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Catholic Identity in Contemporary Ireland: Belief and  
Belonging to Tradition

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## Catholic Identity in Contemporary Ireland: Belief and Belonging to Tradition

### Abstract

Holy Catholic Ireland is changing rapidly. Irish Catholics no longer have the same devotion to the Church that their parents had. While institutional affiliation and levels of belief remain high, there has been a decline in practice, particularly in the number going to Mass. This paper analyses recent changes in Catholic belief and practice, compares them with trends among other European Catholics, and links them to findings from a qualitative study of Contemporary Irish Identities. The changes in Irish Catholic religiosity can be associated with an ongoing detachment from the institutional church. An orthodox adherence to institutional rules and regulations appears to be giving way to a collective identification with a religious heritage. What was once defined as *à la carte* Catholicism seems to be giving way to a more smorgasbord approach in which Catholics not only pick and chose which institutional rules, beliefs and practices they prefer but, increasingly, mix these with ingredients from other religious traditions. These findings suggest a new typology of Irish Catholics.

## Catholic Identity in Contemporary Ireland: Belief and Belonging to Tradition

### Introduction

Despite the changes that have taken place in Irish society in the last fifty years, the census of population in 2002 showed that the vast majority (90 per cent) of the people still identified themselves with the Catholic Church. Ireland is still a very Catholic country, but there are important changes taking place beneath the surface. While levels of orthodox Christian belief remain, religious practice, although still high compared to other Western societies, is declining. Are Irish Catholics, then, becoming more like their fellow European Catholics and Protestants, in Davie's terms (Religion), 'believing without belonging'?

Most Irish Catholics are still born into the Church, baptised and socialised into its beliefs and practices. The vast majority of Catholic children attend Catholic primary and secondary schools where they make their First Holy Communion and Confirmation (Inglis Moral 5761). Between the home and the Catholic school, most children develop a Catholic habitus (Bourdieu 82), a deeply embodied, almost automatic way of being spiritual and moral that becomes second nature and creates a Catholic sense of self and way of behaving and interpreting the world. Being Catholic becomes a fundamental part of their social and personal identity – the way they are seen and understood by others and the way they see and understand themselves. This helps explain why, even though many Catholics may no longer practice as regularly as their parents, or adhere to fundamental teachings of the Church, they still regard themselves as belonging to an Irish Catholic heritage (Demerath).

But while identification with being Catholic is still strong, involvement in the institution is declining. The Catholic Church no longer acts as a "sacred canopy" for social, political and economic life. Religious life has become increasingly differentiated from the rest of social life, privatised and compartmentalised into specific times, places and contexts. At the same time, the influence of the Church over the state, the media, the public sphere and civil society in general, has declined (Inglis 'Irish Civil'; 'Catholic'). The decline in institutional involvement can, then, be linked to long-term structural transformations involving the growth in consumerism and mass media and the decline in participation in interest groups within civil society (Davie Persistence; Bruce). These transformations have led to a decline in the value and importance of religious capital in obtaining other forms of capital (Inglis 'Catholic'). With the important exception of education, it is no longer necessary to be a 'good' Catholic to be employed in fields such as health and social welfare. Declining institutional involvement has been linked to changing position of women, particularly mothers, who with increasing access to other forms of capital throughout the last half of the twentieth century became less dependent on religious capital (Inglis Moral 178200).

So, then, what does it mean to be an Irish Catholic? Certainly it would seem that while Catholics still believe in the fundamental tenets of their faith, they do not

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This article draws on research from a study of *Contemporary Irish Identities* within the Identity, Diversity and Citizenship Programme at the Geary Institute in University College Dublin and funded by the Irish Higher Education Authority under PRTL13 (see [www.ucd.ie/geary](http://www.ucd.ie/geary)). The interviews were conducted by Dr Theresa O'Keefe.

participate as much in Catholic prayers and rituals as they used to. Irish Catholics seem to be slowly becoming more like their European and Protestant counterparts, combining high levels of religious belief with low levels of religious practice. Being Catholic, and being religious in general, seems to be becoming less of a public manifestation and more confined to the private sphere (Casanova). But even within the home, what needs to be investigated is how children are being socialised into becoming Catholic (Dowling). In this exploratory paper, I try to bring to the surface some of the latent issues that lie beneath the more manifest transformations in Irish Catholic religiosity.

