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**Secularization in Ireland: Analyzing the relationship between religiosity and demographic variables in Ireland from the European Social Survey 2002-2012**

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*Abstract: This research will explore both of these theories, secularization and existential (in)security, within Ireland against the backdrop of the recent economic crisis of 2008 using the first five rounds of the European Social Survey.*

*Keywords: Ireland, Religiosity, Survey, Faith, Secularization*

## Introduction

Using survey data to explore religious values has a rich research history across Europe and the United States. In the European context, the European Social Survey (ESS), the European Values Study (EVS), and the Eurobarometer surveys have all had a partial focus on religious attitudes and values, while in the United States the World Values Survey (WVS) and the General Social Survey (GSS) have had the same. In this paper, we focus entirely on the Irish data from the European Social Survey.

In the past few decades, Ireland has seen dramatic changes. The background against which religiosity is to be measured in Ireland continues to shift. Annual change in GDP (real growth rate) in 2000 was 9.9%; it was -7.6% in 2009. Unemployment in 2000 was 4.1%; it was 14.4% in 2011. Urbanization in 1985 was 56.5%; it was 62% in 2010. As of 2005, 41% of 24-34 year olds had tertiary education in comparison with 17% of 55-64 year olds. In short, Ireland has become more educated and more urbanized, all the while in a time of increasing economic uncertainty.

Secularization theory would suggest that with increasing economic development, industrialization and modernity (and concomitant loss of community, increased impersonality and increased mobility), the influence of the church should be waning (Wilson 1982). Huntington (1991) defines modernization as 'a multifaceted process involving changes in all areas of human thought and activity.' The principal aspects of this process include urbanization, industrialization, secularization, democratization, education and media participation.

As a society changes, there occurs a shift in values, attitudes, and expectations. One central element to this change is the diffusion of information in a society through increased literacy, mass communications and education. Social modernization, which follows political modernization, involves improving economic conditions along with increased mass media circulation (Huntington 1991, 35). According to Palmer (1989, 91) 'education and information exposure ... are among the most profound agents of change.' As stated by Breen (2010):

As Irish society becomes more urbanized and more educated, this process of social modernization is accelerated. The changes that have taken place, as Ireland moved from a traditional rural economy to a more modern urban economy, have been profound. Such change has been influenced by the provision of education and media availability. Education, along with media exposure, serves to remove the isolation of traditional societies, (Breen 2010, 2).

In terms of changing religiosity, Ireland must necessarily be viewed against the context of its European belonging. Some commentators have described Western Europe as a largely post-Christian society, and many have begun to look to the southern hemisphere, particularly in South America and the Indian subcontinent for the emergence of a new force Christian values and beliefs, albeit a force that is denominationally splintered. However, while Europe itself is largely secularized; Ireland, Malta, and Poland remain the most formally religious of European nations.

Obviously, within Ireland, religiosity is not spread equally across the population. Previous research into religiosity has explored various socio-demographic variables and their impact on religious practice and beliefs. An early study by Abrahamson & Inglehart (1992) used survey data to measure the impact of generational replacement on value trends in Ireland (as well as other European countries) between 1973 and 1990. They found that generational replacement had a major impact on value trends, the major force creating the trend towards Postmaterialism.

Hornsby-Smith and Whelan (1994) explored differences in religiosity based on age, gender, residence, educational attainment and employment status in Irish EVS data from 1990 and discovered significant differences across all groupings. At-home, older women from rural areas were shown to be the most religious group with unemployed, young men living in urban areas being the least. For those over 40 years of age, educational attainment had no significant impact on church attendance. However, those under 40 with third-level education and above were far less likely to attend church than those with fewer educational credentials.

Breen's work (2002) on the Irish data from the European Values Study also concluded that there are significant differences between age cohorts on social and religious values, sometimes to a very marked degree. It was not clear,

however, whether such changes represented a real alteration over time or simply a generational difference. While there was a marked difference in church attendance based on age, the research also noted that the older cohorts were more caring, more religious and less liberal than the younger cohorts, with 'liberalism' being negatively correlated with 'care for others'.

More recent theories of religiosity suggest that secularisation is not a simple, linear process. Insecurity theory (Norris and Inglehart 2004) predicts that religiosity and religious practice will increase in times of personal insecurity. Immerzeel and van Tubergen (2013) have extended insecurity theory to other kinds of insecurity as well, including contextual. Given the economic insecurities surrounding the Irish public since 2008, both on a personal and contextual level, insecurity theory would suggest that religiosity should be increasing in Ireland.

