

## ***From Catholicism to Chi, Chakras and Crystals: Research on the Lived Reality of Catholicism among Pre-Service Postgraduate Student Teachers in Catholic Third Level Colleges in the Republic of Ireland (ROI)***

### **Abstract:**

This article presents the findings of a two-year research project investigating four hundred third-level Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students' perceptions of the religiously unaffiliated in Ireland. The research was undertaken in two Third Level Catholic colleges of education in the Republic of Ireland. A brief overview of some contemporary cultural, educational and ecclesial factors impacting on participants' lived experiences and perceptions of Catholicism is provided. Irish society is changing rapidly and the religiously unaffiliated are the fastest growing belief group in the 2016 Census (CSO 2016). A major part of the research focused on the religious or belief affiliation of the sample group. It explores how their personal religious and belief perspectives impact on their own lives as well as their understandings of their future professional roles as educators in Ireland's primary school system. Drawing on the research survey and interview data the article explores participants' belief fluidity as it analyses what their experiences might reveal about lived Catholicism in the contemporary Irish context.

**Keywords:** Lived Catholicism, Ireland, Belief Fluidity, Initial Teacher Educators

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## Introduction

A recent Pew Report situates Ireland as the third most religiously observant country in Western Europe.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, an examination of the raw data from this and other recent research might lead one to conclude that Ireland was an overwhelmingly religious and specifically Catholic country. For instance, the 2016 census data from Ireland exhibits very high rates of religious affiliation where 86 per cent of the population self-identified with a faith group.<sup>2</sup> In 2016 Roman Catholicism was the faith of 78 per cent of the population and a further 8 per cent identified as members of other Christian denominations or world religions. Stephen Bullivant's research draws on data from the European Social Survey (2014-2016) and presents Ireland as one of the top four countries (with Poland, Israel and Portugal) where more than ten per cent of 16-29 year-olds claim to attend religious services on at least a weekly basis.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is unsurprising given that in 1972, 91 per cent of people in ROI attended weekly mass. While this number was reduced to 38 per cent in 2010, it is still remarkably high by European standards.<sup>4</sup> Yet such data merits further scrutiny. Breda O' Brien remarks, although these percentages 'are high by European standards, the faith is being hollowed out from within in a way that the

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Centre, 2018, Being Christian in Western Europe, p. 95  
<https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>

<sup>2</sup> CSO 2016 <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rnraa/>

<sup>3</sup> S. Bullivant, *Europe's Young Adults and Religions*, Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, (2018) p.3 <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-mar-europe-young-people-report-eng.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> G. Ganiel, 'Religious practice in a post-Catholic Ireland: Towards a concept of 'Extra-Institutional Religion'', *Social Compass* 66 (4) (2019) pp. 471-287.

statistics fail to reveal'.<sup>5</sup> Twomey points to the significance of language and the importance of how statistics might be interpreted when he states that in the Irish context some previously interpreted the word Catholic, not in terms of belief but in terms of race, thus giving primacy to collective or national identity and not to personal conviction.<sup>6</sup>

The researchers undertook the current research to uncover what the growth of the religiously unaffiliated might reveal about identity, culture, education and the Catholic Church in Ireland. They noted that while there are significant recent studies on the religiously unaffiliated in Australia<sup>7</sup>, Europe,<sup>8</sup> the UK<sup>9</sup> and USA<sup>10</sup>, there is little comparable research in Republic of Ireland. Researching this religiously unaffiliated group provides a unique opportunity to explore the complex causal factors, manifestations and consequences of the unprecedented growth of non-religious worldviews in Ireland. As academics working in Catholic Third-Level Colleges of Education, the researchers were conscious of the Catholic Church's deep respect for humans to follow their conscience as well as the inviolable human right to practice freely and with dignity their chosen religious or non-religious belief tradition. The researchers were also inspired by Vatican II's *The Declaration on Religious Freedom* (1965) which stresses the

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<sup>5</sup> B. O'Brien, 'Young People and the Future of the Irish Church', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 108 No. 430 (2019), p.187.

<sup>6</sup> V. Twomey, *The End of Irish Catholicism*. Dublin: Veritas, (2002) p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> A. Singleton 'Are religious 'nones' secular? The case of the nones in Australia', *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 36:2 (2015), p. 239.

<sup>8</sup> S. Bullivant, *Europe's Young Adults and Religions* (2018).

<sup>9</sup> L. Woodhead, 'The Rise of No Religion in Britain: The emergence of a new cultural majority', *Journal of the British Academy*, 4 (2016), pp. 245–61.

<sup>10</sup> V, Sensenig, 'The Rise of the 'Nones'': Does Education Explain the Decline in Religious Affiliation?' *The American Journal of Education*, 119(2), (2013). p. 339.

rights of all humans to ‘act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty’.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Research Focus**

Given that Catholicism has had a major impact on Irish culture, education and society there is surprisingly little research on people’s lived experience of Catholicism in contemporary Ireland.<sup>12</sup> The current research explored students, taking a two year Professional Masters in Education (PME), own belief identities and attitudes towards religious and non-religious beliefs in the primary school context. A two part study was undertaken on the initial teacher education (ITE) students in two third level Catholic colleges of education in the Republic of Ireland. Part One of the research profiled the students’ awareness of their own religious or philosophical belief identities. The research was carried out at a time when Irish society is changing rapidly and where one in ten people belong to the ‘No Religion’ group. Indeed, the religiously unaffiliated are the fastest growing belief group in the 2016 Census.<sup>13</sup> Part Two of the study explores understandings of and responses to religiously unaffiliated groups while also focusing on participants’ future professional roles as educators in Ireland’s primary school system. Drawing on both parts of the research, the authors set out to explore what the voices and experiences of the sample group of ITE students might reveal about lived Catholicism in contemporary Ireland.

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<sup>11</sup> W. Abbott (1966) *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), par. 1

<sup>12</sup> T. Inglis, ‘Church and Culture in Catholic Ireland’ *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 106(421), (2017) pp. 21-30.

<sup>13</sup> CSO 2016.

## Research Context

Over the past fifty years as Ireland has become a multinational, cosmopolitan, globalised and increasingly secular society.<sup>14</sup> For centuries, Roman Catholicism has been tightly woven into the fabric of Irish culture, identity and education, thus bringing a level of complexity to the increasingly diverse and rapidly changing landscape in Ireland.<sup>15</sup> When Pope John Paul II visited Ireland in 1979 he visited a country with the highest weekly mass attendance (87 per cent) in the Catholic world<sup>16</sup> where divorce and abortion were illegal. Over four decades later, when Pope Francis visited Ireland in 2018, Ireland was utterly transformed. The population had moved away from the former ‘Catholic, White and Gaelic’ markers of identity<sup>17</sup> while simultaneously resisting many of the orthodox teachings of the Catholic Church.<sup>18</sup> There were multiple and complex causal factors leading to this remarkable socio-cultural and ecclesiastical transformation but undoubtedly clerical child sex abuse was a key factor.<sup>19</sup> In 2010 Pope Benedict wrote a pastoral letter apologising for clerical child sex abuse in Ireland.<sup>20</sup> The Ryan

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<sup>14</sup> T. Inglis, ‘Church and Culture in *Catholic Ireland*’ *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 106(421), (2017) pp.21-30 at p.21; M. Breen and A. Healy *Changing Values, Attitudes and Behaviours in Ireland: An Analysis of European Social Survey Data in Ireland, 2002-2012* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016) p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> K. Andersen, ‘Irish secularization and religious identities: Evidence of an emerging new Catholic habitus’ *Social Compass* 57 (1) (2010) pp. 15–39.

<sup>16</sup> P. Mc Garry ‘The Faith of Ireland’s Catholics Continues Despite All’ in *Irish Times* Saturday August 11, 2018 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/the-faith-of-ireland-s-catholics-continues-despite-all-1.3592019>.

<sup>17</sup> M. Parker-Jenkins and M. Masterson, ‘No longer “Catholic, White and Gaelic”: Schools in Ireland coming to terms with cultural diversity’ 32 4 (2013); E. Heinz, K. Davison and F. “I will do it but religion is a very personal thing”: Teacher education applicants’ attitudes towards teaching religions in Ireland’ *European Journal of Teacher Education* (2018) pp. 1-14.

<sup>18</sup> E. Maher and E. O’Brien (eds), ‘Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism: From Galway to Cloyne and beyond’ (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); L. Fuller, J. Littleton and E. Maher (eds), ‘Irish and Catholic: Towards and understanding of Identity’, (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> O’Brien ‘Young People’, p. 185.

<sup>20</sup> Benedict XVI, *Pastoral Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland*, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_let\\_20100319\\_church-ireland.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland.html)

Report described the appalling ‘systemic, pervasive, chronic, excessive, arbitrary, endemic’ abuse of children in Ireland’s institutions, most of which were Catholic.<sup>21</sup> The revelations of clerical child sex abuse in successive commissions of enquiry and reports left people repulsed, horrified and angered<sup>22</sup> and shattered public confidence in the Church’s leadership and moral authority.<sup>23</sup>

The pace of change has been dramatic and is exemplified in the series of referenda removing the constitutional ban on divorce (1995) as well as the legalising of same sex marriage (2015) and abortion (2018). The Church is on rapidly shifting ground and in the five years separating the last two censuses, the Catholic population declined by over one percentage point each year, a decrease from 84.2 per cent in 2011 to 78.3 percent in 2016. Numerically speaking, the Catholic Church is still the overwhelming majority Church in Ireland, yet its exercise of power and influence is drastically reduced and it ‘no longer has a monopoly over morality or spirituality’.<sup>24</sup>

### **Education and the Catholic Church in Ireland**

Education in Ireland is largely a Church-State co-operative, enshrined in the Constitution, enacted in legislation and upheld by the Supreme Court.<sup>25</sup> Instead of having a state system of education at primary level, it is more accurate to say that Ireland has a state-funded privately-

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<sup>21</sup> Government of Ireland, *The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (2009), <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3c76d0-the-report-of-the-commission-to-inquire-into-child-abuse-the-ryan-re/>

<sup>22</sup> G. Jeffers, ‘Telling Tales – Cruelty and Abuse in Schooling in Ireland’, *Education Research and Perspectives* 43 (2016), pp. 101-136, p. 104.

<sup>23</sup> Ganiel 2019, p. 277.

<sup>24</sup> Inglis 2017.

<sup>25</sup> D. Glendinning, D. (2012) *Education and the Law*. Haywards Heath, West Sussex: Bloomsbury Professional.

owned, largely denominational system of education.<sup>26</sup> In contemporary Ireland 96% of all primary schools are managed by churches with 88.9% under the patronage of the Catholic Church; 5.5% under the patronage of the Church of Ireland; 4.8% under Multi-denominational patronage and 0.8% under the category of ‘other’.<sup>27</sup> In Catholic primary schools, faith formation as well as sacramental preparation forms a core part of the school day.<sup>28</sup> Religious education is one of seven curricular areas in the 1999 curriculum.<sup>29</sup> The recommended time allocation for the subject area is 2.5 hours per week.<sup>30</sup> Under Rule 69 of National Schools parents and guardians have a right to withdraw children from Religious Instruction of which they do not approve.<sup>31</sup> Since there is no prescribed state curricular content for religious education, the 1998 Education Act stressed the rights of the different Church authorities to design religious education curricula appropriate to their school ethos. This means that as school patrons, Catholic bishops are responsible for the design, delivery, and assessment of the religious education programmes in Catholic schools. In 2015 the Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC) published an inaugural RE curriculum framework for Catholic pre-school and primary schools in Ireland North and South, with the aim ‘to help children mature in

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<sup>26</sup> G. Byrne and L. J. Francis (eds), (2019) *Religion and Education: The Voices of Young People in Ireland*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> DES *Statistical Bulletin Enrolments 2019* <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools/>

<sup>28</sup> Irish Episcopal Conference, *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2015); A. Hession, *Catholic Primary Religious education in a Pluralist Environment* (Dublin: Veritas, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> Department of Education, *Primary School Curriculum Introduction* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1999), p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> Department of Education, *Rules for National Schools under the Department of Education* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1965).

<sup>31</sup> Department of Education, *Primary School Curriculum Introduction* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1999).

relation to their spiritual, moral and religious lives, through their encounter with, exploration and celebration of the Catholic faith'.<sup>32</sup>

Catholic schools seek to serve the learning needs of a belief-diverse population and are not perceived by the Church in Ireland as being exclusively *of* and *for* Catholics,<sup>33</sup> instead they are increasingly recognised as places of welcome and dialogue for those of different beliefs.<sup>34</sup> Precisely because they are Catholic<sup>35</sup> they recognise and respect the religious freedom of students<sup>36</sup> and serve 'all, non-Christians included'.<sup>37</sup> The National Catechetical Directory *Share the Good News* (2010) affirms that 'In embracing young people from beyond the Catholic community the Catholic school treats them with the greatest honour. It respects the faith and beliefs of all young people under its care'.<sup>38</sup> For their part Catholic schools adopt a holistic, inclusive approach to RE and faith formation.<sup>39</sup> As generalists, pre-service teachers are educated to deliver all curricular areas in the primary school and to this end they study

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<sup>32</sup>Irish Episcopal Conference, *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> A. Mullally, Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students of Different Beliefs in Catholic Secondary Schools (Dublin: JMB 2019; P Kieran (ed.), *Connecting Lives. Interbelief Dialogue in Contemporary Ireland*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2019).

<sup>34</sup> Catholic School Partnership, *Catholic Primary Schools in a Changing Ireland: Sharing Good Practice on Inclusion of All Pupils* (Dublin: Veritas, 2015). Catholic Schools Partnership, *Understanding and Living the Ethos in a Catholic Primary School A process centred on conversations* (Dublin: Veritas, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Leahy, B, 'Catholic Perspectives on Interreligious Dialogue' in Kieran, P. (ed), *Connecting Lives: Interbelief Dialogues in Contemporary Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2019), pp. 119-128.

<sup>36</sup> D. Lane, *Catholic Education in the Light of Vatican II and Laudato Si'* (Dublin: Veritas, 2016)

<sup>37</sup> Congregation for Catholic Education, *Catholic Education on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (Vatican City: Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997), par 85.

<sup>38</sup> Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), p. 101.

<sup>39</sup> Hession 2015; Thomas Groome, *Will There Be Faith?: A New Vision for Educating and Growing Disciples* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2011); S. Whittle (ed.) *Religious Education in Catholic Schools: Perspectives from Ireland and the UK*, (London: Peter Lang, 2018).



religious education as part of their ITE programmes. In order to qualify to teach in a Catholic primary school, pre-service teachers are required to complete a voluntary Catholic Religious Education and Religious Studies Certificate that is recognised by the Irish Episcopal Conference.<sup>40</sup> This additional certificate equips teachers with the foundational Catholic theological and pedagogical knowledge and skills to communicate the Catholic faith to children in primary schools and it is mandatory for teachers seeking employment in Catholic schools.<sup>41</sup> However, there are persistent criticisms of what some perceive as the Catholic Church's near monopoly of the Irish educational system.<sup>42</sup> For example, Atheist Ireland's 'Teach don't Preach' campaign advocates a secular Irish education system based on human rights laws. Ganiel notes that for 'centuries, Catholicism exerted a monopoly on the religious field in Ireland, functioning as a form of religious nationalism, defining the Irish against the Protestant British colonisers'.<sup>43</sup>

## **Catholicism in Ireland**

In 2014 a study of one hundred people, from all walks of life living in different parts of Ireland, led sociologist Tom Inglis to conclude that there were four main types of Catholics in contemporary Ireland. Firstly, orthodox Catholics who tend to believe and practice their faith.

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<sup>40</sup> Irish Catholics Bishops' Conference, *Recognition of Qualifications to Teach Catholic Religious Education in Catholic Primary Schools in the Island of Ireland* (2021).

<sup>41</sup> D. O'Connell, M. Ryan and M. Harmon, "Will we have teachers for Catholic primary schools in Ireland?" in Whittle, S. (ed.) *Religious Education in Catholic Schools: Perspectives from Ireland and the UK*, (London: Peter Lang, 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Mawhinney A. 'The Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief: Norms and Compliance.' In *International Human Rights: Perspectives from Ireland*. Egan S ed., London: Bloomsbury, (2015), pp.267-282; Nugent, M. and Donnelly, J, "Only Secular Schools Respect Every Person's Human Rights Equally." In *Toward Mutual Ground: Pluralism, Religious Education and Diversity in Irish Schools*, edited by Byrne G and Kieran P. (2013) Dublin: Columba; Ruairi Quinn August 6th 2015 'Time to end the Catholic monopoly on our children's schools' *The Independent* <https://www.independent.ie/opinion/comment/time-to-end-the-catholic-monopoly-on-our-childrens-schools-31430961.html>

<sup>43</sup> Ganiel 2019, 477.

Secondly cultural Catholics who tend not to have a strong belief or practice yet continue to engage in Catholic rites of passage such as christenings, weddings, funerals etc. Thirdly creative Catholics who tend to combine Catholic beliefs with other spiritual traditions and practices. Finally, disenchanted Catholics who tend to reject and resist the Church.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Twomey noted those who were born Catholic but who are ‘now of no religious persuasion’ often tend to be virulently anti-Catholic.<sup>45</sup> Inglis suggests that in contemporary Ireland ‘Religion is not in the hearts, in the minds or on the lips of Catholics. Yet more than four in five people see themselves as Catholics, nine in ten children go to Catholic primary schools and the majority of people are baptised, married or buried with Catholic ceremonies’.<sup>46</sup> Interestingly Inglis notes the stew of bewilderment, confusion and doubt that characterises many people’s lives in contemporary Ireland.

Gladys Ganiel’s research on post-Catholic Ireland (2019) explores people’s religious practices and beliefs on the island of Ireland. She developed the notion of on ‘Extra-Institutional Religion’ to explore religious practices and beliefs that have developed ‘outside or in addition to the Catholic Church, Ireland’s historically dominant religious institution’.<sup>47</sup> This concept highlights the non-traditional or unorthodox manner in which a range of eclectic and highly individual beliefs drawn from outside the formal ecclesial institution characterises people’s contemporary practice of Catholicism. As a sociologist Ganiel drew on empirical data from her research in Ireland and developed her concept of ‘Extra-Institutional Religion’ to help explain how people are practicing their religion.<sup>48</sup> Ganiel uses the term post-Catholic to signal ‘a shift

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<sup>44</sup> T. Inglis, *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland: Webs of Significance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> Twomey 2003, p. 19.

<sup>46</sup> Inglis 2017, p. 21.

<sup>47</sup> Ganiel 2019, p. 473.

<sup>48</sup> Ganiel 2016; Ganiel 2019.

in consciousness in which the institutional Catholic Church is no longer held in high esteem by many, including practising Catholics'.<sup>49</sup> In an increasingly secular context she noted the enduring dominance of religious institutions in the way that people thought about and practised their religion. She developed this idea building upon Davie's notions of believing without belonging and vicarious religion<sup>50</sup> as well as Beck's concept of reflexive religious individualisation or the turn to individual choice and experience, drawing not just on alternative or new age spiritualities but including those who identify in some way with the Christian tradition.<sup>51</sup>

People who practised extra-institutional religion were reflexively individualistic in their beliefs and practices. But their individualisation was moderated by the dominance of the institution in how they thought about and practised their religion. Even those who defined themselves against the Catholic Church maintained some links with it. These were individuals whose religious practice was important in their lives. They either found or created extra-institutional spaces in order to pursue personal and collective transformation through religion. So extra-institutional religion is not simply all religious practice in Ireland outside the Catholic Church; it is committed religious practice that defines itself and its practice over and against the Catholic Church.<sup>52</sup>

While religious individualisation partially explains what is happening in Ireland, Ganiel has developed this 'provisional concept' of extra-institutional religion to explain how people are practicing religion. She also notes that studies of 'lived religion' or 'every day religion' tend to downplay religious institutions.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ganiel 2019, p. 479.

<sup>50</sup> G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without belonging*, (Oxford: Wiley and Sons, 1994); G. Davie, *Religion in modern Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); G. Davie, *Religion in Britain: A persistent paradox*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

<sup>51</sup> U. Beck *A God of one's own: Religion's capacity for peace and potential for violence*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

<sup>52</sup> Ganiel 2019, pp. 472-473.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

## Religious Disaffiliation Among Young Catholics

Internationally, in 2016 the Centre for Applied Research in Georgetown conducted a groundbreaking study of the various reasons for disaffiliation from the Catholic Church among the 15-25 year-old age-group.<sup>54</sup> The study reveals that 35 per cent of the participants are ‘done’ with religious affiliation but continue to believe in something bigger and maybe even God. This echoes with Woodhead’s research<sup>55</sup> in the U.K. which argues that those who may disaffiliate from the Church and now identify with no religion are not necessarily atheists. They are diverse in their make-up and resist religious labels but some continue to believe in God. Nagle also writes about American Catholics who are migrating beyond the influence of the Catholic Church.<sup>56</sup> He highlights the complexity that lies at the heart of the religious lives of young Catholics. His study reveals that despite many young people denying membership of the Church, many maintain a religious worldview and practice.

The Centre for Applied Research study in the U.S. suggest three categories of disaffiliation that emerge from their research on young former Catholics; the injured, the drifters and the dissenters. *The injured* are those who have been hurt by Church teaching or disillusioned by the fact that people they love died despite their prayers. *The drifters* do not find meaning in the rituals and rules of the Church and do not see how faith connects to the real world. *The dissenters* are those that fundamentally disagree with Church teaching on matters such as same-

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<sup>54</sup> R. McCarthy, and J. Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*, (Minnesota: St Mary’s Press, 2016).

<sup>55</sup>L. Woodhead, ‘The Rise of “No Religion” in Britain: The Emergence of a New Cultural Majority’ *Journal of the British Academy*, 4, (2016), pp. 245–61.

<sup>56</sup> J.M. Nagle, *Out on Waters: The Religious Life and Learning of Young Catholics Beyond the Church*, (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2020).

sex marriage, abortion and contraception. Some also state that their questions about life and life after death are not adequately answered by Church teaching. These studies raise questions about young people's lived experience of Catholicism and suggest a lack of a sense of belonging within the Church. They also point to young people's ongoing religious and spiritual development beyond the boundaries of conventional communities. As Nagle says 'learning religion in liquid modernity involves inheriting a shared tradition, receiving insights from various relationships and extra-ecclesial experiences, testing what is good, and moving beyond what is not...liquid modernity has expanded and made more viable a space at the edge of affiliation where a faithful but critical praxis can continue outside of the established boundaries of religious communities.'<sup>57</sup>

## **Methodology**

This mixed-methods research methodology was implemented using anonymous online questionnaires using SurveyMonkey software and in-depth one-to-one interviews. It was carried out in two third level Catholic colleges in the Republic of Ireland. Triangulation across both data sets increased the validity and accuracy of the study.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, many researchers exploring religious identity and religious diversity have used a mixed-method approach because it extends and deepens the researchers' knowledge, enabling them to appreciate the complexity of the area and to make more nuanced conclusions about participants' views and religious identities.<sup>59</sup> An online questionnaire was chosen as the most appropriate way to gather

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<sup>57</sup> Nagle 2020, p.119

<sup>58</sup> J.W. Creswell, *Educational Research Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, (New Jersey: International Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, 2008).

<sup>59</sup> G. Bertram-Troost, 'Investigating the Impact of Religious Diversity in Schools for Secondary Education: A Challenging but Necessary Exercise', *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33 2 (2011), pp. 271 – 283. P.J. Hemming, and N. Madge, 'Researching Children, Youth and Religion: Identity, Complexity and Agency', *Childhood* 19 1 (2012), pp. –51; Hemming, P. J., and N. Madge. 2012. "Researching Children, Youth and Religion: Identity, Complexity and Agency." *Childhood* 19 (1): 38–51.

data from students as the colleges had pivoted to online teaching and learning at the time of data collection due to Covid-19 restrictions. Some of the questions and scales were selected from the *European Values Survey (2017)*<sup>60</sup> as well as Mc Carthy and Vitek's *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* study (2016) conducted in the U.S.A.<sup>61</sup> This enabled the researchers to compare and contrast relevant aspects of the gathered data with a much larger body of existing international research. The questionnaire was distributed to four hundred students over two years (2020 and 2021) with data gathered from PME1 and PME 2 students in 2020 and PME1 students in 2021. The questionnaires enabled the researchers to gather a large amount of data from a large cohort of students. The questionnaires gathered large amount of both quantitative *and* qualitative data from a large cohort of students by asking respondents to explain and elaborate upon their answers. At the end of the questionnaire students were invited to voluntarily, self-select to participate in a follow-up one-to-one semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Due to the complexity of the issues being discussed, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews were deemed preferable to focus groups in order to give participants ample opportunity to present and discuss their ideas and personal experiences. Furthermore, this methodology enabled the researchers to gather rich detail about participants' lived experiences by asking them to elaborate on particular points.<sup>62</sup> Schostak (2006) describes interviews as an extended conversation between partners which aims to uncover in-depth information about a certain

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<sup>60</sup> <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

<sup>61</sup> R. J. McCarthy and J.M. Vitek, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> J. Lewis and C. McNaughton Nicholls, "Design Issues" IN: J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, C. McNaughton Nicholls and R. Ormston (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. (London: SAGE Publications, 2014), pp. 48 – 76.

topic through which a phenomenon could be interpreted in terms of the meanings interviewees bring to it. Interviews were conducted over zoom due to the on-going Covid-19 restrictions.<sup>63</sup>

### **Research Participants**

The study was carried out with a total sample group of 400 postgraduate initial teacher education students in two third-level colleges of education in ROI. This postgraduate cohort of students who had already completed their primary degree was chosen on the basis that they may have a rich life experience, with an added capacity for enhanced reflection and analysis. ‘Opportunity sampling’ was employed because every PME student was invited to respond to the questionnaire. ‘Self-selection sampling’ was employed for the semi-structured interviews because each participant had a choice to self-select to take part in the interviews of their own accord.

N = 400 questionnaires were distributed and n = 192 questionnaires were returned. Five students, all female, participated in the one-to-one interviews each lasting for approximately 45 minutes. Students were asked to specify their age bracket and gender at the beginning of the questionnaire (See figures 1 & 2). The majority of the participants were between 18 and 34 years.

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<sup>63</sup> J. Schostak, *Interviewing and Representation in Qualitative Research*, (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006).

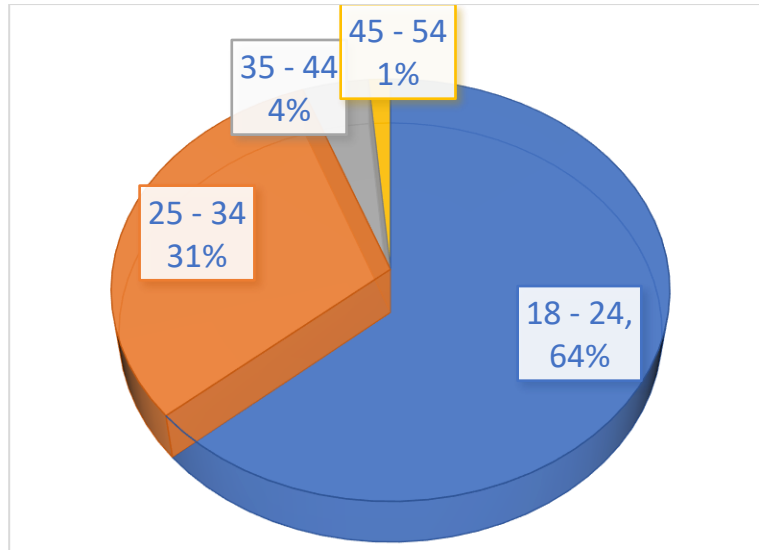


Figure 1: Age groups of respondents

The gender imbalance of the cohort, with 88% identifying as female, reflects the reality of teacher education and the primary teaching profession in Ireland which is predominantly female.

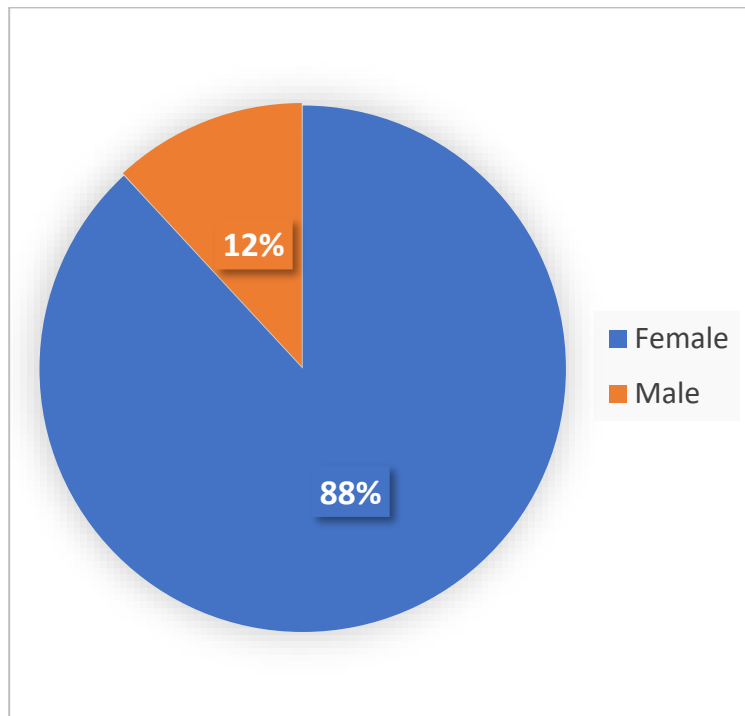


Figure 2: Gender of participants



## **Findings**

The findings of the research regarding the belief profile of the participants points to the significant influence of Catholicism and Catholic education in Ireland. For the sample group attendance at a Catholic school is normative in Ireland. Attendance at Catholic schools was 97% at primary level and 89% at post primary level. 99% received the sacraments of First Eucharist and Confirmation.

### **A Commitment to Non-Commitment**

Given this high level of sacramental initiation and education within Catholic schools when participants were children, the survey asked if they now belonged to a particular religious tradition or non-religious worldview as adults: 8% said ‘Don’t Know’; 12% said ‘No’ and 80% said ‘Yes’. One in five no longer know or don’t belong to a religious or secular tradition or worldview. There seems to be a growing uncertainty or reluctance within some of the participants to identify with one perspective or position.

The same question went on to ask if they stated yes to belonging to a particular religious tradition or non-religious worldview to select from a list of beliefs provided.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Atheist, Agnostic, Baptist, Bah’ai, Buddhist, Christian Orthodox, Church of Ireland, Evangelical, Free Church, Free Thinker Hindu, Humanist, Jewish, Lapsed Catholic Methodist, Muslim, Nominal Catholic, Non-conformist, Non-Religious, Presbyterian, Protestant, Roman Catholic, Sceptic, Sikh, Spiritual, Unbeliever, Other.

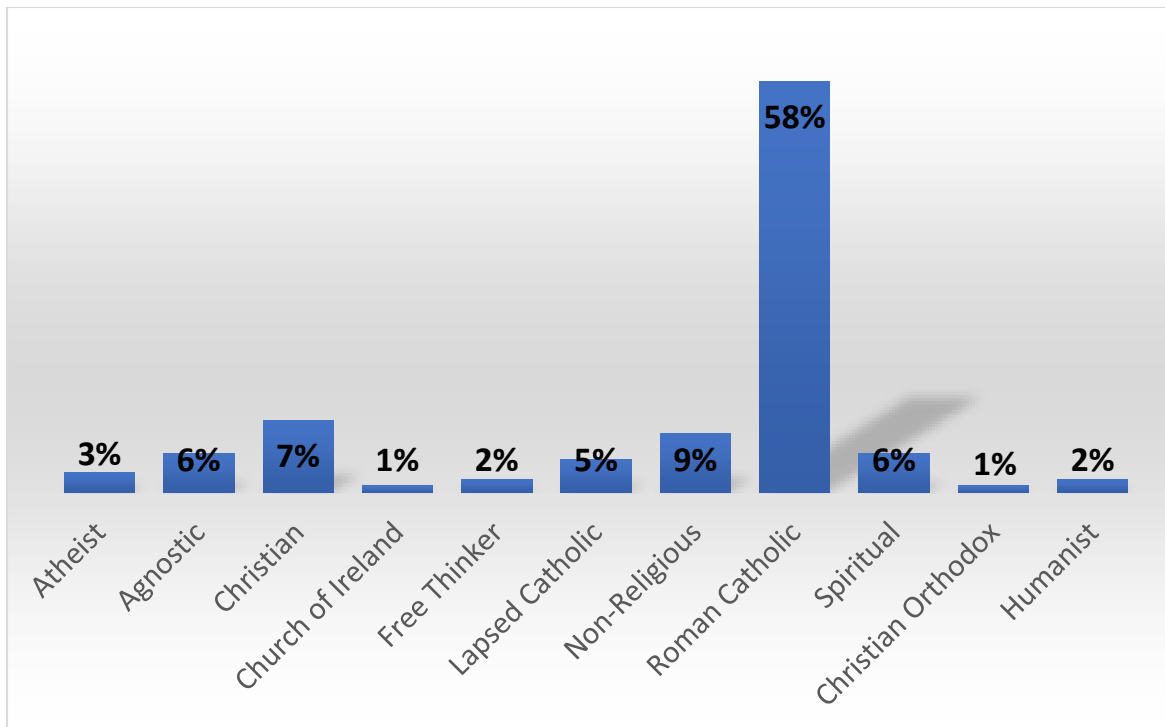


Figure 3: Beliefs identified by participants

When given greater options to choose from, a greater diversity of responses is revealed as the participants move away from self-identifying with a religious tradition into more specific non-religious world views. More than a third (33%) move away from identifying with a religious tradition and self-describe as a non-religious worldview. Titles like ‘free thinker’(2%) or ‘spiritual’(6%) are more nebulous and give less specific horizons of interpretation. Given that 99% have been initiated into the Catholic Church, it is interesting to note the gravitation among a third of the participants to less institutionally specific and formal categories.

A question inviting participants to evaluate how strongly they are attached to their belief shows that only 8% are attached very strongly to their religious or non-religious worldview.

Moderately	31%
Rather Strongly	23%
Rather Weakly	20%

Don't Know	10%
Very Weakly	8%
Very Strongly	8%

Figure 4: How strongly are you attached to this religious or non-religious worldview?

Just over half of the participants (58%) are attached to their belief moderately, rather weakly and very weakly. Overall the results suggest that given that 99% received the sacraments within a confessional educational system designed to nurture faith and personal commitment, the sample group does not bear evidence of an overwhelmingly strong commitment to any worldview. This suggests a commitment to non-commitment. Paul Murray speaks of ‘a prevailing attitude of commitment if, only, and for as long as something works for me further erodes any sense of inherited loyalties and transgenerational identity.’<sup>65</sup>

In response to the question ‘Do you ever attend religious services these days?’ 13% attend once a week, the minimum requirement for ‘orthodox’ Catholics,<sup>66</sup> and 30% no longer attend religious services.

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<sup>65</sup> P. D. Murray, ‘Living Catholicity Differently: On Growing into the Plenitudinous Plurality of Catholic Communion in God’, In S. Hellemans, P. Jonkers (eds) *Envisioning Futures for the Catholic Church*. (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2018), pp. 109-158.

<sup>66</sup> The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997) lists five laws of the Church: to attend Mass on Sundays and Feasts of Obligation; to go to confession (see Penance) at least once a year; to receive Communion during the Easter season; to keep holy the Feasts of Obligation; and to observe the days of fasting and abstinence.

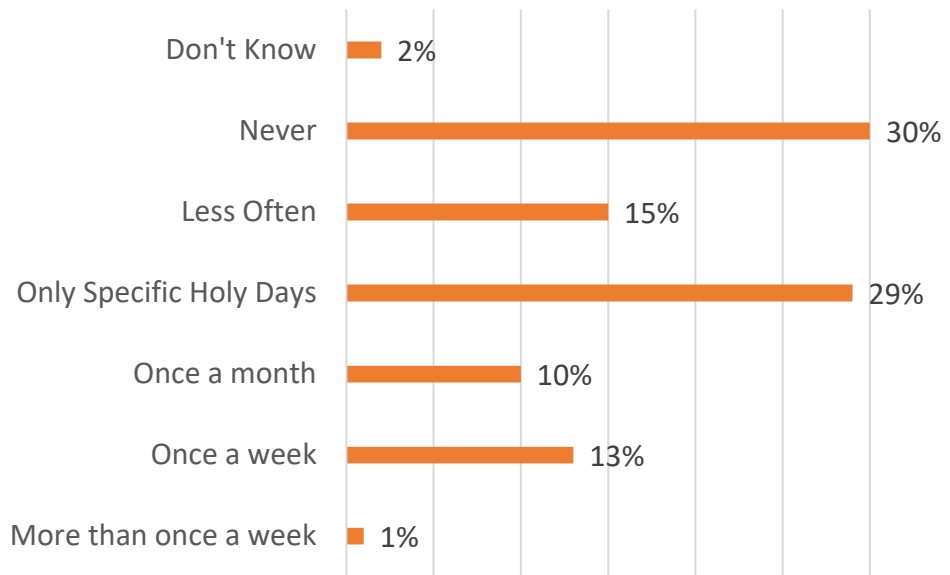


Figure 5: Religious practice of participants

Attendance at religious services on specific holy days was selected by 29% of the participants which points to a possible cultural attachment to their religion and may involve only attending services around Christmas and Easter for example. The data provides evidence of changing patterns of religious practice in the lived Catholicism of the participants. This finding raises questions regarding the difficulty for this cohort as future teachers who are tasked with teaching a faith formational programme, promoting the importance of weekly mass attendance. As teachers they are required to teach something that the majority are not currently personally practicing. This is raised by one of the participants in the one-to-one interviews who stated: *'I must admit I am not a very religious person myself and it was always a worry of mine that it may affect the children's learning in religious education. Over the past few years, I have stopped attending mass, but I do still strongly believe in God'*.

The questionnaire went on to invite participants to tick one statement which comes closest to their own beliefs.

'I believe in a God with whom I can have a personal relationship'	30%
'I believe in a spirit or life force'	25%
'I don't really know what to believe'	19%
'I believe that God is something within each person rather than something out there'	15%
'I don't believe in any kind of God, spirit or life force'	11%

Figure 6: Statements of Beliefs

The data shows that participants have high levels of assent to religious worldviews yet much lower levels of assent (30%) to belief in a personal God with whom they can have a relationship. Belief in a personal God is at the heart of the Christian tradition and the religious education programme in Catholic Schools in Ireland. 16% believe that God is something within each person rather than 'out there'. Here God is meaningful in so far as God is relatable to human life. The data points to an experience of an imminent rather than transcendent dimension of the divine among the participants. One in four believed in the more open-ended 'spirit or life force' and 19% of participants did not know what to believe. These findings are consistent with O'Connell, Ryan and Harmon's five-year (2015-2019)<sup>67</sup> research on undergraduate ITE students beliefs and practices in Republic of Ireland. Their findings in a large sample group of 1,200 students show that 34% believe in a personal God, 44% believe God is some sort of spirit or life force and 22% don't know. There may be a sense in which religious language in the Irish context is encumbered<sup>68</sup> and the term God is heavily laden and has connotations of an institutional Church. Among this educated sample group there is still a sizeable percentage who

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<sup>67</sup> O'Connell, D., Ryan, M., and Harmon, M. 'Will we have teachers for Catholic primary schools in Ireland?' in S. Whittle (ed.) *Religious Education in Catholic Schools: Perspectives from Ireland and the UK*, (London: Peter Lang, 2018).

<sup>68</sup> D. Doherty, 'Why do you bother writing those books? Religious book publishing and its possible significance for lifelong religious education', Doctor of Education Thesis, DCU (2020).

may be perplexed, confused or indecisive about their own personal belief. This reinforces Inglis' reflection on a 'stew of bewilderment' and leads the researchers to question whether this is as a consequence of personal indecision or resistance to certitude. However, it may be part of a larger cultural existential response where there is a paradoxical commitment to non-commitment in a world of endless choice.

### **Reasons for Disaffiliation**

For those who once were but no longer consider themselves to be religious, a question enabling participants to tick more than one box asked 'Please indicate how important if at all each of the factors listed below were in your decision to no longer be religious'. Findings show that 69% stopped believing in institutional religion which does not seem to be addressing the experiences and needs of many of the participants. This corresponds with McCarthy and Vitek's (2016) findings on disaffiliation in the U.S. which categorized one of the reasons for disaffiliation as not finding meaning in the rituals and rules of the Church and no longer seeing how faith connects to the real world. A participant in the one-to-one interviews commented '*I think my religion needs to adapt to suit the current climate if it is to last, as currently it doesn't resonate with the young people of Ireland*'. Another participant stated '*religious stances on sexuality and the status of women*' as key issues that prompted her to distance herself from her Catholic faith. The data showed that the sexual abuse of children by religious was a major reason for disaffiliation. For 91% of the cohort sexual abuse of children by religious is either very or somewhat important. The impact that this has had on participants' decision to no longer identify with Catholicism cannot be underestimated. While 23% felt their disaffiliation was due to a tragedy or death that prompted them to question their faith, 36% stated that they no longer felt part of the faith community.

## Belief Plasticity

A further question about beliefs was asked in the questionnaire: *Do you currently believe in any of the following? (you may tick more than one).*

