-thirds of the adult population attended church at least weekly in the late 1960s, by the late 1990s, this had decreased to around two-fifths, a significant decline in a relatively short period of time. Since then attendance rates have dropped even further, with just a third of the population currently reporting that they attend church on a weekly basis. However the figures also suggest that frequent church attendance has been replaced by less frequent church attendance, rather than by complete non-attendance; those

attending church less frequently than once a week have grown from around one third of the population throughout the 1990s to just over half in 2008 and are now notably greater than the proportion who attend church weekly. By contrast, those never attending have remained relatively stable at about one in six of the population.

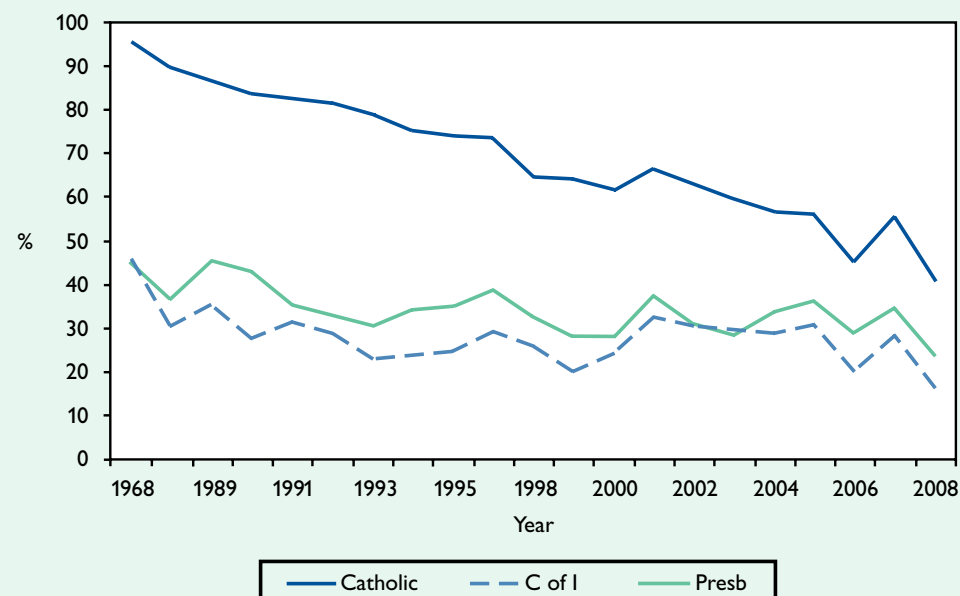
Which denominations account for the declining frequency in church attendance? Regular church attendance – defined as at least weekly attendance – has declined among the three major denominations, Catholic, Presbyterian and Church of Ireland. (See Figure 2). However, the decline has been greatest among Catholics, traditionally the most diligent church attenders. For example, in 1968,

Figure 1: Patterns of Church Attendance, 1968-2008



Source: 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.

Figure 2: Weekly Church Attendance, Main Denominations, 1968-2008



Source: 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.

95 per cent of Catholics said that they attended church at least weekly, but by 2008, that proportion had declined to just 41 per cent – a decline of 55 per cent overall, or 11 percentage points per year. By contrast, regular attendance by Presbyterians has declined by just 21 per cent over the same period, and among Anglicans, by 30 per cent. Thus, at least as far as Northern Ireland is concerned, the relatively high rate in religious belonging has been accompanied by a dramatic decline in religious practice and this is particularly the case when the Catholic population is considered.

The ‘Privatization’ of Religion

According to some versions of secularization theory, the weakening of religion in modern societies takes the form not so much of the complete abandonment of religious faith as its ‘privatization’. This perspective suggests that religion may weaken as a public institution but retain a presence in people’s private beliefs and day-to-day practices. In other words, to use Davie’s expression, people may ‘persist in believing’ (if only in an ordinary God), but see no need to participate in their religious institutions (Davie, 1994). To what extent is this process occurring in Northern Ireland today?