This theory is supported somewhat by recent research of the latest European Values Study (Breen and Reynolds 2011) which concluded that, despite the declines in institutionally-oriented religiosity and the lesser declines in beliefs, Ireland remained an outstandingly religious country.

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, (Breen and Reynolds 2011, 209-210).

This research will explore both of these theories, secularization and insecurity, within Ireland against the backdrop of the recent economic crisis of 2008 using the first five rounds of the European Social Survey.

## **Data**

The European Social Survey (the ESS) is an academically-driven social survey designed to chart and explain the interaction between Europe's changing institutions and the attitudes, beliefs and behavior patterns of its diverse populations. The ESS was established in 2001. Currently preparing for its seventh round, this biennial cross-sectional survey covers more than thirty nations and employs the most rigorous methodologies. The full survey deals with a variety of topics: Trust in institutions; Political engagement; Socio-

political values; Moral and social values; Social capital; Social exclusion; National, ethnic, and religious identity; and Well-being, health and security. The ESS waves which we examine took place in Ireland in 2002/03, 2005, 2006/07, 2009/10 and 2011/12. All ESS data are in the public domain. An integrated 5-wave dataset (all countries, all waves, one data file) is downloadable at <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/> and the questionnaires, along with the codebooks are available from the ESS website.

The stated intention of the creators of the ESS was 'To measure and interpret changes over time in the underlying attitudes, values, perceptions and behavior patterns of the peoples of Europe'. Our focus in this study has been on the interrelationship between religiosity and the standard demographic variables in Ireland vis-à-vis secularization theory across the five waves of ESS data (2002-2012). We have looked at Religiosity, Religious attendance, and Prayer as variables of interest and explored these using Gender, Age, Education, Employment status and Urbanization as explanatory variables.

## **Findings**

Figure 1 plots (non-) attendance at religious services from 2002-2012 highlighting the difference between Ireland and the rest of Europe ('1' means attends religious service daily, while '7' means does not attend at all). Although it is clear that religious attendance in Ireland has been decreasing over the five waves of European Social Survey, there is still a large gap when Ireland is compared to the rest of Europe. The Irish are still attending religious services more than the rest of European, on average.

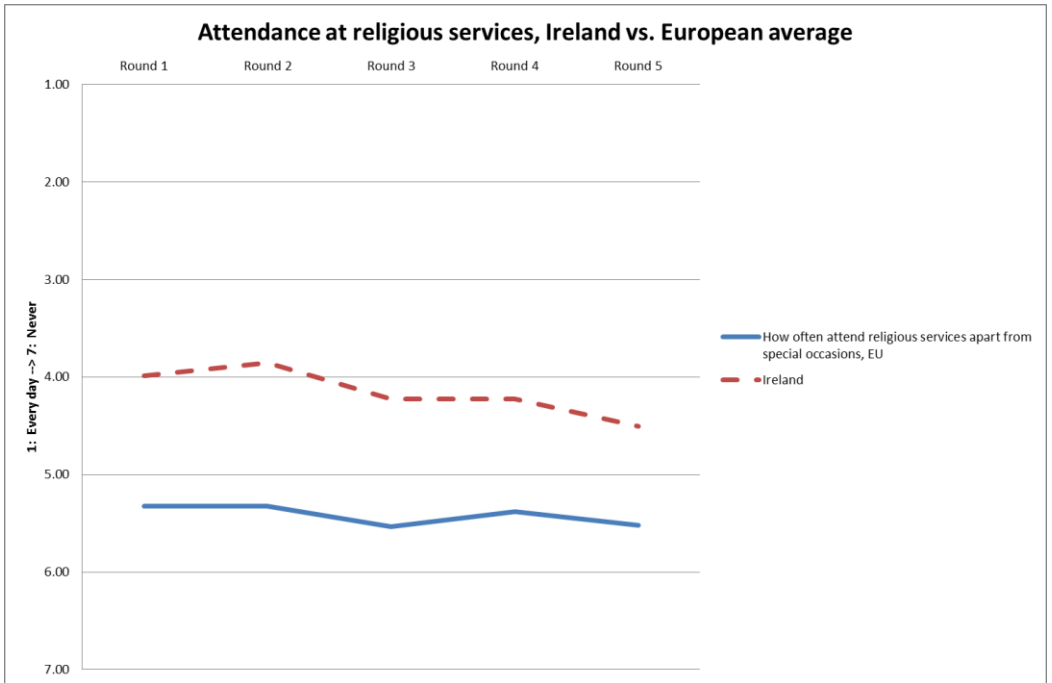


Figure 1: Attending Religious Services, ESS 2002-2012

Source: Authors' analysis of ESS data, 2002-12.

