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Michael J. Breen and Caillin Reynolds

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The Rise of Secularism and the Decline of Religiosity in Ireland: The Pattern of Religious Change in Europe

Michael J. Breen, University of Limerick, Munster, Ireland

Caillin Reynolds, University of Limerick, Munster, Ireland

Abstract: The European Values Study is a pan-European project which utilises an omnibus survey focusing especially on values associated with work, religion, lifestyles and other issues. Its most recent data gathering exercise was in 2008, the fourth of its kind. This study focuses on changing religious values in Ireland over the span of the EVS (1981-2008) and examines the rise in secularism and the rapid decrease in church participation, which brings Ireland much closer to European norms. The data to hand suggest a variety of important social questions: If religious and social values and attitudes are changing, what are the implications for Irish society? As we become an increasingly educated society in quantifiable terms, what is happening to our value and belief systems? Does the erosion of church practice mean the erosion of values or are we simply witnessing transference of allegiance from institutions to self? Some commentators suggest that reduction of care and concern for others, a reduced sense of God, and a minimised approach to things religious, allied with a rise in liberalism, are not of themselves harbingers of prosperity and joy for society; the opposite they contend is true, and will result in decreased happiness and increased alienation. 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. As the Irish let go of things deeply rooted in their culture and tradition, is this simply a matter of becoming a mature nation amongst the nations of Europe?

Keywords: Religion, Europe, European Values Study, Values, Church Practice, Spirituality, Secularization

Introduction

REVIEWING THE EUROPEAN Values Study (EVS) of 1981, Fogarty *et al.* (1984, p.8) concluded that Ireland remains an “outstandingly religious country”.¹ Their conclusions were based on the unparalleled levels of belief, practice and prayer that distinguished Ireland from its European neighbours. At around the same time, McAllister (1983, p.4) described Ireland as “one of the most religious societies in the world, by whatever measure is used”. Since then, the EVS has expanded its remit from ten Western European nations to forty-seven, now covering virtually all of Western and Eastern Europe, providing an invaluable source of both cross-nationally comparable and longitudinal (i.e. repeated cross-sectional) data.

In Ireland, the period between 1981 and 2008 was characterized by rapid and profound economic changes, particularly from the mid-1990s onwards: from mass unemployment and emigration of the 1980s to almost full employment, inward migration, and a dramatic increases

¹ Throughout this paper, Ireland will be used to refer to the Republic of Ireland.

in the standard of living by the turn of the century (Kitchin and Bartley 2007).² The period also witnessed major political changes, most notably in relation to the cessation of the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, and the continuing integration of Ireland into the expanding European Union. The five constitutional referenda on the liberalization of legislation in relation divorce and abortion during the period, two of which were rejected and two of which were passed only by a slim majority, as well as the legalization of contraception and homosexuality, are a testament to the volatile position of the Church as the ‘conscience of the nation’ during this period (Kissane 2003). Commenting on some of these changes, particularly the more liberal, secular and pluralistic character of contemporary Irish society, Kitchin and Bartley (2007, p.14) state that Ireland today is one that is “almost unrecognizable” to the immigrants that left in the 1980s. While there are no shortage of studies that have charted the rise of this more secular, pluralistic, and liberal society (e.g. Hornsby-Smith 1992, Inglis 1998, Greeley and Ward 2000, Cassidy 2002, Inglis 2007b), the modest aim of this paper is to offer a descriptive account of some of the changes pertaining to religious and social values in this period, utilizing data from the 1981, 1990, 1999 and 2008 European Values Studies.³ The data from the EVS is unique in this respect, being the only source of a range of repeated items relating to religious and social values and attitudes that span this thirty year period. Furthermore, the comparative element situates these changes within wider Europe, evaluating the extent to which Irish people have become more similar to their European neighbours, or the extent to which Ireland remains an exceptionally religious outlier on the periphery of Europe. As such, the longitudinal focus of this paper will concentrate on Ireland, the comparative on Ireland in contrast to a theoretically interesting, and geographically wide-ranging, subset of European countries.⁴

Modernization, Secularization and Religious Change

Studies of religious and broader cultural changes are typically framed within a paradigm of modernization and secularization. In very simple terms, as Bruce (2002, p.2) puts it, “modernization creates problems for religion”.⁵ The theory (or more precisely the thesis) of secularization however, from holding a paradigmatic position in any discussion of the social and cultural changes that accompany modernization, has received sustained criticism since at least the 1960s (e.g. Martin 1965), the most recent theoretical affront to its status taking the form of the “new paradigm” of ‘religious economies’, ‘supply-side’ or ‘rational choice’

² Ireland’s economic fortunes have since witnessed a profound reversal, but the ramifications will not be discussed here. The EVS survey of 2008 was conducted just as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ was beginning to collapse, and would therefore seem poorly placed to make claims about the consequences for Irish values and attitudes. For a detailed and critical discussion of the collapse, see Kirby (2010).

³ Unweighted data from European Values Study Group (2010) and European Values Study Group and World Values Survey Association (2006) - see bibliography for file versions.

⁴ In regional terms the four sub-regions of Europe are represented here by Germany and France (Western), Spain and Italy (Southern), Slovakia and Bulgaria (Eastern), Norway (Scandinavia/Northern) and Ireland (British Isles/Northern). In most of these countries the majority religion is Roman Catholicism (Norway is predominantly Protestant, Germany is mixed Catholic-Protestant, and Bulgaria is Eastern Orthodox).

When referring to the Church therefore, it is generally in relation to the Roman Catholic Church.