The data in Table 3 lend considerable support to the privatization thesis. Although key beliefs in the tenets of the Christian faith – God, Life after death, Heaven and Hell – are more widely accepted among regular church attenders than among others, they are nevertheless held to a considerable degree even among irregular church attenders and non-attenders. Belief in God, in particular, is espoused by a notable majority who claim a religious affiliation irrespective of their church attendance practices and denominational preferences. This is not the case, however, among the non-affiliated where only a minority of individuals, or just two-fifths of respondents said that they believed in God. A similar pattern emerges when a belief in heaven or hell is considered. Although more individuals believe in heaven than in hell, the proportion of individuals who accept these ideas even

Table 3: Differences in Belief by Religious Identification and Church Attendance

	% 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

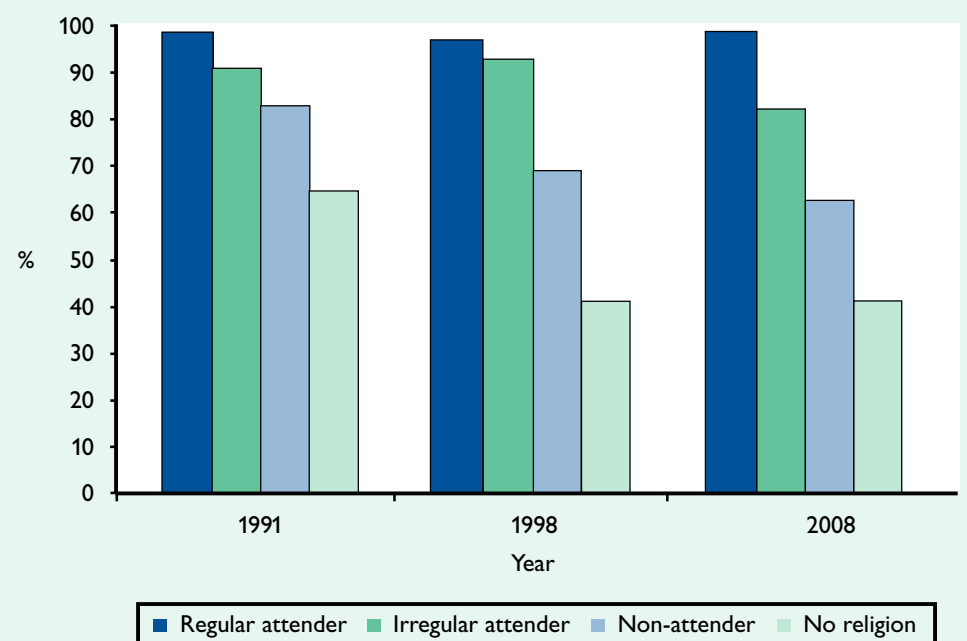
Note: Church attendance patterns refer solely to those who claim a religious affiliation. Regular attender: attends religious services at least weekly. Irregular attender: attends less than weekly. Non-attender: does not at all attend religious services. Source: Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 2008.

among non-regular church attenders is considerable. Again, this is not the case among the non-affiliated who stand out as the least religiously orientated in their views.

This absence of a religious faith among the non-affiliated appears to be a relatively recent phenomenon which dates from

the late 1990s. As Figure 3 demonstrates, whereas the proportion of individuals who believe in God among affiliated regular and irregular church attenders has remained relatively stable over the last two decades, it has declined considerably among non-attenders and particularly the non-affiliated. For example, between 1991 and 1998, the proportion of non-affiliated

Figure 3: Belief in God by Patterns of Church Attendance and Religious Non-affiliation, 1991-2008



Note: Church attendance patterns refer solely to those who claim a religious affiliation. Regular attender: attends religious services at least weekly. Irregular attender: attends less than weekly. Non-attender: does not at all attend religious services. Source: Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, 1991; Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey, 1998 and 2008.

individuals who claimed to believe in God fell from 63 per cent to just 40 per cent (a decline of 23 percentage points in under a decade). The equivalent decline among non-attenders in the same period was less steep from 80 per cent to just 67 per cent (13 percentage points). Furthermore, there is some evidence to suggest that this rejection among the non-attenders of a key tenet in the Christian faith is continuing, albeit at a much lesser pace than in the past; currently just 61 per cent of individuals who do not attend church are willing to espouse a general belief in God.