Figure 2 provides details on the distribution of religious attendance based on residency for both rounds one (2002) (the top row of Figure 2) and five (2011/12) (the bottom row of Figure 5) of the survey. In previous research into Irish religiosity, Irish rural dwellers would have had higher attendance than Irish urban dwellers (Hornsby-Smith and Whelan 1994). These patterns remain today. Looking at the religious attendance data for rural dwellers in round one (2002) (top left pie chart of Figure 2), we can see 61% attending at least weekly and only 8% never attending. The comparative figures for urban dwellers in round one was only 40% of respondents attending religious services at least weekly or more frequently compared to 16% never attending (as shown in the top right pie chart of Figure 2). By the time round five (2011/12) came round, the picture had changed quite dramatically. Over the intervening 10 years, the weekly or more frequently attendance rate for rural dwellers were 43% with 12% never attending (bottom left pie chart); for urban dwellers these rate had

fallen to 28% and 23%, respectively (bottom right pie chart). When comparing change between the two groups, there seems to be parallel decline with both urban and rural dwellers attending less frequently over time (as can be seen by comparing the pie charts on the right hand side of Figure 2 for urban dwellers and the pie charts on the left hand side for rural dwellers). Thus, the differentiation between urban and rural dwellers remains. These trends coupled with the fact that Ireland is becoming more urbanized over time, supports secularization theory.



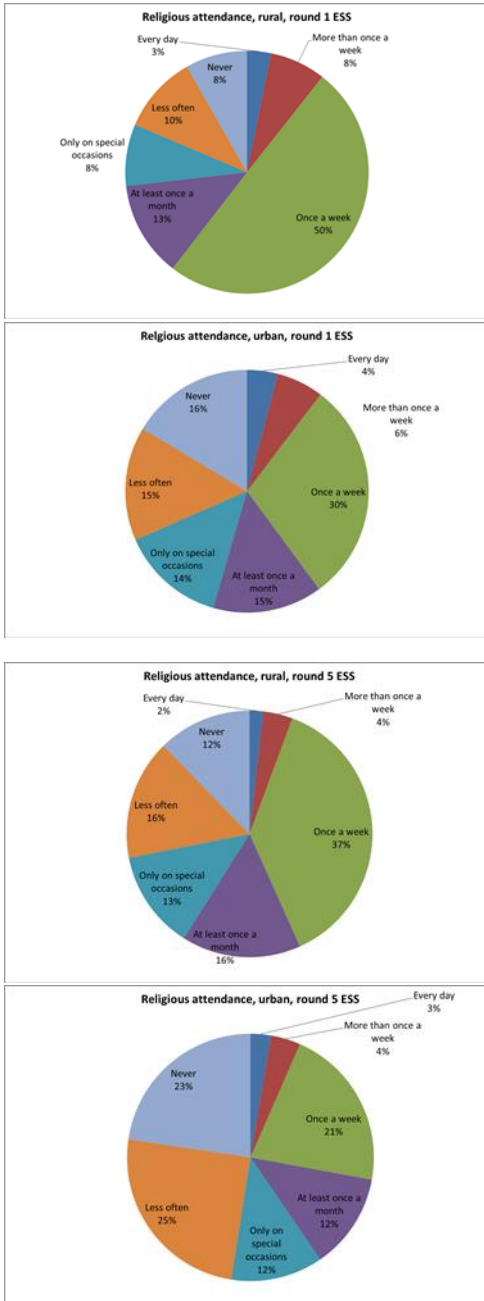


Figure 2: Attending Religious Services, Rural vs Urban Ireland, ESS 2002-12

Source: Authors' analysis of ESS data, 2002-12.