⁵ Modernization itself is obviously a multi-faceted concept that describes the vast array of cultural, social and political changes that accompany socioeconomic development and the transition from traditional to industrial, and to post-industrial society. For a more elaborate discussion Inglehart and Welzel (2005) or in relation to religion see Bruce (2002).

models (e.g. Bainbridge and Stark 1984, Warner 1993, Stark and Iannaccone 1994). It is beyond the remit of this paper to discuss the theoretical merits and weaknesses of these “new paradigm” theories, or to provide a detailed exposition of the concept and paradigm of secularization. Rather, in reflecting on some of the changes apparent in the data, the paper will provide a brief discussion of some of the key propositions in theories of secularization and modernization, what alternatives have been suggested, and what model seems to provide the best fit to the patterns of religious and cultural change in Ireland over the last three decades.

Put rather simply, the paradigmatic status of secularization within the most seminal theories of social change was one that rested on the Enlightenment-inspired conviction that belief in the supernatural, and religion that was based on such supernatural beliefs, was destined to disappear (or at least significantly dwindle to a very small minority) in the more rational modern world (Casanova 1994, p.18). Again put rather plainly, the worldwide evidence suggests that this decline simply has not happened, evidenced most significantly by the permanence and resurgence of religion in the much of the modern world, most notably the persistently high levels of individual religiosity in the United States (Berger 2001). The more theoretically refined arguments within the secularization paradigm however, place increasing unbelief and a decline in religious practice as relatively marginal aspects of the paradigm as a whole (e.g. Dobbelaere 1999, Tschannen 1991). The central aspect is in fact the declining societal significance of religion, which is principally linked to the increasing differentiation of institutional spheres from religious control, and the rationalization of social organization (see Wilson 1969, Martin 1978, Chaves 1994, Dobbelaere 1999). These broad societal trends can be perceived in more concrete changes that affect the everyday lives of individuals in modern society: the removal of educational institutions from ecclesiastical authority, the separation of legal proscriptions from religious ones, and the increasing instrumentality of relationships between role-performers in the work process (Berger 1967, Wilson 1976). These changes no doubt alter the location and function of religion in modern society, but whether and how this declining societal significance is causally linked to a declining prevalence and relevance of individual religiosity differs from theorist to theorist. Many of the most influential theorists in the paradigm have in fact reappraised their view of this causal connection (e.g. Berger 2001), but there are still those who vigorously defend the causal linkage (e.g. Bruce 2002).

The apparent exception to this trend is Europe, where secularization (at both the level of society and at the level of the individual) appears to remain the most satisfactory way of explaining the patterns of religious change and so called “Euro-secularity” (Berger 2001, p.447). Berger (2001, p.447) goes as far as to argue that “as a country is absorbed into Europe economically and politically, it gets Euro-secularity along with the package”. Here too, however, there are competing theories that stress the continuing prevalence of religious belief and spirituality, but in ways that are divorced from the traditional institutionally bound context. Davie’s (1990, 1994, 2000) description of “believing without belonging” in Britain and Europe is an often cited example of this, but the more general thesis is that in modern society religion does not simply fade away but rather changes social form. There is no dispute that across much of post-war Europe there has been a significant decline in churchgoing, and that this no doubt loosens the moorings of the core Christian beliefs, but the notion that these are replaced by secular alternatives is disputed, by Davie (2001) in particular. What social relevance these institutionally-divorced beliefs have (in relation to values and attitudes

in particular) has however been questioned by Davie's contemporaries (e.g. Voas and Crockett 2005), and Davie (1994) herself has argued that her distinction between believing and belonging is merely a useful way of capturing a mood and promoting further enquiry. The most immediately relevant question then is to what extent does Ireland conform to this pattern of Euro-secularity, and to what extent might believing without belonging be an accurate description of the Irish case.

Religious Affiliation, Attendance and Belief

The proportion of Irish people who believe in God decreased from 97% in 1981 and 1990, to 95.5% in 1999, and to 91.8% in 2008 (see Table 1). The proportion of individuals belonging to a religious denomination has decreased to a similar but slightly more pronounced extent, from 3.9% in 1990 to 11.4% in 2008. The other core Christian beliefs (life after death; heaven; hell; sin) show similar declines of about ten percentage points in each, with belief in Hell starting from the lowest base, and Heaven the highest. Changes in church attendance are much more severe: weekly attendance (or more regularly) approximately halving from 82% in 1981 to 44% in 2008, this change principally occurring between the 1990 and 1999 surveys. In terms of monthly or more regular attendance (not shown), the decline is similarly severe, from approximately 90% in 1981, to 80% in 1990, and to 65% in 2008. Furthermore, 14% of the population never attend church in 2008, from 4.5% in 1981.

Table 1

	1981	1990	1999	2008
God	97.1%	97.6%	95.5%	91.8%
Heaven	89.3%	89.5%	85.3%	79.8%
Hell	60.5%	52.6%	53.3%	52.9%
Afterlife	84.6%	83.3%	79.2%	74.2%
Sin	89.8%	86.6%	85.7%	78.0%
Denomination	98.7%	96.1%	93.1%	88.6%
Attendance(Weekly)	82.4%	80.9%	56.9%	44.3%
Moral Problems	56.4%	42.1%	30.1%	40.0%
Family Problems	52.4%	35.9%	27.2%	32.5%
Social Problems	Na	33.3%	26.7%	29.8%
Spiritual Needs	72.7%	70.6%	63.8%	63.5%
Importance of God (Mean of 1-10)	7.88	7.93	7.41	7.22

The overall picture seems to be one of a pronounced church-oriented decline, but a relatively persistent religious sentiment, either in terms of a more nominal denominational affiliation that is unsubstantiated by regular practice, or in terms of persisting religious beliefs that are unsubstantiated by regular practice. While Davie's description of "believing without belong-

ing” is an apt description of the latter, Inglis’s (2007a) and Demerath’s (2000) description of “cultural Catholicism”, a loose badge of cultural identity that has tenuous connections to belief and practice, seems a useful way of describing the former. That is not to disregard the relevance of the 44% who attend church weekly or more regularly, and indeed the significance of this figure becomes apparent when compared to the rest of Europe (see Table 2).