Although there is ongoing debate about the nature of what it is to be religious and ways of measuring the various dimensions of religiosity there does appear to be a pattern of ‘believing without belonging’ – continuing high levels of religious belief without translating this belief into institutional religious practice (Davie Religion 463).<sup>1</sup> However, the extent to which this belief is supernaturally oriented rather than some form of immanent spirituality and the extent to which it permeates everyday life, remains in question (Voas and Crockett 24). The question at the centre of this paper is to what extent Irish Catholics are beginning to adopt a pattern of religiosity similar to European Protestants and of believing without belonging. I argue that Irish Catholics, both in terms of European Protestants and other Catholics, still show strong signs of both believing and belonging. The majority of Irish Catholics still strongly identify with being Catholic, and continue to practise regularly. However, there has been a significant change in the nature of belonging. The era of the simple faith that characterised Catholic Ireland up to the 1960s is rapidly disappearing. Critical reflection and scientific rationality have brought an end to Catholic doxa – the unquestioning acceptance of Catholic Church teaching (Bourdieu 168). Being Catholic seems to be becoming less about adherence to Church teachings, rules and regulations, and more about belonging to a cultural tradition and heritage, to a shared collective memory (Hervieu-Léger Religion). In such a transition, it would be expected, as Davie (Praying Alone 332) argues, that there would be a ‘stronger emphasis on immanence rather than on transcendence’ – which involves participating in Catholic family and community events such as Weddings, Holy Communion, Confirmations, Christenings and Funerals – and ‘towards patterns that fit more easily into a culture dominated by consumption.’

I begin this paper by looking at findings from the European Values Study (1999) and comparing Irish Catholic religiosity with the French, Spanish and Italian counterparts.<sup>2</sup> I then use results from an in-depth qualitative study of changing Irish identities to identify and describe some underlying changes in Irish religiosity. I examine the transformations in the way the parents, particularly mothers, have socialised their children into being Catholic. I finish by suggesting a typology of Irish Catholics in terms of their belonging to the institutional Church.

### **Irish and European Catholics**

France, Spain, Italy and Ireland can be regarded as Catholic countries in that, when asked in censuses of population, the vast majority of people freely identify themselves as Roman Catholics. However, there are important differences between the four countries, particularly when it comes to salvatory beliefs, religious practice, and religious independence. The majority of Catholics in these countries have a high level of orthodox religious belief. They believe in God, life after death, and sin. However

there is less belief in heaven and, in particular, hell. This corresponds to a general pattern among Western Europeans (Davie 'Patterns' 20).

This could be seen as paradoxical. Given that Catholics theoretically belong to what Weber described as an ethical salvationary religion, and supposedly believe that salvation is attained in and through the Church, the comparatively low level of belief in heaven and hell suggests that the importance of salvation – and living according to the teachings of the Catholic Church to attain salvation – may be declining as a core element of religiosity. If an emphasis on immanence means not just a decline in transcendence but a lack of concern for salvation, then if this may signal not just the de-institutionalisation of Christian religion but the slow collapsing of one of its major pillars.

The results of this analysis reveal that European Catholics are an extremely heterogeneous group. The French are more like the Spanish, and both are quite different from the Italians and Irish. For example, the level of belief in hell and heaven among French Catholics is about half what it is among Irish Catholics. The Irish have the highest level of orthodox religious belief, but on three items of belief (God; Sin and Hell) they are not significantly different from the Italians. While these cross-cultural comparisons are revealing, it may well be that the factors and processes that lead to the differences, particularly in terms of involvement with or detachment from the institutional Church, may be more unique rather than common.

There are even more variations when it comes to religious practice. The level of weekly Church attendance among Irish Catholics is more than five times what it is among French Catholics. Similarly, when it comes to prayer, almost half of Irish Catholics pray every day compared to less than one in seven French Catholics. Again there are differences and similarities between Irish and Italian Catholics. Although the Irish attend church more often every week – 65 per cent compared to 48 per cent – the difference in frequency of prayer is insignificant.

Table 1 about here

It would appear that there is a detachment from religious practice and the institutional Church, particularly among French and Spanish Catholics. And yet, even in these countries over two-thirds of respondents considered themselves to be religious and up to half said religion was important in their lives. In this respect, it would appear that many European Catholics are becoming more like their Protestant counterparts in that they while they have held onto deep-seated religious beliefs that have ceased to be belong to the Church in any meaningful way (Davie 'Patterns' 19).