If we explore the relationship between religious attendance and employment status, we can once again compare round one (2002) and round five (2011/12) data as shown in Figure 3 and see similar change. Previous analysis of Irish EVS data from 1990 would have found that the unemployed attended religious services less frequently than those in other employment statuses (Hornsby-Smith and Whelan 1994). Our more recent ESS data confirms that this distinction remains today. In round one (2002) (top left corner, Figure 3) 27% of respondents who were unemployed went to church weekly or more frequently, whereas 25% of such respondents never attended. If we look at other employment statuses (top right corner, Figure 3), we find that 55%, almost twice as many, went to church weekly or more frequently and only 10% never went to church. Similarly, when we look at those respondents who were unemployed in round five (2011/12) (bottom left corner, Figure 3), we find that 23% went to church weekly or more frequently compared to 27% who never went. The corresponding figures for respondents with other employment statuses in 2011/12 are 40% and 14% (bottom right corner, Figure 3).

While this may give the impression of a correlation between churchgoing and socio-economic status, it may also be an indicator of the multi-faceted nature of exclusion vis-à-vis the unemployed relative to other employment statuses in Irish society. Not only is this group not participating in the working world, but they are also not as active in religious practices, historically an important means of social interaction within Irish community. If we explain the relationship between employment status (unemployed, in this instance) and religiosity in terms of the lack of community and social isolation that comes with unemployment, then these results also support secularization theory (and go against insecurity theory which would hypothesize increased religiosity with the personal insecurity brought on by unemployment).

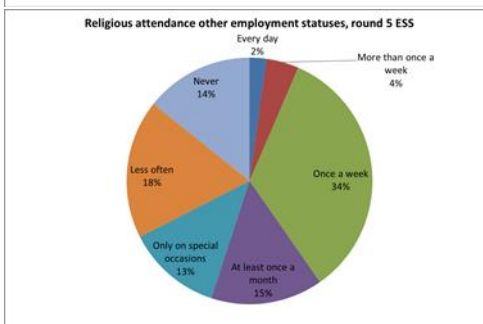
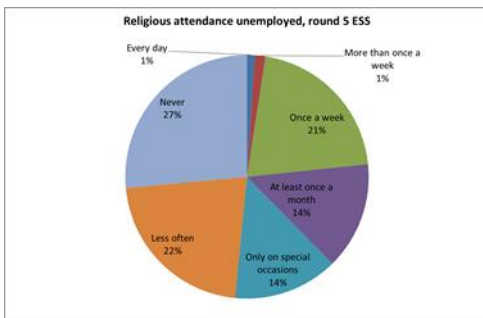
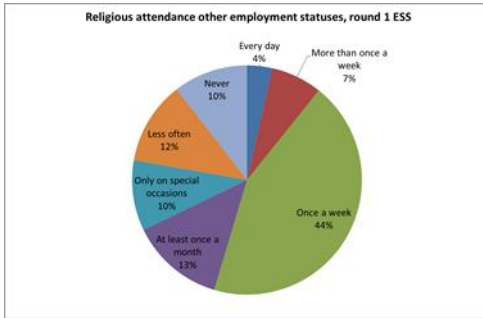
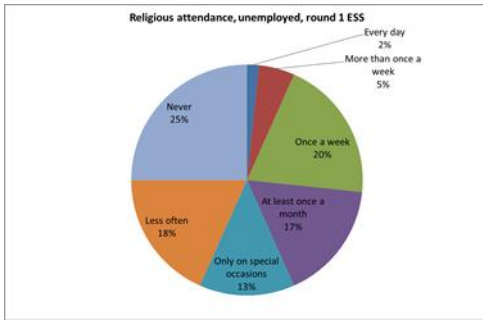


Figure 3: Attending Religious Services by Employment Status, ESS 2002-12

Source: Authors' analysis of ESS data, 2002-12.

Last of all, in respect of religious attendance, we look at the relationship between church attendance and educational attainment as another aspect of social stratification. For this purpose we divided our survey cohort into three groups: those who did not complete secondary school (less than Leaving Cert, pie chart to the left in Figure 4), those who completed secondary school (Leaving Cert, pie chart in the middle in Figure 4), and those who went on to tertiary education (beyond Leaving Cert, pie chart on the right in Figure 4). As can be readily seen from the pie charts in Figure 4 (which deal with round five (2011/12) data only), 50% of the least educated attend church weekly or more frequently, while only 12% never attend. Looking at the middle group, those who have a secondary education but nothing further, we find that the weekly or more frequently attendance rate drops to 36%, while the never attend rate rises to 16%. And finally when we look at the most educated group, those with tertiary education (on the right), we find that only 32% attend weekly or frequently while 18% never attend. The trend of these data is extremely clear, in that higher levels of education are directly correlated with decreasing levels of church attendance and vice versa.



Figure 4: Attending Religious Services by Educational Attainment, ESS 2012

Source: Authors' analysis of ESS data, 2002-12.

However, religiosity can be measured in other ways besides church attendance. Turning now to frequency of prayer we consider respondents

answer to the ESS question ‘how often do you pray’. In figure 5 we see the pie charts for these answers from round one (2002) of the ESS according to the educational groupings that we used above. In the least educated group (those with less than secondary school attainment (pie chart on the left)), 55% prayed daily whereas 6% never prayed. In the middle group (those who have completed secondary school) 47% prayed daily while 10% never prayed. In the group with the highest level of educational attainment (third-level and beyond; the pie chart on the right) 37% prayed daily while 13% never prayed. Once again the trends are quite clear in that higher levels of education are positively correlated with lower levels of religiosity, in this instance as measured through prayer.

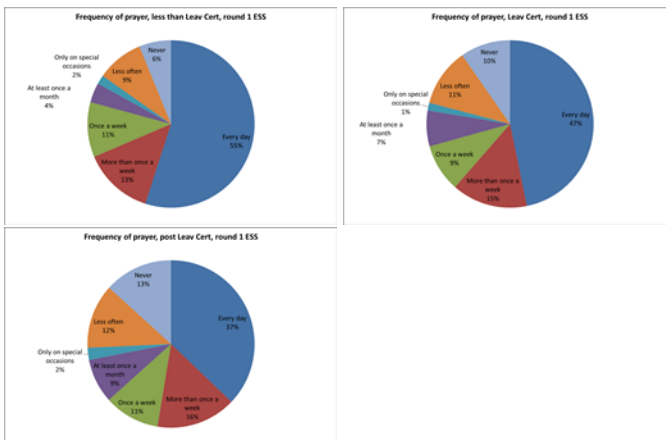


Figure 5: Frequency of Prayer by Educational Attainment, ESS 2002

Source: Authors' analysis of ESS data, 2002.

If we compare these figures to the data for round five (2011/12), which are shown in figure 6, we see that daily prayer among the least educated grouping has fallen to 42% while there is an increase to 10% of those who never pray (pie chart to the left in Figure 6). And in the middle and higher educated

groupings (middle and right pie char in Figure 6, respectively), the figures for daily prayer are 29% and 33% respectively; for never pray, both are at 16%. In the 10 years that intervened between rounds one and five, there has been an overall diminution in the number of people who pray daily and a corresponding increase in the numbers who never pray. As with religious attendance, there is a parallel decline across all educational attainment levels instead of convergence (though the difference between those with the least amount of education and those with the highest has declined very slightly over 10 years).

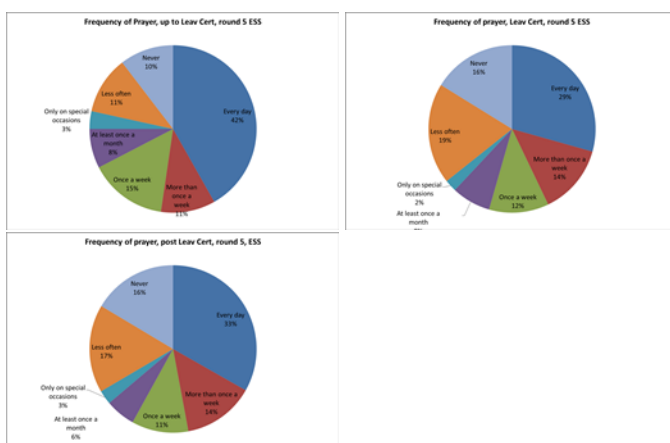


Figure 6: Frequency of Prayer by Educational Attainment, ESS 2012

Source: Authors' analysis of ESS data, 2012.

The European Social Survey also asks respondents to rate their level of religiosity, with 10 being very religious and 0 not all religious. Figure 7 shows the religiosity data for Ireland compared to Europe over the five waves of the ESS. While the average for Ireland is clearly higher than the average for Europe, it is clear that there is a downward trend in the Irish data from an average of close to 6 (mildly religious) in 2002 (Round 1) to an average of just below 5 (just under neutral) ten years later in 2012 (Round 5). There seems to be convergence over the 10 years, with the Irish average much closer to the

European average (which has hovered consistently between 4.5 and 5) in 2012 (Round 5) than it was in 2002 (Round 1).

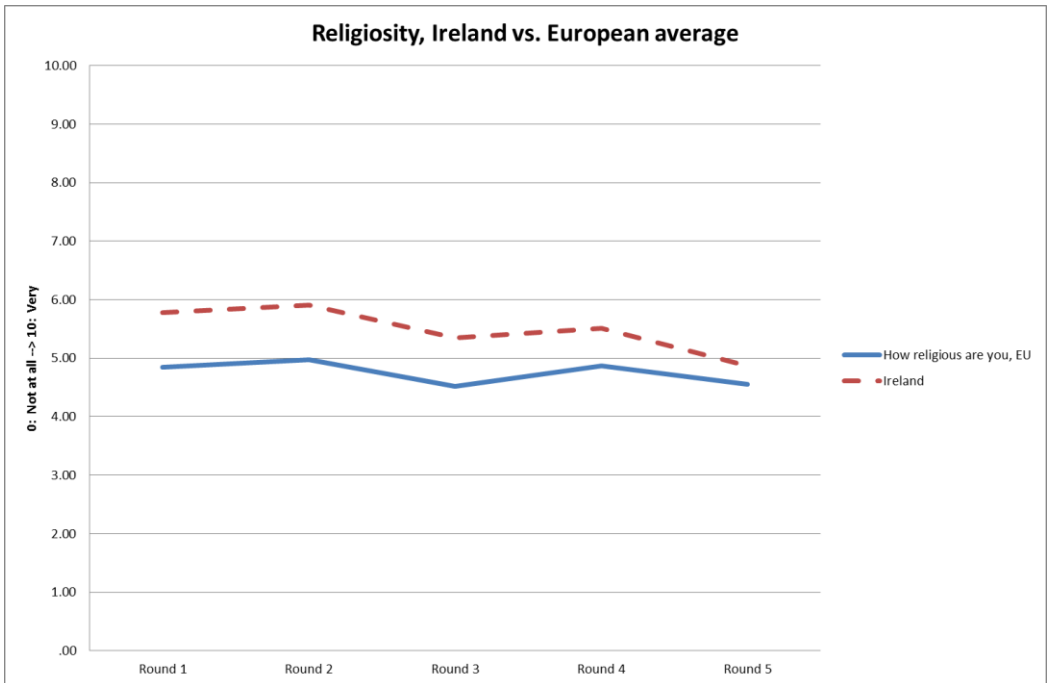


Figure 7: Self-identified as a Religious Person, ESS 2002-2012

Source: Authors' analysis of ESS data, 2002-12.

In terms of social differentiation in religiosity, historical analysis of EVS data would have clearly indicated that gender and age are important differentiating factors (Breen 2002; Hornsby-Smith and Whelan 1994). Figure 8 shows the data for the distribution of religiosity by age and gender. The trend is clearly linear, with women generally being more religious than men in the same age cohort, and older people being significantly more religious than younger people, in that religiosity is clearly seen as increasing with age. However, it is also clear that religiosity across all ages and both genders has decreased from 2002 to 2012. As of round 5 (2012), only women 45 years of age and older and men 60 years of age, on average, consider themselves somewhat religious

(with a rating of 5.0 being neutral; anything over that would be mildly religious).