Table 2

	Ireland	France	Spain	Germany	Norway	Italy	Bulgaria	Slovakia
God	91.8%	54.1%	78.0%	47.1%	54.5%	90.2%	76.0%	83.8%
Heaven	79.8%	32.8%	47.4%	25.5%	38.4%	61.9%	33.0%	58.2%
Hell	52.9%	16.9%	31.4%	13.6%	15.5%	51.5%	28.6%	49.8%
Afterlife	74.2%	42.7%	49.9%	31.2%	45.8%	71.2%	31.6%	66.1%
Sin	78.0%	40.4%	48.9%	35.8%	30.7%	57.2%	63.9%	71.4%
Denom.	88.6%	51.2%	75.9%	53.9%	79.0%	80.6%	74.6%	80.3%
Attend	44.3%	6.7%	18.5%	6.4%	5.3%	32.0%	5.6%	40.0%
Moral	40.0%	31.8%	33.7%	38.8%	32.1%	55.6%	41.1%	62.4%
Family	32.5%	27.6%	30.9%	30.9%	21.0%	45.6%	25.7%	53.9%
Social	29.8%	22.3%	26.3%	25.6%	17.0%	39.2%	13.9%	33.3%
Spirit	63.5%	55.9%	46.0%	42.3%	50.2%	76.7%	57.6%	79.3%
Imp God	7.22	4.31	5.8	4.09	4.19	7.19	5.87	6.97

Of the subset of European countries used here, only Slovakia approaches the level of attendance in Ireland. Other interesting comparisons such as Italy are over ten percentage points below. In terms of core Christian beliefs, Ireland ranks considerably higher than all the countries on most, and on a par with Italy and Slovakia in relation to some. With regard to denominational affiliation, Ireland again ranks highest, but other European countries have similar proportions.

Some further substantiation of these figures, particularly the belief aspect, can be gained from looking at the level of importance individuals assign to such beliefs, specifically the question relating to the ‘Importance of God in your life’, of which the mean values are presented in Table 1.⁶ What is noteworthy is that in Ireland the mean levels on this item have changed only very slightly over the past three decades, from a mean of 7.88 in 1981 to 7.22 in 2008. It suggests that despite the quite substantial decline in religious practice, this does not entail an indifference or apathy towards religious belief. In fact, it requires no further interpretation: God is almost as subjectively important to individuals in Ireland today as in the early 1980s. If one were to take such subjective importance as an index of secularization (and in many ways it is an important index in that it gains an insight into the personal

⁶ Individuals were asked to rank on a ten-point scale, where one is not at all important and ten is very important, ‘How important is God in your life?’.

meaning individuals attach to their religious beliefs), then one could not say with great confidence that Irish people have become a great deal more secular since the 1980s. In European comparison (see Table 2), Ireland unsurprisingly ranks highest, but the means in Italy and Slovakia are not appreciably different. France, Germany and Norway on the other hand have considerably lower averages.

A similar battery of items in the EVS questionnaire, that asks individuals about the importance of religion in their lives, and the importance of other activities, offers further insight into this topic.⁷ The mean values of each activity (with a lower score indicating greater importance), in European comparison are presented in Figure 1. Firstly, one can examine the relative importance of each activity: on average Irish people see family as most important, followed by friends, leisure time, work, religion and lastly politics. In Ireland, this ordering has not changed that drastically since 1990, with family permanently the most important, but work and religion have each moved down in the rankings at the expense of leisure time (not shown). Comparing these averages to those in Europe however, Ireland still ranks very highly in terms of the importance of religion, behind only Italy. There appears to be a high degree of consensus in Europe on the importance of the family, and also a degree of consensus that religion and politics are relatively less important. And while the importance of religion and politics occupy the lowest positions in every country, it appears that these are the two areas where European countries differ most.

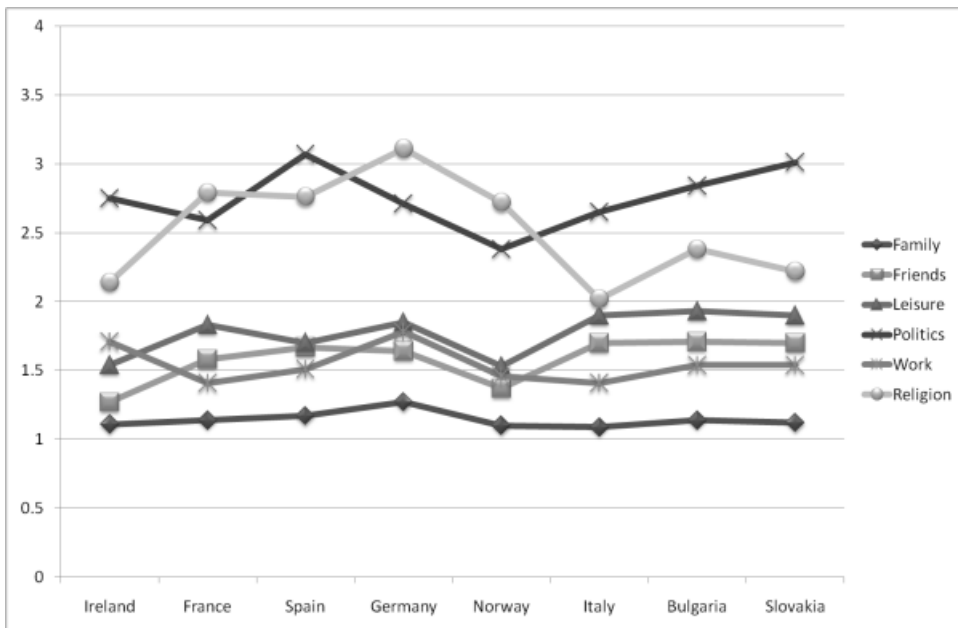


Figure 1

⁷ Individuals are asked “please say, for each of the following, how important it is in your life”, (with importance ranked on a four-point scale of: very important, quite important, not important, not at all important) in the categories religion, work, family, friends, leisure time. It should be noted that these are six separate questions- individual do not themselves order each of these activities in terms of importance. These questions were not asked in the Irish 1981 survey.

To briefly summarize this section on individual indicators of religiosity, the Irish pattern is one of declining core beliefs, a more pronounced decline in practice, but still remaining “outstandingly religious” compared to much of Europe. The decline, particularly in relation to practice, suggests the applicability of secularization, and “Euro-secularity” as a suitable explanation and description of these patterns of religious change. And while “believing without belonging” appears to be a relatively useful way of partially describing the resistance of the Irish case to these secular trends, the proportion who belong *and* believe, who practice regularly and accept all the core Christian beliefs, seems to distinguish the Irish case from the pattern in much of Europe. Despite the decline in practice, the subjective importance Irish people attribute to God in their lives seems to underline the non-triviality of the relative permanence of these religious beliefs. The important qualification in this regard is that Irish people, in a pattern that is broadly similar across Europe, view family, friends, work and leisure time as more important than religion.

Moral, Social, Family and Spiritual Answers

As stated earlier, the more theoretically sophisticated versions of secularization treat a decline in belief and practice as relatively marginal to the paradigm as a whole (Dobbelaere 1999, Tschannen 1991). What is central to the secularization paradigm is the societal significance of religion (Wilson 1976, Dobbelaere 1999). With functional differentiation, religion is no longer the sole source of values in society, or no longer is society integrated on the basis of a religious worldview. Rather, individuals now move between different institutional spheres each guided by their own autonomous values and norms. Religion becomes privatized, a matter of personal choice and preference that no longer permeates other social spheres (Luckmann 1990). A somewhat useful insight into the effects of this process at the individual level is in terms of the extent to which individuals feel the Church is providing adequate answers to certain problems- moral, social, family life- and spiritual needs. One would expect that as society becomes increasingly differentiated, the spheres in which the Church is seen to be providing adequate answers will become more restricted, replaced by more specialized institutions and specialized forms of knowledge. Examples might include the recommendations of social science replacing the social teachings of the Church, or family life problems becoming the domain of psychologists and counsellors rather than local clergy.

Spiritual needs, being essentially located in the ‘religious sphere’, would seem to be more immune to these changes. Since however the question is in relation to the ‘Church answers’, one should be mindful that it is proposed that the privatization of religion (that religion is now a preference rather than an obligation) gives rise to an increasing pluralism in the religious/spiritual sphere itself, whether in the form of semi-institutionalized New Religious Movements, or in terms of the private syncretism of various magical, (quasi)scientific, philosophical and other religious sources (Luckmann 1990). In Luckmann’s (1967, p.135, 1990) work, this new syncretic religion, characterized by a “sacralization of subjectivity”, is in the new modern social form of religion, its ascension to some extent at the expense of the traditional Christian churches. As such, one might expect that the Church would not be completely immune to a decline in its credibility in relation to spiritual matters. One must also be mindful of the more proximate causes of declining credibility in addition to these societal trends, the series of clerical sexual abuse scandals of the mid-1990s in particular.

While one could fit these incidents into a broader theoretical discussion of secularization⁸, suffice it to say here that such scandals will have undermined the credibility of the Church to be officious on certain matters, perhaps morality in particular (For a discussion of the effects on public opinion of media coverage and the official govt. reports on abuse, see Breen et al. 2009, Crowe 2008).

In 2008, approximately two-thirds of the Irish population feel that the Church is providing adequate answers to people's spiritual needs (See Table 1). The decline in this proportion since 1981 is of a similar magnitude to the declines in relation to the core Christian beliefs, and of denominational affiliation, approximately 10 percentage points in each. In relation to moral, social, and family life problems, those who feel the Church is providing adequate answers are of a much smaller proportion, with family life and social problems standing at around 30%, and moral problems at 40%. In relation to moral and family life problems, this 2008 figure represents a decline of 15-20 percentage points in each since 1981, although there appears to have been a slight rebound in each between 1999 and 2008. Unsurprisingly, these declines seem to be broadly reflective of the decline in religious practice. It would appear that those who have ceased practicing regularly have also become sceptical of the answers the Church provides on these issues.

The difference between Ireland and Europe on these items is not nearly as great as the differences in levels of belief and practice (See Table 2). Italy and Slovakia for instance, have higher proportions who feel the Church is giving answers to moral, family, social and spiritual problems. The proportions in Ireland are in fact more similar to Germany in relation to moral, social and family life problems, albeit differing in relation to spiritual needs. One might very tentatively suggest that there may be more room for the alternative expressions of spirituality in Germany (being more pluralistic, and also more secular), but that alternatives in terms of moral, social and family problems have similarly displaced the position of the Churches in both these countries. Such conclusions may be stretching the data a little too far, suggesting that the Church decline on these issues automatically entails the ascension of alternative agencies that provides adequate answers. Although it is not directly comparable, further insight on this can be gained by looking at changing levels of confidence in a selection of social institutions.

Confidence in Institutions

Figure 2 shows the proportion of individuals in Ireland who declared they had "a great deal of confidence" in a selection of social institutions from 1981 to 2008.⁹ What is immediately striking is that confidence in the Church is only marginally surpassed by the education system, on a par with the armed forces, and marginally ahead of the police. The justice system, parliament, and the press all rank considerably lower. That is not to understate the considerable fall in robust Church confidence, from over half the population in 1981 to just over 20% in 2008. These declines are mirrored (from a lower base) in all but the education system. Clearly

⁸ The collapse of the worldview, one of the exemplars of Tschannen's (1991) systematization of the secularization paradigm would be the point of departure here. Berger's (1967, pp. 78-80) ideas on the collapse of the Christian theodicy in times of great crisis would seem an interesting theoretical parallel, but would require a much broader discussion.

⁹ Individuals are asked to select from four options how much confidence they have a particular institution: a great deal; quite a lot; not very much; or none at all.

lack of confidence is a more important indicator of the institutional health of the Church than it would be in the case of the armed forces, but the decline in confidence across almost all of these institutions suggest something broader than secularization is at work.

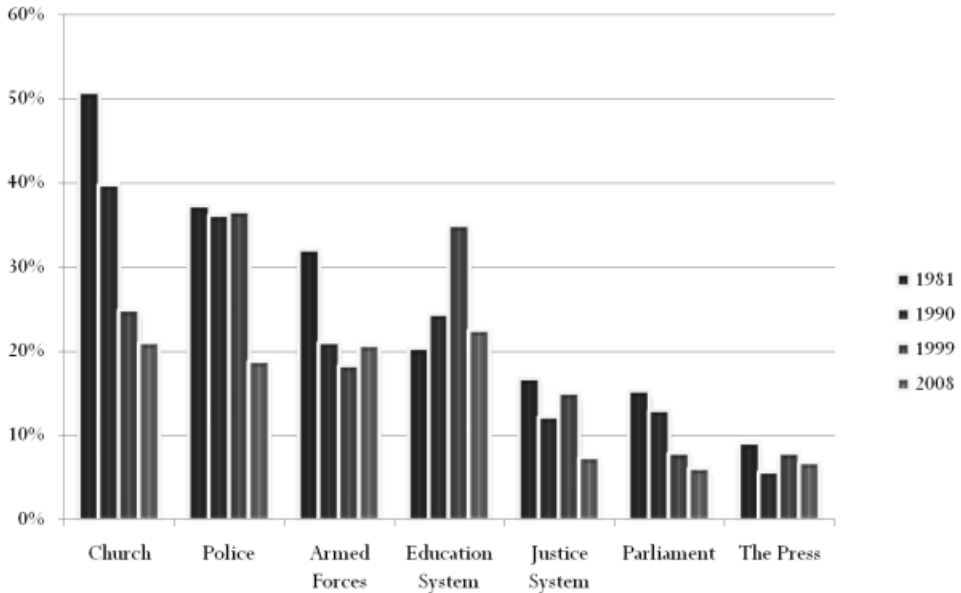


Figure 2

As part of his vast body of work on the effects of modernization on cross-national value change among the mass publics of industrial and post-industrial societies (e.g. Inglehart 1997a, Inglehart 2003, Inglehart and Welzel 2005, Norris and Inglehart 2004), Inglehart (1997b) has suggested that postmodernization entails a decreasing confidence in the more authoritarian and hierarchical institutions of society (e.g. the army, the police, the church)¹⁰. Instead there is an emphasis on the self, and on personal autonomy in particular. It is beyond the remit of this paper to engage in a detailed comparative analysis of this anti-authoritarian vs. personally autonomous axis, but some insight may be gained through European comparison, in which the countries are predominantly post-industrial.¹¹ While there is universal lack of confidence in the press and parliament, and to a lesser extent the justice system, there appears to be no clear pattern of anti-authoritarian attitudes across all institutions. In the Slovak Republic for example, high levels of confidence in the Church are accompanied by low levels of confidence in the police, and the opposite is true of Norway. Although one cannot make claims about the extent of decline in confidence in these countries with the data presented here, the only immediately discernible pattern is that those countries with the highest levels of belief and practice- Ireland, Italy, Slovakia- have the highest levels of

¹⁰ Inglehart (1997b) in fact links declining confidence in the church to the process of modernization rather than postmodernization, but one can assumed that its status will not change in the postmodern/post-industrial transition.

¹¹ Bulgaria and Slovakia are defined by Norris and Inglehart (2004, p.244) as industrial rather than post-industrial, or modern rather than postmodern.

confidence in the Church, and those who have the lowest levels of belief and practice have the lowest level of confidence (but even for this trend to hold one has to exclude Bulgaria).

Table 3

	Ireland	France	Spain	Germany	Norway	Italy	Bulgaria	Slovakia
Church	2.34	2.76	2.87	2.89	2.65	2.19	2.66	2.26
Police	2.15	2.17	2.23	2.2	1.98	2.1	2.87	2.49
Army	2.1	2.19	2.44	2.46	2.41	2.1	2.68	2.24
Education	2.06	2.12	2.16	2.56	2.22	2.41	2.65	2.14
Justice	2.59	2.47	2.64	2.49	2.1	2.77	3.24	2.82
Parliament	2.57	2.57	2.57	2.82	2.32	2.82	3.39	2.57
Press	2.64	2.76	2.72	2.88	2.62	2.85	2.96	2.76

Tolerance

An additional aspect of Inglehart’s modernization theory is that increasing socioeconomic development is accompanied by increased tolerance, trust and personal autonomy, all of which form part of a development sequence that characterizes the movement from industrial to post-industrial societies (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Inglehart’s broad thesis is “socioeconomic development giving rise to a new type of society that promotes human emancipation” (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, p.2). This does not seem to have been the case in Ireland.

Table 4

	1981	1990	1999	2008
Drug Addicts		64.4%	66.1%	77.4%
Criminal Record	43.9%	51.7%	55.6%	65.9%
Heavy Drinkers	33.3%	34.1%	36.3%	41.7%
Emotionally Unstable	22.8%	30.0%	24.9%	34.2%
Aids		34.6%	22.8%	28.2%
Muslims	13.4%	13.6%	13.5%	22.7%
Homosexuals		33.2%	26.8%	19.1%
Immigrants/Foreign Workers	5.8%	5.1%	12.3%	14.1%
Jews		6.4%	10.9%	10.9%
Different Race	7.2%	5.9%	12.1%	10.0%

Overall, Irish people have become more intolerant since the 1980s (see Table 4).¹² They are proportionally more intolerant of drug addicts, people with a criminal record, heavy drinkers, emotionally unstable people, Muslims, immigrants/foreign workers, Jews and people of a different race. On the other hand, they have become more tolerant of homosexuals and people with AIDS. Compared to Europe, Ireland has higher proportions of intolerance toward most groups than France, Spain, and Norway, and quite similar levels to Italy, Bulgaria and Slovakia. Slovakia and Bulgaria, being defined as industrial countries, would seem to fit Inglehart's model, as do the post-industrial countries of France, Spain and Norway. Italy and Ireland, both post-industrial, do not. Perhaps high levels of allegiance to an authoritarian Church would explain this conflict, but the declines in Church confidence in Ireland that have coincided with increasing intolerance would seem to negate this argument. One probable cause of this disparity is that Inglehart generally uses levels of tolerance towards homosexuality in his operationalization of "tolerance of others' liberty" (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, p.150). If this operationalization is applied, then Ireland (but perhaps not Italy) would fit Inglehart's model. This narrow view of tolerance however, may only serve to obscure the possible negative aspects of socioeconomic development. Such a perspective is reflected in Loyal's (2003) critical discussion of Ireland's most recent phase of rapid development, in relation to increased racism and intolerance of immigrants in particular.

Underlying the celebrated liberal values of freedom, choice and opportunity, which are supposedly intrinsic to the cultural renewal ushered in by the 'new Ireland', is the harsh reality of capitalist production, exclusionary nationalism and growing xenophobia, in relation to both the state and the general populace.

(Loyal 2003, p.74)

While tolerance of homosexuality is congruent with the liberal values of the 'new Ireland', increasing intolerance of almost all groups does indeed suggest a harsh reality that is obscured in narratives of modernization and cultural development.

Table 5

	Ireland	France	Spain	Germany	Norway	Italy	Bulgaria	Slovak
Drug	77.4%	39.6%	46.7%	67.5%	52.2%	59.1%	84.1%	76.8%
Criminal	65.9%	14.5%	34.0%	30.0%	34.2%	52.3%	78.4%	69.4%
Drinkers	41.7%	35.8%	31.4%	59.9%	25.3%	45.0%	80.9%	72.9%
Emotion	34.2%	12.2%	20.4%	13.9%	29.6%	39.4%	76.3%	23.6%
Aids	28.2%	2.7%	12.3%	16.4%	5.3%	29.9%	45.8%	40.2%
Muslims	22.7%	7.6%	12.9%	26.2%	13.3%	22.7%	19.5%	23.1%
Homo	19.1%	5.7%	5.4%	17.1%	5.6%	21.7%	54.9%	34.1%

¹² Tolerance/Intolerance measured as response to the question: "On this list are various groups of people could you please sort out any that you would not like to have as neighbours". For an example of where this measure of intolerance/prejudice has been applied see Strabac and Listhaug (2008).

Immig	14.1%	4.3%	4.2%	11.6%	6.0%	16.1%	18.1%	16.6%
Jews	10.9%	2.4%	2.5%	6.1%	2.9%	12.1%	14.9%	12.5%
Race	10.9%	3.4%	4.0%	4.6%	5.1%	15.6%	21.2%	15.4%

Moral Values

How religion informs and influences moral values is obviously a complex interplay between individuals, institutions, and society. In the classical sociological theories, pre-modern society is one in which religion is the social cement that binds individuals to the moral community, objectifying its values and legitimating social control through reference to a sacred and supernatural authority (Durkheim 1976). With functional differentiation, society is no longer integrated on the basis of an all-encompassing religious worldview. As described earlier, individuals now move between relatively autonomous institutions with their own specialized values and norms (Luckmann 1990). Social control and cohesion shifts from moral suasion to technical imperatives, enshrined in constitutions, laws and various other technical devices (Wilson 1976, pp. 267-268). Of course, this operates differently in dissimilar historical contexts and in relation to different religious institutions (see Casanova 1994, Martin 2005). From at least the nineteenth century to at least the 1960s, the Catholic Church in Ireland occupied a dominant position in controlling the moral values of Irish Catholics (Inglis 1998, pp.20-24). Through a vast organisational apparatus that permeated schools, hospitals, homes, as well as churches, the Catholic Church ensured knowledge of, and adherence to, their rules and regulations (see Inglis 1998, pp.39-64). A detailed discussion of the declining reach of this apparatus is beyond the scope of this paper, but from the evidence already presented, one would expect that with declining institutionally-oriented religiosity, in terms of declining levels of practice, confidence in the Church, and declining Church adequacy in terms of moral, social and family life problems, that there would be a significant shift in moral values away from the social teachings of the Church. Even with the continuing prevalence of belief, one of the central ideas in theories of secularization is that, in modern society, they are no longer socially significant. At the individual level this is manifest in the extent to which individuals consign their religious views to the private domain, and the extent that their religious views no longer inform aspects of their lives in other domains. Religiosity becomes compartmentalized – something that is only relevant in its own particular time and place – no longer informing aspects of everyday lives to the same extent as it once did (Bruce 2002, pp.19-21).¹³