Is, then, being Catholic in Europe becoming more about collective memory, group membership and a way of being in the world and has less to do with getting into heaven or going to hell? In other words, it could be argued, then, that while many European Catholics see themselves as belonging to a religious tradition they are less willing to engage in rituals, particularly going to Mass, through which collective memory, consciousness and conscience are maintained. Detachment from the institutional Church appears to be particularly strong among French and Spanish Catholics. However, given the low level of prayer it may be that for many Catholics whatever about praying together, praying alone is also declining. The even bigger question is the long term prospects of European Catholics continuing to believe in God and salvation without practising what they believe. Will decline in belief inevitably follow a decline in practice (Bruce; Voas and Crockett)?

The comparatively high proportions of Catholics who see themselves as religious and who see religion as important in their lives – and yet who for whom religious practice is low – appears to confirm increased institutional detachment, growing religious individualism and perhaps, in general, the Protestantisation of European Catholicism (Hervieu-Léger Individualism). It may also be that religious self-confidence comes from increased institutional detachment. Although Irish Catholics have generally higher levels of belief and practice, the proportion that see themselves as religious (76 per cent) while higher than French and Spanish Catholics, is significantly lower than Italian Catholics (94 per cent).

The question then remains whether Irish Catholics are gradually becoming like their European counterparts. Over the last thirty years there has been a steady decline in religious practice. A national survey in 1973/74 found that 91 per cent of Catholics in the Republic of Ireland went to Mass at least once a week. The European Values Study indicated that this fell by 25 per cent in 25 years. There has been an even greater decline in attendance at Confession; in 1973/74, almost half (47 per cent) of Catholics went at least once a month, twenty years later this had fallen to 14 per cent (Inglis, Moral 209). Again this seems to reaffirm a growing trend of institutional detachment among Irish Catholics: an increasing number no longer see adherence to Church teachings, rules and regulations as necessary to attaining salvation. However, there has also been a decline in the level of daily prayer, from 80 per cent in 1973/74 to 49 per cent in the EVS (1999). Is this an indication that being Catholic in Ireland is increasingly becoming immanent rather than transcendent and more about belonging to a cultural heritage and way of being in the world than attaining salvation?

While the survey findings provide us with an overall picture of where Irish Catholics stand in relation to other European Catholics, they do not provide an understanding of how Catholic social identity and being Catholic operate at the level of everyday life. We do not get a sense of how people see and understand themselves as Catholics, how being Catholic permeates into family and community life and work. Has being religious become differentiated from social, cultural, political and economic life? How does being Catholic impinge on how people see and understand themselves, others, and the world in which they live?

Another indication of the decline in institutional involvement and of the Church being seen as the means to salvation is the decline in attendance at Confession. Between 1974 and 1995, the level of attendance at monthly Confession declined from 47 per cent to 14 per cent (Inglis, Moral 207). It would seem, then, that while Irish Catholics believe in sin they are bypassing the priest and the institutional church and perhaps seeking forgiveness directly from God.<sup>3</sup> This may be tied in with a growing divergence between what the Church and the laity regard as sinful. Again there is evidence that most Irish Catholics do not see using contraceptives, sex outside marriage, divorce and homosexuality as necessarily sinful. In 1996, an opinion poll found that when it came to serious moral problems, 78 per cent of Catholics followed their own conscience rather than the teaching of the Church (Inglis, Moral 211).

Although Mass attendance has declined significantly since 1973/74 (91 per cent) and is declining rapidly in urban areas, particularly among the young, at 65 per cent it is one of the highest in Europe – after Malta and along with Poland (Fahey *et al.* 46.) However, the level of Mass attendance among Irish Catholics is very significantly different from French Catholics of whom only 12 per cent attend at least once a week. But going to Mass is as much a social as a religious event in Ireland, especially among older people living in rural areas. What survey data do not tell us is to what extent attending Mass on Sundays has as much to do with maintaining and

developing status, respect, social bonds and social capital as it has to with attaining salvation. This also helps explain the social significance not just of funerals, marriages and christenings but, increasingly, of First Holy Communion and Confirmations. Even though the salvation aspect of Irish Catholicism may be declining, over 95 per cent of Irish Catholic respondents in the EVS considered it important to have a religious service for birth, marriage and death (Fahey *et al.* 51). In 2002, there were 50,867 Catholic baptisms which was 84 per cent of the total number of births. Although the number of civil marriages quadrupled between 1996 and 2002, the vast majority – 82 per cent – the majority of which would have been Catholic.

While the findings from the EVS provide us with an overall picture of Irish Catholic religiosity, they do not provide any understanding of how Catholic social identity and being Catholic operates at the level of individual involvement in everyday life. We do not get a sense of how people see and understand themselves as Catholics, how being Catholic permeates into the realms of family, community and work. Social surveys are very good at mapping changes in religious belief and behaviour, but they are not very satisfactory when it comes to exploring the transitions in the meaning of being Catholic and in identification with the Catholic Church that have taken place over generations. How do the way people see and understand themselves as Catholic and the way they identify with the Catholic Church differ from Catholic habitus and lifestyle of their parents?<sup>4</sup>

To address and help answer some of these issues and questions, this paper uses the findings from an in-depth qualitative study of *Contemporary Irish Identities* (CII) undertaken during 2003–5. This study examines the impacts of global, regional, institutional and everyday life influences on how people construct and act upon their identities in contemporary Ireland. One hundred and twenty respondents were interviewed using a snowball sampling frame through contacts with resident and community organisations. Respondents were chosen primarily on their availability and willingness to participate. However, as the fieldwork progressed respondents were sought out and interviewed who were from groups that had not until then been included, for example Protestants and Travellers. This study used both an open-ended and semi-structured interview schedule to explore the way Irish people see and understand themselves. Respondents were interviewed in three urban areas: two in the Irish Republic and one in Northern Ireland. The initial interview questions were general and open-ended, trying to discover the identity categories that people used to describe themselves. Once these were identified respondents were asked specifically about aspects of their social and personal identities, including religion. In this exploratory paper, I confine the analysis to interviews with Catholic respondents that were conducted in a 'Milltown' a large town in the East of Ireland and 'Blackfield' a large suburban area of Dublin. The analysis is further confined to women as traditionally they have been more religious than men and, as mothers, have played a crucial role in socialising children into the Catholic teachings, beliefs and practices (Inglis, Moral17889). As with all qualitative samples, the purpose of these interviews is to bring some hermeneutic flesh to the bare facts that emerge from quantitative surveys. There is no claim that these Catholics are representative of anything more than being alive and living in contemporary Ireland. Among the probing questions used in the religious section of the interview were: What does being a Catholic mean to you? What do you most like about being Catholic? Do you think there is any special connection between being Irish and being Catholic? Can you remember any specific occasion, event or experience when you felt particularly Catholic? How is being Catholic different from when you grew up? Do you like people to know that

you are a Catholic? Is there anything that you find interesting or attractive about other religions, beliefs or practices?

### **Transitions in ways of being Catholic**

It is important to remember that despite rapid social and change, particularly with the emergence of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy during the 1990s, that the Republic of Ireland is still a very Catholic country. This is particularly when it comes to women who are elderly. Louise is an 84 year-old single woman. She is deeply imbued with a Catholic habitus. When she was asked in an open-ended question how she would describe herself, she immediately did so in terms of being Irish and a Catholic. 'Well I suppose I would class myself as very Irish and my religion means everything to me. I'm a RC, Roman Catholic and I always had a great love for my country.' (Blackfield 11) She goes to Mass everyday. She knows the names of the churches in the surrounding area and the saints after which they are named. She has a detailed knowledge of the missions. She loves to hear stories from priests who have returned from various parts of the world. She thinks the reason why the Irish are liked is that they were never colonisers but instead brought education and Catholicism to the natives. She talked animatedly about the Pope's visit to Ireland in 1979 and her pilgrimages to Rome and the Holy Land. What makes Louise a strong Catholic is the passion with which she talks about her religion. There is a sense that being Catholic is central to her everyday life, to how she sees and understands herself and the world.

Many respondents described their way of being Catholic and the identification which their parents had with the Catholic Church as quite different from their own. Anne is a married woman with two grown-up daughters who has lived all her life in Milltown. She has worked, mainly as a secretary, in various companies. She was brought up in an orthodox Catholic family. 'I've been brought up a Catholic and my parents were very strong practising Catholics and that tradition would be distilled (sic) in me. It would have been part of me and it would be part of tradition and belief.' However, while she is still quite orthodox in her beliefs and practices, she does not take a legalistic approach to Church teachings, especially having to attend Mass. 'I mightn't be practising enough as I ought, I'll be very honest. I don't go to Mass as much as I should, but I would revert to prayer, you know, when I have troubles or a difficult time in my life, yes I would.' What is important is that while Anne feels a little guilty about not going to Mass, it is not something which she sees as obligatory.

Fidelma is an articulate woman who, when asked at the beginning of the interview to describe herself, announced that she was a feminist and a republican. She has two children and is presently unemployed. She remembers the time when she confronted her mother about going to Mass.

I remember saying it to my mother one time ... I was kicking up about going to Mass or something. Oh she was scandalised ... . But then of course ... when I was young, when you were living in a country area, you had no choice, you went to Mass. (Blackfield 5)

It may well be that the transition in identification with the Catholic Church over the past thirty years has taken place primarily in relation to attendance at Mass. As Fidelma says, going to Mass was not just a personal identification, it was an ascribed social identity; one did not have a choice. It would also seem that identification with the Church was something that was particularly important to mothers. When their

children rebelled about going to Mass on Sunday, it was a source of scandal. The identity of mothers, what it was to be a good mother, would seem to have been closely allied to identification with the Catholic Church (see Inglis, 1998: 178–200).

Although Fidelma stopped going to Mass and became detached from the Church, she obviously faced a dilemma when it came to raising her own children. Given the monopoly position that the Catholic Church had developed in Irish civil society, and the monopoly it developed over the ways of being spiritual and moral people like Fidelma brought their children up as Catholics not only because of the potential scandal, but because, in effect, there was no other religious choice available. Protestant English colonial domination meant that most Catholics never considered the possibility of becoming Protestant.

What has also changed is the orthodox-legalistic, if not coercive, approach that existed in schools at the time. This is how Joan described going to Mass.

Oh yeah you had to go ever Sunday. And the school I went to had their own mass that they went to which was quarter past nine on a Sunday morning and we had this little part up the front of the church that was maybe 12 rows that was for us, it was a very small school and that was our place and the priest came in the next morning and asked were you at your school mass and if you didn't you got a slap across the face. (Milltown 13)

For some of the women, being Catholic is not something which is questioned or thought about much. Some respondents had difficulty articulating what being a Catholic meant to them. It was as if they had been asked what it meant to them to be a man or a woman. This is how Mary, a fifty year old woman, married with four children, described her Catholicism.

Well, if you're brought up with it, it's always in you. I was brought up a Catholic, I would say, I wouldn't go with the teachings of the Church on an awful lot of the stuff. ...I wouldn't go to Mass and yet I would have brought up my kids like that. That's basically Irish, being Irish, I was born Irish, I'll die Irish. It's just not a big part of my life. It's just there, something that's there.(Blackfield 2)

Another dimension to emerge from the CII study is how some women have begun to question orthodox beliefs and look for spiritual sustenance outside of traditional Catholic practices. Miriam is a 48 year old woman born who grew up in a very traditional Catholic home. She was about 9 or 10 years old when she first heard the notion of reincarnation. 'I heard that theory and that hit me, not here [points to her head] but here [points to her heart]. I said that is absolutely true. And it explained to me life's inner qualities very clearly.' Miriam continued:

I think I am very spiritual, I think there is a Celtic spirituality there and I do believe it, but that is probably a bit new-agey and maybe I wasn't always aware of it. But mm I do think this whole tradition of banshees and ghosts like, eh, I was kind of probably afraid growing up now of ghosts and that kind of thing, but it confirmed in me a deep belief in the other world which I do believe in, you know reincarnation and souls. So I think that is probably Celtic and Irish, you know.(Milltown 19)

It is important to emphasise that while these Catholics no longer take an orthodox-legalistic approach to their religion, while they may have become less involved and more emotionally detached from the institutional Church, and while they may be ambiguous about their religiosity, they still identify strongly with being Catholic. It is part of their cultural heritage. It still means a great deal to them. In comparison with previous generations, the process of Catholic identification has moved gradually from the public to private sphere. It used to be that visiting anthropologists and commentators on Irish culture and society would remark that the signs of Catholic life were to be seen everywhere (Humpheys; Arensberg and Kimball; Messenger; Taylor; Scheper-Hughes). They referred to church buildings, clerical dress, public processions, crucifixes and statues of Our Lady in public places, the ringing of bells, people constantly coming and going to and from the church for Mass, devotions, novenas and so forth. They also referred to the way Catholic habitus was embodied in language, in the way people spoke of themselves, the way they invoked religious references and imagery, the way they blessed themselves frequently: literally the way they wore their religion on their sleeves. It may well be that nowadays such public manifestation of identification is more confined to lifestyle, fashion and sport.

Identification with the Catholic and with being Catholic is not just about a sense of emotional belonging and bonding which comes from what Jenkins (1948) calls the symbolic construction of similarity, it also has to do with the social organisation of difference. In Catholic Ireland, this has primarily revolved around the way Catholics, institutionally through the Church, collectively in families and groups, and individually, in everyday life represented and constituted members of other religions, particularly Protestants but also Jews, as different, and created and maintained physical and mental boundaries around them. Of course, this has crucial significance in Northern Ireland, but it is also significant in the Republic.

Mothers played a key role in passing on the faith and keeping Ireland so Catholic for so long. However, it would appear that the decline in the number of orthodox Catholics and the rise in the number who have become detached from the institutional Church, can be linked to women who abandoned the traditional image of the Irish Catholic mother. Hilliard found that the Church's teaching on fertility control was a crucial factor in this process. For Fidelma, this was the more important scandal in Irish society. She was asked if a lot of people felt like she did about the Church.

They do now yes and I think that they were so upset and like there's still more ... . A lot of them I'd say were unhappy themselves and they took it out on other people but ... they handed down these edicts or whatever they called them and you know you couldn't take contraceptives. They weren't the ones having thirteen and fourteen and fifteen children. They weren't the ones that buried maybe ten and twelve children and buried the mother of ten and twelve children. They weren't the ones who had to put up with the abuse of alcoholic husbands either, you know 'offer it up to god.' (Blackfield 5)

### **Forms of Catholic Identity**

The majority of Irish Catholics may readily identify themselves as Catholics, may accept the beliefs and teachings of the Church, and may go to Mass regularly and receive the sacraments, but they are far from being a homogeneous group. There is a considerable variety in the way that they are Catholic. Inglis (Moral 2438) identified three dimensions to the modern Irish Catholic habitus: magical-devotional, legalistic-

orthodox, individually-principled.<sup>5</sup> These were not mutually distinct. They could overlap and people could move between them depending on context and personal circumstances. The present typology is suggested from a reading of the findings of EVS and CII. It classifies Irish Catholics in terms of their level of identification with, loyalty to and sense of belonging to the institutional Church. Typologies and analytic distinctions are heuristic devices to help delineate and classify a heterogeneous category of people who, in reality, are not neatly classified and may move between the classifications. This is an exploratory classification.

### *Orthodox Catholics*

Orthodox Catholics are loyal members of the institutional Church. They accept the teachings of the Church, they engage regularly in Church practices, and adhere to its rules and regulations. They are deeply involved in the institutional life of the Church. They are happy and proud to be Catholic. Their Catholic identity is a coat that they wearing willingly, if not passionately. Being Catholic is not something that is confined to backstage behaviour. It is manifested publicly. Being Catholic permeates every other aspect of their lives. If there was a conflict between the teachings of the Church and their family, work or social life, it is likely that the Church will come first.

We are well used to the notion of strong Protestants in Northern Ireland – where religious identity is public manifested in social, political and economic life – but the number of Catholic equivalents in the South, particularly in political life, has declined significantly in the last thirty years. But orthodox Catholics have also disappeared from the fields of education, health and social welfare. Indeed, what needs to be examined is the extent to which they have disappeared within families, communities and everyday social life.

### *Creative Catholics*

The concept of the *à la carte* Catholic has been used to describe those Catholics who are no longer orthodox, who no longer adhere legalistically to the rules and regulations of the Church, but rather chose which beliefs, teachings and practices to adhere to, and which to ignore. The *à la carte* Catholic could be someone who may go to Mass regularly and receive Holy Communion, but who would distance themselves from the Church when it came to issues such as using contraceptives, having sex before marriage, obtaining a divorce, going to Confession, observing days of fast and abstinence, and accepting belief in hell and the infallibility of the Pope.

However, there may be a new type of Catholic emerging in Ireland who not only chooses between different beliefs, teachings and practices, but mixes these with non-Catholic beliefs and practices. In other words, these Catholics no longer, so to speak, confine themselves to the Catholic menu as to how to live a spiritual and moral life, but look at other religious menus and mix and match according to their tastes and preferences. Consumerism and religious individualism have led to an increasing number of guides on how to be spiritual and moral. These range from new ageism to yoga. What is of interest is how these beliefs and practices become assimilated with Catholicism. What ends up on the religious plate of Irish Catholics could then be a selection of beliefs and practices that have their origins in Buddhism, Taoism, Paganism, and so forth. We can then refer to the emergence of smorgasbord Catholicism.