Conclusion

The results presented here suggest that the creeping signs of secularization witnessed in the last 1990s have continued to endure and intensify over the last decade. In particular, the non-affiliated group have continued to grow at the expense of their Protestant and, more recently, their Catholic counterparts so that they are now firmly entrenched as the fourth largest group after Catholics, Presbyterians and Anglicans, and almost the same size as the latter.

However, it is in relation to religious practices that the most dramatic changes have taken place. Since the early 1990s, weekly church attendance rates among the affiliated have declined sharply in Northern Ireland and this is particularly so among the Catholic community, traditionally the most diligent church

attenders. It is important to note, however, that this general decline in weekly levels of religious observation has been replaced by less frequent attendance rather than by no attendance at all. Thus, nominal adherence – those who claim a religious affiliation but do not attend religious services on a weekly basis – has now become the norm for a majority of individuals in Northern Ireland.

This is not to suggest, however, that Northern Ireland has abandoned its religious roots to such an extent that it is now on the verge of out-and-out atheism. Rather, the results reported here generally confirm the rather lukewarm or incipient nature of secularization in Northern Ireland. In other words, such secularization that is taking place should be understood as more a matter of the privatization of religion rather than a complete shift to irreligion. As our results also show, not only do the vast majority of individuals still claim a religious affiliation, but a significant majority continue to espouse some of the main tenets of the Christian faith, most notably a general belief in God. Furthermore, this relationship remains even among the majority of the adult population, or those who fail to attend church on a weekly basis. It is to an investigation of the beliefs and practices of this group – the nominally affiliated – that future research should be directed. A key focus of this investigation should be the degree to which they continue to maintain both

their affiliation and religious beliefs in light of their increasing disengagement from formal religious practices.

Acknowledgements

The Religion III (2008) module of the International Social Survey Programme for Northern Ireland was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

References

- Davie, Grace. 1994. *Religion in Britain since 1945 - Believing without Belonging*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- De Graaf, Nan Dirk and Ariana, Need. 2000. 'Losing Faith: Is Britain Alone.?' In Roger Jowell, John Curtice, Alison Park, Katarina Thomson, Lindsey Jarvis, Catherine Bromley and Nina Stratford (eds.), *British Social Attitudes: The 17th Report*. London: Sage, pp. 119-135.
- Fahey, Tony, Hayes, Bernadette C. and Richard Sinnott. 2006. *Conflict and Consensus: A Study of Values and Attitudes in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland*. Leiden: Brill.
- Mitchell, Claire. 2006. *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Bernadette C. Hayes is Professor and Head of Department of Sociology, University of Aberdeen. Lizanne Dowds is a consultant to ARK.

Key Points

- Eighty per cent of the Northern Ireland population continues to identify with one of the main religious denominations, though in 1968 the figure was 96%.
- Over the last decade the proportion of people in Northern Ireland claiming no religion has grown to become the fourth largest group after Catholics, Presbyterians and Anglicans.
- Since the early 1990s, weekly church attendance rates among people who claim a religion have declined sharply, particularly among the Catholic community
- The decline in weekly levels of religious observation has been replaced by less frequent attendance rather than by no attendance at all.
- Those who claim a religious affiliation but do not attend religious services on a weekly basis has now become the norm for the majority of individuals in Northern Ireland
- A majority of people in Northern Ireland still believe in God, even among those who do not attend church on a weekly basis.

In collaboration with Queen's University, Belfast and University of Ulster

Magee Campus University of Ulster
Northland Road Londonderry BT48 7JA
Tel: 028 71375513 Fax: 028 71375510
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast, Belfast BT7 1NN
Tel: 028 90973034 Fax: 028 90973943
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk