10. SAINTS, SCHOLARS, SCEPTICS AND SECULARISTS:

THE CHANGING FAITH OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IN IRELAND, 1981-2020

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Abstract

This study examines the issue of declining religiosity in Ireland as a gateway for thinking about broad processes of value change. Drawing on the data of the European Values Study, the European Social Survey, and the PERSOCOV study, it authors look at one simple facet of religion in Ireland, viz., the degree to which the adherents of the largest faith grouping, the Catholic church, attend religious services. The examination of religious practice has implications beyond the obvious: degradation or abandonment of communal religious practice on a wholesale basis has implications for society as a whole, believers and unbelievers alike. Drawing on the work of Loek Halman in particular, the study references the complex links between religious participation and value change. The study documents the decline of religious practice from 1981 to 2020, including the initial period of COVID-19 pandemic, showing how the resulting social restrictions impacted religious participation in Ireland. During the COVID-19 lockdown almost 90 percent of the population indicated that they participated in religious services less than monthly. Finally, the study looks at the implications for the church in Ireland as religious participation continues to decrease.

10.1 Introduction

Of all the clichés about Irish history none has been more enduring, nor enjoyed such universal popularity, as the 'Golden Age' of early Irish culture. The 'Island of Saints and Scholars' which was a beacon for the rest of Europe when the continental countries languished in their 'Dark Ages', and whose missionary monks brought light to those darkened regions, has left an afterglow that persists to the present day (Ó Cróinín, 1995).

There is a tendency among religious apologists in Ireland to hark back to a time when Ireland was the land of saints and scholars. It is a term that originates in the monastic tradition of men dedicated to learning and piety, and whose knowledge was spread far and wide by pilgrims and travellers. In particular their computational skills were critical in the literature regarding the establishment of the date for Easter.

The Church at that time was wealthy, well-connected, and a source of education and erudition for, at least some, of the populace. But it was also a church that reflected to some degree the cultural *mores* of its own time. O'Corráin writes of the attitudes to abandoned children:

"*Expositi*, children rejected for many reasons—because they were the offspring of incest or adultery, because they were defective or otherwise unwanted ... were often dumped on the church, in Ireland as elsewhere. The Canon lawyers ruled "… a child abandoned to the church is its slave unless he is redeemed. Nor, if he be violent, shall his evil conduct stain the church if it corrected him as far as possible" (2013, p. 14).

The position of the church was maintained into modern times. Larkin, writing in 1975, described the failed attempts to limit the power of the Church in Ireland, because 'the Church had so integrated itself psychologically, functionally, and historically into the Irish way of life that it became virtually at one with the nation's identity (p. 123). But that was coming to an unexpected end.

The relationship between religious practice and moral outlooks is well documented in the European Values Study literature, including the work of Loek Halman. This research line is essentially arguing that increasing secularization is a precursor of increased liberalism in societies (cf., Cohen et al, 2006; Halman and Draulans, 2006; Philips, 2012; Voas et al, 2013; Feich and O'Connell, 2015; Halman and Van Ingen, 2015; Storm, 2016; Kanik, 2018; Shorrocks, 2018; Matuilic and Balabanic, 2019; Nikoderm and Zrinscak, 2019; Fuchs et al, 2020). As Halman and Van Ingen put it (2015), fundamental shifts in religious practice, such as diminishment of church attendance, are social indicators of potentially profound change.

Because religion provides a normative framework for opinions on moral issues, declining levels of religiosity may have far-reaching consequences for the moral order within societies. … Knowing that Europeans are increasingly accepting of homosexuality, divorce, abortion, and euthanasia, it could be argued that this increased permissiveness in people's moral attitudes is linked with the diminished role of churches in secularized societies where the churches' strict moral codes are no longer self-evident to all (2015, p. 618).