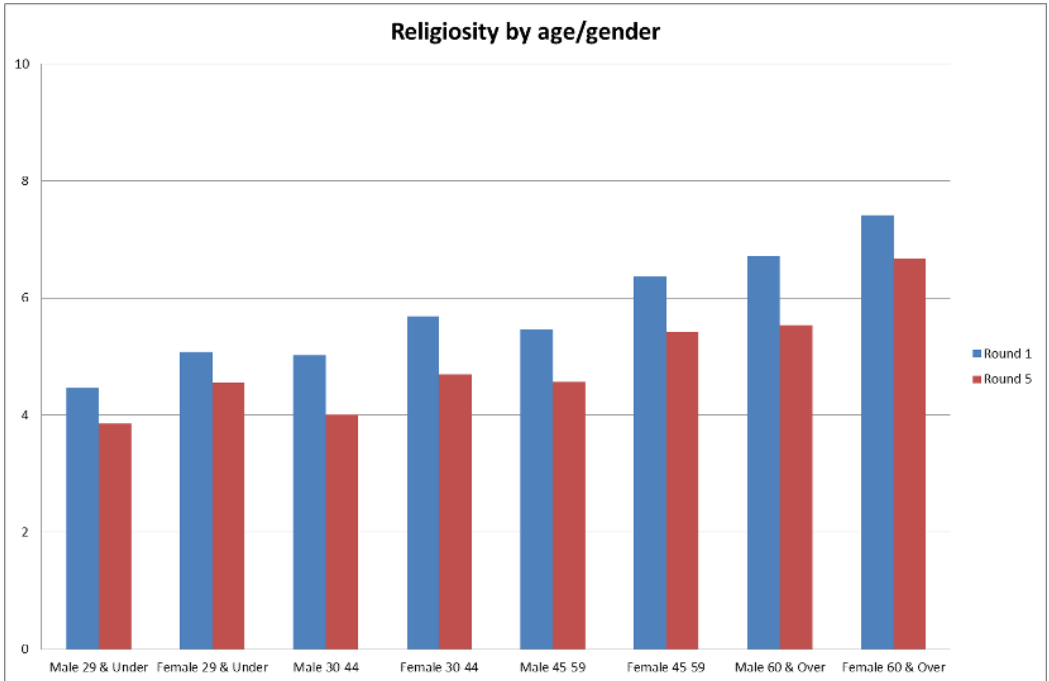


Figure 8: Religiosity by Age/Gender, ESS 2002-2012

Source: Authors' analysis of ESS data, 2002-12.

Finally, in figure 9, we see the data for religiosity by educational attainment. ('JC' stand for Junior Certificate, an exam taken when a student is midway through secondary school; 'LC' stands for Leaving Certificate, the exam that we have discussed previously in the paper which is taken at the end of secondary school.) Generally speaking the higher the level of education, the lower the levels of religiosity in both rounds 1 and 5. Equally we see that the average levels of religiosity have declined over the 10 years between those two rounds for all level of educational attainment.



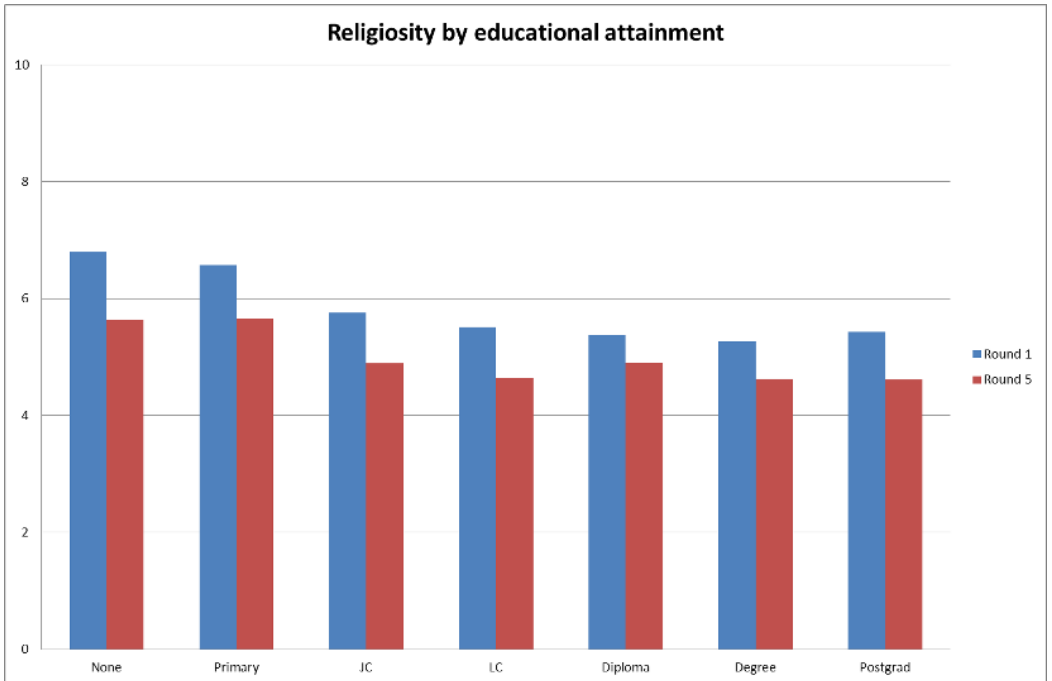


Figure 9: Religiosity by Educational Attainment, ESS 2002-2012

Source: Authors' analysis of ESS data, 2002-12.

Multivariate regression analysis allows us to assess whether or not each of these key demographic variables is significant in predicting religiosity holding the impact of the other included variables constant. Table 1 shows the results of ordinary least squares regression with religiosity as the response variable and gender, age, domicile, educational attainment, employment status and round of the ESS (as a means of assessing change over time) as explanatory variables. All of the variables are significant in predicting religiosity in Ireland with the patterns described in our descriptive analysis replicated in our multivariate analysis. Women are nearly one unit (.80) more religious than men, all else equal. The older a person is the more religious they are (with approximately a .04 unit increase in religiosity with each one year increase in age). We would expect a 60-year old to be more religious than a 20-year old by 1.6, all else equal. Those living on farms are significantly more religious (by .59) than those living in big cities. Those with more education (Leaving

Certificate and Tertiary) are less religious than those who never completed secondary school (by .21 and .28, respectively). The unemployed are less religious (by .27) than all other employment statuses. And, in contrast with insecurity theory which would hypothesize that economic uncertainty at both a personal and societal level should increase levels of religiosity; the years after the economic crisis in 2008 are showing significantly lower levels of religiosity than those before. Relative to Round 1 of the ESS, Rounds 3, 4 and 5 (all gathered after the crisis of 2008) all indicate significantly lower levels of religiosity with Round 5 having the lowest of all (at .79 less than Round 1 of the ESS and .87 less than Round 2 of the ESS).

Table 1: OLS Regression predicting Irish Religiosity, ESS 2002-2012

Response variable:			
religiosity	Coefficient	Standard Error	P>t
Females (ref: male)	0.80	0.05	0.00
age	0.04	0.00	0.00
Domicile (ref: city)			
Suburbs	-0.04	0.12	0.72
Small town	0.17	0.12	0.17
Country village	0.24	0.13	0.07
Farm	0.59	0.12	0.00
Education (ref: less than leaving cert)			
Leaving Certificate	-0.21	0.07	0.00
Tertiary	-0.28	0.06	0.00
Unemployed (ref: all other employ status)	-0.27	0.12	0.03
ESS round (ref: 1)			
ESS round 2	0.08	0.07	0.26
ESS round 3	-0.35	0.09	0.00
ESS round 4	-0.28	0.08	0.00
ESS round 5	-0.79	0.08	0.00
constant	3.50	0.15	0.00

*Source: Authors' analysis of ESS data, 2002-12.*

## **Conclusion**

The focus of this research is on the core question of secularization. Specifically, we have looked at the continuing fall in religious practice within Ireland and in comparison with European averages. Analyzing the trends in religiosity, prayer and religious practice across relevant social groupings from 2002-2012, it would seem that secularization is an inevitable reality. While Ireland still remains more religious compared to the European average, it is rapidly catching up with its European neighbors.

The process of modernization has been ongoing in Ireland for several decades. In essence, over time Ireland has become more urbanized, younger and more educated. Women are working outside of the home more than they have in the past. However, national unemployment rates are high. What the European Social Survey reveals to us is that the consequences of development continue to accrue. Despite its diminished economic status, Ireland continues to become more secularized.

In keeping with similar research (Hornsby-Smith and Whelan 1994) conducted twenty years ago

, this research has found that the most religious within Ireland are still older, less educated, not unemployed, rural females. At the other end of the spectrum, the most secular in Ireland are younger, educated, unemployed, urban males. Of all of these demographic predictors, gender and age seem to have the strongest impact on religiosity.

However, just as relevant as the demographic predictors in predicting level of religiosity is the passing of time and the events that have unfolded during that time period in Ireland. In contrast to the predictions made by insecurity theory, Ireland on average is becoming more secular over time. Irish people are not returning to religious practice now that the boom times are over, but instead are less overtly religious today than they were 10 years ago. And the

demographic variables that distinguished religiosity and religious practice in the past are still significant (if not more so) today.

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