The question of interest in the EVS here is one in which individuals are asked to rank on a ten-point scale whether an action is one, never justified, or ten, always justified. The changing mean values for each action from 1981-2008 are represented in Figure 3. In order of the magnitude of change, Irish people have on average, become more liberal in relation to homosexuality, divorce, euthanasia, and abortion since 1981. In relation to suicide and

¹³ This is one of the major criticisms, alluded to earlier, levelled at the “believing without belong” thesis as an alternative to secularization theories. For instance, Voas & Crockett (2005) question what social relevance have beliefs that are unsubstantiated by practice. That is, beliefs that are unsubstantiated in other spheres of activity do actually fit quite well within the secularization paradigm.

adultery the trend is one of relative stability since 1981.¹⁴ It is no accident that the changes in relation to homosexuality and divorce are reflective of the legal changes witnessed in the mid 1990s. One could describe such changes as the increasing secularization of Irish society, where Church proscriptions have become separate from legal ones. One might also argue that the continuing illegality of abortion and euthanasia in Ireland reflects a certain resistance to these trends. While one must be mindful that they are not completely democratic, legal changes also reflect the views and demands of individual and groups to alter what is officially sanctioned (Abela 2001). The increasing justifiability of euthanasia and abortion, now occupying the middle of the spectrum, seem particularly interesting in this regard, but the persistent conservatism in attitudes towards suicide and adultery are also noteworthy. It seems to suggest that Irish people increasingly pick and choose which social teachings they adhere to and which they do not. That is not to say that the only reason an individual might oppose abortion or suicide is because of their allegiance to the Catholic Church, but that the changes in these attitudes depict a society that increasingly no longer accepts unquestionably many of the core social teachings of the Church.

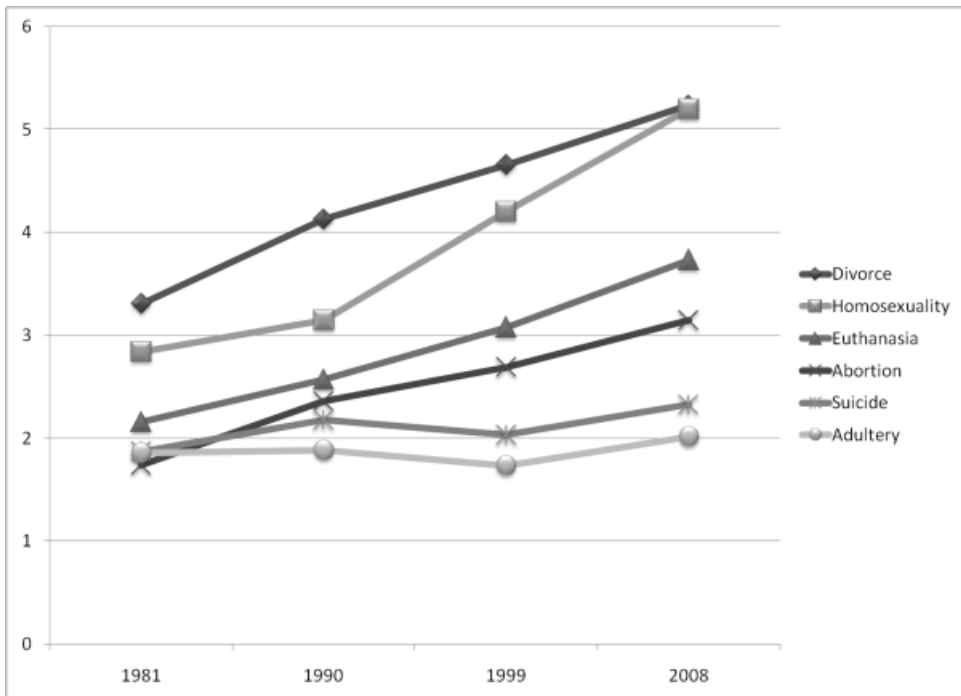


Figure 3

An insight into this claim can be seen in a comparison of the changing attitudes to abortion and homosexuality among regular and irregular churchgoers. Figure 4 shows the change in

¹⁴ In relation to suicide and adultery the trend is in fact towards increasing liberalism, but the mean differences between 1981 and 2008 are not significant in relation to adultery, and the mean differences between 1990 and 2008 are not significant in relation to suicide (t-tests not shown).

justifiability of abortion and homosexuality according to two groups, one who attend church monthly or more, and the other less so (including never). The mean differences between the two attendance groups are immediately apparent, with the scale of the difference between the two groups roughly equivalent for each issue. Furthermore, the difference between the two groups has not changed much over time. Although attendance is no doubt reflective of other social-structural variable such as age and education, it does not lend much credence to the notion that individual religiosity (in terms of attendance) has become irrelevant in at least differentiating between groups who hold divergent moral values. The similar trajectories of change in both groups however, in relation to homosexuality in particular, and to a lesser degree in relation to abortion, imply that it is not simply changes in institutionally-oriented religiosity that have contributed to the more liberal outlook of Irish people, but that religious and non-religious alike have become more liberal. In this sense, it is not merely declines in regular practice that have contributed to a growing liberalism, but that even those who attend regularly seem to be subject to the same liberalizing social currents as those who do not.