10.2 The Irish Church Today

The dominant theme of religious influence in Republic of Ireland has been the Catholic voice, which held sway over much of health and education, but with a particularly strong influence on social and moral perspectives general. In the 1937 Irish Constitution, the role of the Catholic Church was specifically enshrined: "*The State recognises the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens.*" That special position, albeit never precisely defined, was removed from the Constitution in 1975. Since then, much in the Irish religious landscape has changed, in fact changed utterly (see Anderson, 2010; Breen, 2001,2002; 2003; Breen & Reynolds, 2011; Breen & Healy, 2014; Cassidy, 2002; Howlett, 2008; Inglis, 1998; Inglis & MacKeogh, 2012; Matte, 2011).

In reality, change has been ongoing in Ireland for decades. At the time of writing, the Church in Ireland has undergone great scrutiny of its stewardship of

children, in relation to the sexual abuse of children, the provision of education in religious run industrial schools for orphans, and more recently in the management of homes for unmarried mothers. None of these events have covered the ecclesial authorities in glory and all may be said to have a profound negative impact of the practice of faith among the Irish. The recent scandals which have engulfed the Catholic Church are not the cause of the religious transformation documented below, but they may well have served as catalytic agents for it. The Catholic Church in Ireland is in decline, perhaps inevitably. As Inglis put it in 1998 (p. 224):

"There is no doubt that the absolute religious power of the Catholic Church in Ireland is dying, if not already dead."

The twenty years that have passed since then would give pause for thought as to whether such change is transitional or permanent, and it could be argued that Inglis's prediction was somewhat premature. Inglis himself is unsure, prefacing the previous quote with the statement

"While there is definite evidence of the decline of the influence of the institutional Church in many fields of Irish social life, it would be wrong to think that Irish Catholicism is dying, especially when the Church still has such control in education…" (Inglis 1998: 224).

Given ambiguities, this chapter revisits the issue of religiosity in Ireland as a gateway for thinking about broad processes of value change. Drawing on the data of the European Values Study, among others, the authors look at one simple facet of religion in Ireland, viz., the degree to which the adherents of the largest faith grouping, the Catholic Church, attend religious services. The Code of Canon Law lays down the requirement: "On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass" (Can. 1247). The data document the relentless fall in religious practice over the last 40 years in Ireland, a fall which has been accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

10.3 The European Values Survey

Comparative social survey data provide an invaluable lens into the levels of conformity with this regulation over time. Ireland has participated in the European Values Study in its first four waves: 1981, 1990, 1999 and 2008[1], and in the European Social Survey since its inception in 2001. In this chapter, the data are used from both studies, and from one additional survey, the PERSOCOV study, to cover a period of 40 years, from 1981 to 2020, and which cover the most significant changes in the practice of religious faith in Ireland.

There have been several scholarly pieces drawing on the initial waves of the EVS which are pertinent. Breen wrote in 2002 (p. 120):

"The data to hand suggest a variety of important social questions which cannot be answered from within the data alone. If religious and social values and attitudes are changing, as strongly suggested here and elsewhere, then what are the implications for Irish society? … Is it incontrovertible that Ireland will be different in the future, that the social map will have very different contours, especially in relation to institutional religion? … … Or are we simply becoming a mature nation amongst the nations of Europe, whose value and belief systems will simply be more homogenous with our neighbours, who have not fallen apart at the seams?"

In the years that followed, other scholars started providing the outline of answers to these questions. Following a five-country analysis of three waves of the EVS, Williams *et al* (2009, p. 181) concluded that

"it is reasonable to hypothesise that those who dissociate themselves from religious affiliation and religious practice are less likely to feel influenced by religious teaching. (I)t is reasonable to hypothesise that those who live outside conventional (married) family structures may wish to distance themselves from religious communities"

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1   Ireland did not take part in the 5th wave of the EVS due to funding difficulties.

The examination of religious practice, therefore, has implications beyond the obvious: degradation or abandonment of communal religious practice on a wholesale basis has implications for society as a whole, believers and unbelievers alike. This is increasingly evident in Ireland in respect of education and certain aspects of social care as many of these functions in Ireland involve the Catholic Church. Anderson (2010, p. 37) puts it thus

"Irish society has undergone massive social, political and economic changes since the 1960s. The institution that has perhaps suffered the most from these is the Catholic Church, which has lost its virtually exclusive power to control the minds, bodies and hearts of Irish people. The Church is now only one of many influential institutions and has to compete for an audience in all the major social fields, such as education, the media, health and politics."

In the remainder of this chapter, we look briefly at some of the religious practice data, on the basis that establishing a convincing picture of religious practice change over a sustained period, it is all but inevitable that the changes to which Halman and others have alluded necessarily follow. A focus on religious participation is fitting given Halman's own contributions (see De Hart, Dekker, and Halman 2013; Halman and Draulans 2006; Halman and Riis 2003). With specific attention to issues secularization and how one might best measure and model secular trends, Halman pointed to important, albeit complex links between religious participation and value change across European countries.

10.4 Empirical Snapshots

One commonly used indicator of the strength of church belonging is the frequency of participation in religious services. Figure 10.1 captures this with comparative cohort analysis for two periods, 1981 and 2018. The thirty year span is important in capturing the precise period were the social influence of the Catholic Church was in decline. It also looks at pre-covid data. In 1981, the vast majority of the population reported attending church weekly with only small percentages attending monthly or less often. Equally important, cohort variation was relatively small. For all age groups, between 88 percent and 96

percent attended on a weekly basis. Fast forward 35 years, the modal practice is to attend church less than monthly and there is a clear cohort gradient. For the youngest people in the sample, approximately 12.5% attend church weekly and this increases to 64.3% for those in the oldest cohort. Simultaneously, 75% of the youngest group attend church less than once a month and this decreases to 27.6% for those in the oldest cohort. Such patterning echoes Ryder's (1965) seminal description of cohorts as vehicles for social change.

Figure 10.1 Comparative data for Church practice, by age cohort, 1981 and 2018
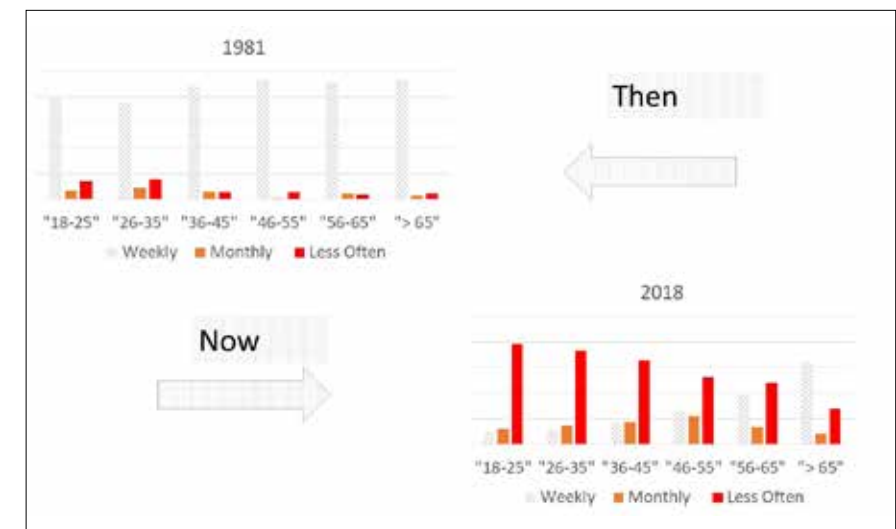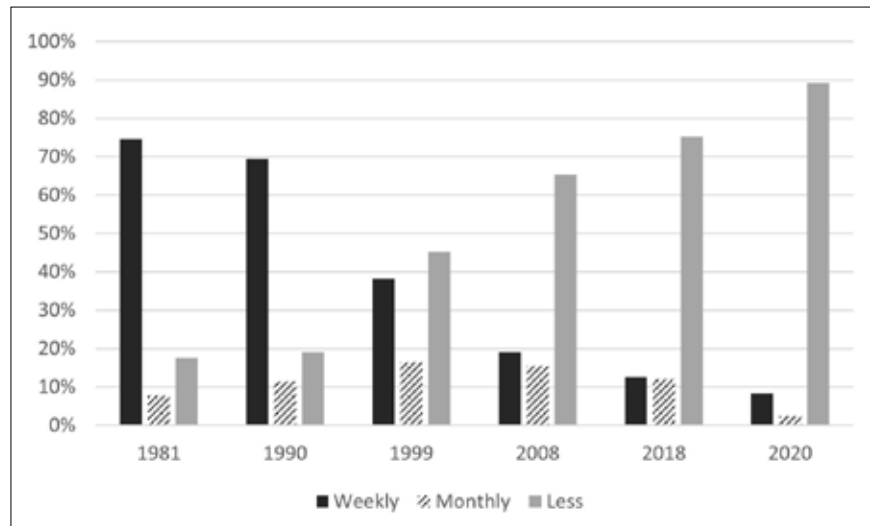