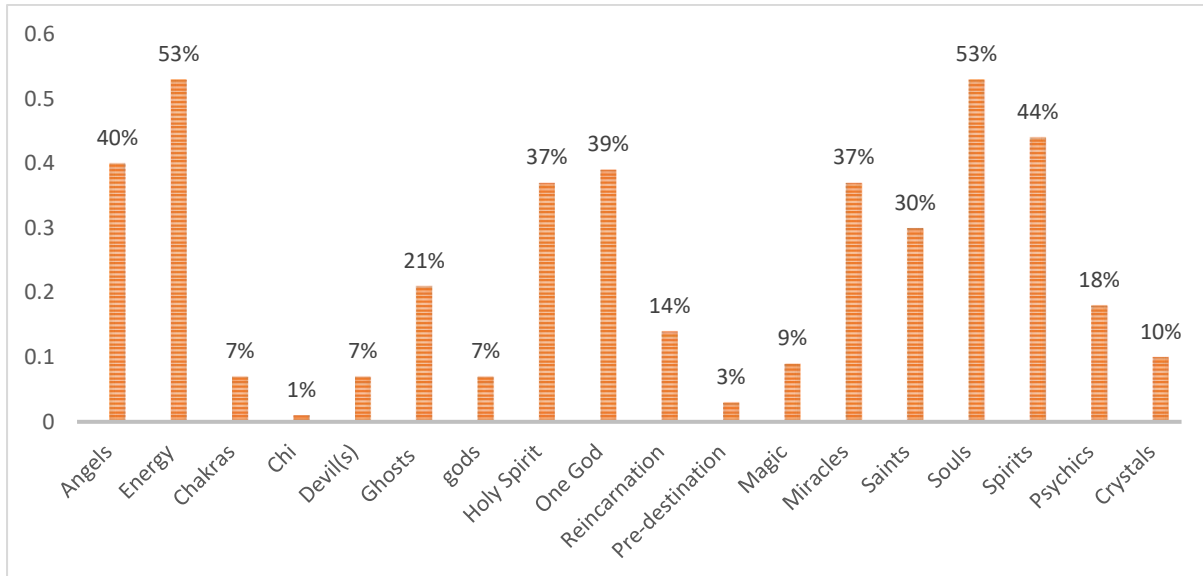


Figure 7: Results of participant beliefs

Given that 99% of the sample group received the sacraments and that the overwhelming majority have the benefit of twelve years of schooling in a Catholic context where they are familiar with faith formational approaches and where they were initiated into the Catholic sacramental tradition, this profile of beliefs reveals that participants hold a wide array of beliefs, many of which come from traditions outside of Catholicism. Belief in souls (53%) and energy (53%) is greater than belief in one God (39%) and the Holy Spirit (37%). While 44% believed in spirits and 40% believe in angels, 21% believe in ghosts and 18% believe in psychics. Crystals (10%), chakras (7%), reincarnation (14%), devil(s) (7%) and magic (9%) are also selected as beliefs. Participants' religious and non-religious practices and identities blend seemingly incompatible, paradoxical and binary beliefs revealing a complex plasticity that defies neat categorisation and resists orthodox classification. This plasticity incorporates traditional Catholic teaching and practices with a wide spectrum of spiritual and secular

traditions from across the world. These findings connect with Maurice Harmon's research<sup>69</sup> on the voice of the child in Ireland. Harmon speaks of children's 'blended' religious identities as evidenced by one child in his research who described themselves as a 'Catholic Atheist'. Another child stated 'I am a Catholic Buddhist'. These children exhibit very high levels of awareness of the varieties of belief traditions and perspectives in contemporary Ireland and in their immediate families.

### **Attitudes to Teaching Religious Education in Catholic Primary Schools**

When asked in the one-to-one interviews about how they felt about teaching religious education in a Catholic school on school placement a clear theme of ambivalence emerged. Participant C felt *'it is possible to engage with it, and still be separate from it'*. Participant A stated *'I go through the motions. People do go in and teach, even if they don't necessarily believe what they're teaching... if you want to teach in Ireland then its regardless of your own views'*. Participant B said *'I find it a little bit false. It's just stuff they're just rattling off... I mean you would just have to do it if it was in the ethos of the school and you were in a Catholic school.'* Similarly participant E commented *'...people probably do go through with it and know that it's part of the job. It's ticking the box in the job and they have to do it, you know?'*. These comments reflect a lived reality of Catholicism among many young teachers in Ireland, many of whom believe in God, are familiar with orthodox Catholic beliefs and practices, but experience what O'Brien describes as a thin, faded version of cultural Catholicism<sup>70</sup>. This has implications for Catholic schools and for faith transmission in Ireland.

### **Discussion**

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<sup>69</sup> M. Harmon, "I am a Catholic Buddhist": the voice of children on religion and Religious Education in an Irish Catholic Primary School', *Doctor of Education thesis*, Dublin City University.

<sup>70</sup> O'Brien p.187.



In the participants lives, complex multi-layered religious and non-religious identities seem to blend what could be seen as incompatible and binary beliefs from diverse traditions. Clearly, the lived Catholicism of these future teachers is out of synch with ‘orthodox’ or conventional articulations of Catholic identity where, for example, belief in gods and reincarnation is not part of the Christian tradition. Participants exhibit what Ganiel has described as ‘Extra-Institutional Catholicism’ in their selection of Chi, Chakras and Crystals among other beliefs in addition to traditional Catholic beliefs. More research is needed to reflect on what these preliminary findings might mean for the lived experience and Catholic identity of younger people in Republic of Ireland. There is evidence of what Voas’s (2009) termed ‘Fuzzy Fidelity’ when it comes to the practice of beliefs, especially Catholicism.<sup>71</sup> Further, there is no indicator of whether or not children are being educated compassionately and comprehensively in Catholic schools by teachers who are familiar with orthodox Catholic beliefs and practices. In-depth interviews suggest that participants were not aware of the eclectic nature of their own beliefs and the diversity that characterises belief in contemporary Ireland. O’Brien comments that ‘it is now mostly uncatechised young adults who teach the programme to children. (The era of unfocused second level religious education class arguably started in the 1970s, so the uncatechised young people teaching RE today also have parents who had little or no formation). While teacher training colleges for the most part do their best, they cannot repair the lack of religious education that their young under-graduates demonstrate.’<sup>72</sup> There is a real need for the Catholic Church to appreciate the complex composition of the beliefs of students and teachers and to understand the challenges they face in the Catholic educational setting. The transmission of faith through catechetical programmes in Catholic schools is a challenging task and given the belief fluidity of ITE

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<sup>71</sup> D. Voas, ‘The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe’. IN *European Sociological Review*. 25, 2. (2009) pp. 55-168.

<sup>72</sup> O’Brien p.187.

students it is becoming more and not less complex. The research highlights the variety of factors including clerical child sexual abuse, institutional religion, tragedy or death, that lead to increased religious disaffiliation. Furthermore, the sample group perceived a disconnect between Catholic rituals, spirituality, ethical teaching and beliefs with youth culture and contemporary life.

### **Conclusion**

This research indicates that the lived Catholicism of the participants from the two Catholic teacher education colleges in Ireland is an extra-institutional lived Catholicism. This cohort are indicative of what Peter Berger calls those who have a ‘supermarket of ideology’ approach. Blending seemingly incompatible beliefs in their eclectic and idiosyncratic individual worldviews. The overall impression is that their beliefs are not identifiable within an orthodox Christian or Catholic perspective.

Further research needs to be undertaken on the reality of belief plasticity among students and teachers in Catholic schools in contemporary Ireland. A lot can be gained from research into and dialogue with non-religious groups. It is time to move away from a rhetoric that, in the past, tended to place religious and non-religious groups in competing, binary and even hostile positions. In advance of the next Census with its rephrased question about Religion and its option to tick the ‘No Religion’ box, it is important for Church members to recognise that understanding the voices and beliefs of every citizen has the potential to enable educators to work toward creating a more compassionate, inclusive, educated society.