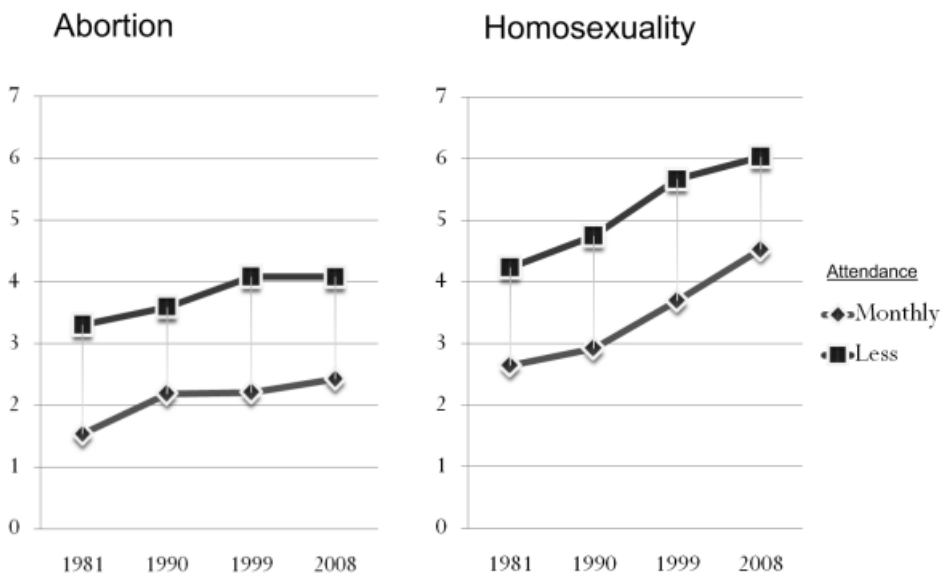


Figure 4

In comparison to Europe (see Table 6), Ireland remains exceptionally conservative in relation to most of these issues, but with the notable exception in relation to homosexuality. Ireland is comfortably the most conservative nation in relation to abortion, euthanasia, and to a lesser extent adultery. In relation to suicide it is still comparatively quite conservative, quite similar to Italy and Spain, but Bulgaria is the most conservative, and there is a similar pattern in relation to divorce. Homosexuality is the rather large exception. On this issue Ireland, and to a lesser extent Slovakia, seem to be more similar to countries such as France, Spain and Germany, as opposed to the more conservative Italy and Bulgaria. Aside from this issue, the overall pattern is one of the most highly religious countries having the most conservative

moral values. One point of interest is that despite Ireland being closer to countries like Germany or Spain rather than Italy or Slovakia in terms of whether the Church is providing answers to social, moral and family life problems, it remains closer to the latter group in terms of conservatism on these moral issues. One might surmise that this general conservatism is so deeply embedded in Irish culture (and for some issues, ingrained in law), that to uproot it may take longer and require more effort than to simply denounce the influence of the Church.

Table 6

	Ireland	France	Spain	Germany	Norway	Italy	Bulgar	Slovak
Abortion	3.14	5.97	4.8	4.75	6.37	3.59	4.63	4.03
Divorce	5.23	6.54	6.88	6.24	7.05	4.81	5.05	5.03
Euthan	3.73	6.74	5.99	4.67	5.71	4.63	4.24	4.17
Suicide	2.32	4.31	2.55	3.38	3.36	2.29	1.66	2.97
Homo	5.2	5.65	6.01	5.69	7.18	3.79	2.78	4.79
Adultery	2.02	3.14	2.22	2.79	2.12	2.28	2.29	2.79

Conclusions and Reflections

Despite the declines in institutionally-oriented religiosity and the lesser declines in beliefs, Ireland remains an outstandingly religious country. The important question is whether this relative persistence represents something unusual about Ireland in particular, or whether Irish society is simply in a process of ‘catching up’ to the rest of Europe. Most commentators propose the link between national identity and Catholicism, particularly in its role as an opposition to foreign domination, as the primary explanation the unusually high levels of religiosity in both Northern Ireland and the Republic (e.g. Bruce 2002, Martin 2005). Indeed Martin (1978, p.107) goes as far as to suggest that there is an “indissoluble union between church and nation” when religion and national culture become so intertwined. In his typology of Catholic identity in modern Ireland, Inglis (2007a) describes a modern variant of this sense of group identity that remains tied up with Catholicism: that of the “cultural Catholic”. While it may not be explicitly entangled with a defensive nationalism, it is bound to a sense of shared heritage a distinct cultural identity. Inglis (2007a) argues that being Catholic has become less about adhering to rules and regulations, but that it still retains a sense of belonging and bonding to a community, and to a shared heritage. That is not to disregard the quite substantial proportion of the population who attend regularly and unquestionably accept the rules and regulations of the Church. But it would seem that even with these comparatively high levels of practice, the needs of many Irish Catholics have shifted away from requiring guidance on moral, social and family life issues. The declining confidence in the Church, and the move away from its social teachings, add further weight to the inference that the Church is increasingly relegated to its specifically religious sphere of activity and influence. The relative persistence of belief and the subjective importance of God would suggest that even in the modern Irish society, these more spiritual aspects of life are still important, and that the spiritual needs of Irish people still have a resonance with the Church. The declining confidence in nearly all social institutions and the growing intolerance of various groups

suggest the need for some form of integration that might offset the negative and individualizing effects of modernity. Whether the Catholic Church can provide such integration, as a symbol of shared heritage and community, or as an institution whose relevance is becoming more limited to spiritual matters, remains to be seen.

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About the Authors

Dr. Michael J. Breen

Professor Michael J. Breen is Dean of Arts at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland. He holds undergraduate degrees from University College Dublin (Philosophy) and the University of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rome (Theology). He completed his M.S. and Ph.D. at Syracuse University. Professor Breen is the national director for Ireland of the European Values Study and director of the Centre for Culture, Technology and Values at Mary Immaculate College. He is a past Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Fellow. He is currently the Irish representative of the Scientific Advisory Board of the European Social Survey. His books include *A Fire in the Forest: Religious life in Ireland* (2001) Veritas Publications: Dublin and *The Influence of Mass Media on Divorce Referenda in Ireland* (2010) Edwin Mellen Press: Lampeter, UK.

Caillin Reynolds

University of Limerick, Ireland