Source: EVS and ESS

While the story of declines in religious participation are not entirely surprising, the months from January 2020 through to Spring of 2021 provide a further arena for study. Here, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social restrictions raised or renewed questions about religion and religious participation in people's lives. From one perspective, participation became more difficult and more complicated with the majority of services moving online. From the standpoint of technological competence, one might expect that religious par-

ticipation would fall even further given strong age gradients in competence and IT accessibility (Peacock and Kunemund 2007) and religious participation. From another perspective, theoretical work extending back to Durkheim has postulated that people turn to religion in "times of trouble" as both a coping mechanism and a response to stress (Pargament and Park 1995). Importantly, both perspectives can operate simultaneously and hence produce a complicated account of religious participation in the contemporary period. Figure 10.2 explores such questions below with the ESS and EVS augmented with data from a unique nationally representative sample from Ireland collected for the period of the first major lockdown in spring of 2020, the PERSOSOV data.

Figure 10.2 Church practice, 35 or under, 1981-2020

Source: EVS, ESS, & PERSOCOV

Although evidence of declines in participation were clear in the ESS and EVS data, there is a clear spike during the COVID-19 lockdown with almost 90 percent indicating that they participated in religious services less than monthly. In fact, when we examine the data in detail, it is worth noting that over the

last 20+ years, the middle ground – those who go at to church monthly – has been steadily decreasing. From about 20% of the population in 1999 and 2008, this group decreased to left than half of that amount in 2018 to under 8% and during covid to less than 4%. When we look at the PERSOCOV data, it transpires that of the 18–25-year-olds 2.2% attend weekly, while 96.7% attend less often than monthly; of the 26–35-year-olds the corresponding figures are 11.7% and 91.5%; and for the 36–45-year-olds the corresponding figures are 11.7% and 89.5%. Even in the oldest age group, the over 65s, only 17.7% attend weekly while 76.5% attend less than monthly. The decline in the youngest age groups is all the more remarkable when their likely higher versatility with the digital world is taken into account – those most digitally able were the least likely to vail of the virtual outreach by the Church.

10.5 Rethinking Religion and Values

On the basis of the data reported above, there is little doubt but that there is an ongoing seismic shift in traditional levels of church attendance, and by extension, a concomitant shift in values. But its implications for values and value change may be more complicated. Ganiel (2019) posits the notion of a post-Catholic Ireland that has resonances with Habermas 'post-secular' Europe. She writes (2019, p. 472)

"Habermas asserts that the post-secular is characterised by a shift in consciousness in the way Europeans think about the public role of religion. It is not that Europe was once secular and now it is not; rather, Europeans have recognised that religion is not going away, and will continue to influence society and politics. In post-Catholic Ireland, Catholicism is important but no longer monopolises the religious market."

Her study focused on people committed to religion: she found people searching for faith expression were often characterised by a regard of "the 'institutional' church as a dry and lifeless hierarchy", which they ignored in favour of keeping their faith alive outside of the church context. She defines this as 'extra-institutional religion' as a way of describes the practice of some people

who are committed to their religion, and will use the sacramental life of the church to some degree but for whom their religious practice is very different to past experience.

Ganiel's argument is very convincing: if she is correct, then in fact there may be very little comfort for the hierarchy even in the number of people who attend church regularly. It may well be the case, as she suggests, that extra-institutional religion is a more accurate description of how some people approach their faith practice 'outside or in addition to historic state churches', an approach that balances two 'structural strengths: its position on the margins, and its continued links with institutional religion' (p. 481).

In the PERSOCOV study we asked respondents if they regarded themselves as a religious person, not a religious person, or an atheist. Modal participation for all groups is never attending church services indicating that even those how identify as religious people forgo church services. It suggests that something important may be missed by using participation to capture religiosity or the meaning of religion in contemporary society.

The second important feature is the opposite phenomenon. Significant numbers of people who *do not identify as religious* still participate in religious services. About one and a half percent do so daily. This increases to 4.4 and 3.1 percent for weekly and monthly attendance, respectively. Another 23 percent attend at least once a year or on special occasions. Again, such behaviour highlights two things. First, formal religion is clearly serving some purpose for people, regardless of their personal identity as a religious person. Second, we clearly miss something when not incorporating identity and values in our accounting of religion in contemporary society.

A second lens on religion in contemporary society focuses on the relationship between religious identity and value differentiation. In the PERSOCOV data we focused on differentiation with respect to the various items in the Schwartz value scale (Schwartz and Bilsky 1990). In summary, people who see themselves as religious people are more traditional, favour being well-behaved and obedient, are more oriented towards equality (but only in comparison to those who

do not see themselves as religious people), value safety and respect, think it is important to do good in the world and be helpful, and think it is importance to showcase abilities (at least in relation to atheists).

Obviously, there are also values where there is no differentiation by religious identity and this includes diversity, modesty, hedonism, successfulness, loyalty, creativity, the importance of wealth, and novelty. But as Schwartz has repeatedly noted, values are not a zero-sum game and evidence of the social sources of values differentiation of any type can tell us important things about the institutional make up of a society and the key social dynamics at work. In our case, they show the continued relevance of religion for how people see themselves, how people see society, and how people see the connection between the two.

10.6 Conclusions

Alternative evidence aside, it is abundantly clear is that church attendance is heading in the direction of near-total collapse, given the degree to which current trends are cohort-related. Voas and Chaves (2018, p. 710), writing in the context of the United States put it thus

The intensely religious population may be declining more slowly than the more moderately religious population, but this is to be expected. Nominal members are the first to defect, doubters are the first to disbelieve, and occasional churchgoers are the first to stop attending; a committed core remains.

It is difficult to conclude anything other than an increasing level of decline for the Catholic Church. While it still maintains strong influences in hospitals, these are effectively run by independent lay trusts. In education, the other great bastion of church control, there is little evidence to suggest a strong focus on religiosity. In 2018 Heinz *et al*, based on an anonymous survey on Initial Teacher Education students from the primary sector, reported that One (32-35%) of Initial Teacher Education applicants rarely or never attend religious services and/or practice their religion, and that Catholic religious instruction received little support, even from Catholic ITE applicants.

In the Irish context, there is a need for ongoing research in undertaking a sophisticated analysis of values orientation, including religiosity. Such research would potentially be of immense benefit to the institutional church in providing a detailed breakdown of the multifaceted nature of religious belief in the 21st century, exploring in particular the phenomenon of belief without belonging.

The future will be very different. Any response from the institutional Church will need to take into account the likelihood of greatly diminished influence and the necessity to engage with a largely secular society, the majority of whom may not be hostile but may evidently simply be disinterested.

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