In an increasingly globalised culture, people are developing eclectic tastes not just in music and food, but also in religion. Religion becoming privatised, and through the diversification of the religious market place, people are being exposed to different beliefs and practices which offer a wide range of spiritual and moral possibilities suited to personal needs and interests (see Beyer). In a global religious market, religion becomes less about taking a whole religious package and making up one's own package. Among creative Irish Catholics there is a greater affinity with some world religions more than others, for example, with Buddhist beliefs and practices rather than Muslim.

Again, creative Catholics both believe and belong. What differentiates them from orthodox Catholics is that they are more progressive and adventurous. They are willing to stand up, speak against and challenge the Church and its priests and bishops in a way that would have been unthinkable in previous generations. They are also anxious and willing to explore alternative ways of being spiritual and moral. They are willing to take religious risks, to mix and match Catholic beliefs and practices with those derived from other religions and philosophies. It used to be that Catholics would have a personal religious identity which would mark out them out as different – it could be a devotion to a particular saint, place of pilgrimage, church or religious order. It would appear that this devotional religious behaviour is decline. However, in their desire to be spiritual and moral, Irish Catholics may be exploring new forms of meditation, alternative ways of transcendence, and different ways of caring for themselves.

Outside of the religious field and engagement in specifically religious behaviour, creative Catholics are also more willing and able to blend their Catholicism with what may appear to be sometimes incompatible or contradictory philosophies and fields of knowledge. The best example of this in recent years has perhaps the marriage of feminism and Catholicism (see Condrón).

### *Cultural Catholics*

In his study of world religions, Demerath made a distinction between religious Jews (who were orthodox in their religious beliefs and practices) and cultural Jews (who were not believers but who identified with fellow Jews). He then used this distinction to differentiate Catholics in Poland. Cultural Catholics, he argued,

weren't really believers, and while they attended church at least sporadically, they had a good deal of contempt for some of the Church officials and policies. Still Catholicism was part of their national and family cultural heritage, and they were proud of what the Church had done to help free Poland from the Communist regime (Crossing, 43).

Demerath went on to argue that there were cultural Catholics and cultural Protestants in Northern Ireland. He maintained that 'neither are much involved in their churches, but both are caught up in the religious legacies handed down from family to family, neighbourhood to neighbourhood, and community to community (Crossing, 49).

Cultural Catholics tend to identify less with the institutional Church and more with Catholic heritage and being Catholic. They are more detached from the institution. They are less rigid in adhering to the Church's teachings, rules and regulations. They are more open to debate and discussion. But they are not open to changing their religion. Being Catholic is like some indelible mark that they have

accepted and have no desire to change. It is literally part of what they are in the same way that they are, for example, white, male and Irish. Cultural Catholics are not passionate about their identity. It is a coat they have always worn, they feel comfortable in it, and do they not look for any other because, in their eyes, no other coat would fit or suit their needs.

Cultural Catholics, then, appear happy to bring up their children as Catholics, and to have them attend Catholic schools. They may have lost some confidence in the Church because of the scandals concerning the sexual abuse of children by priests and brothers, but they like the rituals and celebrations that surround baptisms, First Holy Communion, Confirmations, weddings and funerals. Even those who rarely give much time or thought to the Church would find it difficult to forgo these events, or to celebrate them in a Protestant church. They are not in favour of radical change in their lives.

In her study of Catholics in America, Dillon revealed that there are many Catholics who go beyond seeing their Catholic identity as part of their cultural heritage and are actively engaged in challenging some of the Church's teachings. In this respect, they are perhaps closer to being creative Catholics.

### *Individualist Catholics*

In the 2002 Census of Population, there were 146, 258 (5.5 per cent) people returned as having no religion or not stating their religion. There were only 1,528 who said that they were either agnostics or atheists. As previous censuses have shown over 90 per cent of the population to be Catholic, it is probably safe to assume that many of these are people who were brought up as Catholics but have become completely detached from the Church. They are non-Catholics. It would seem, however, that there may be an increasing number of Catholics in Ireland who while they identify themselves as Catholics have developed a nebulous New Age orientation to religion that revolves around a search for personal authenticity, the importance of experience, a rejection of the institutional Church and its ready keys to reality, and a this-worldly conception of salvation based on individual self-perfection (Hervieu-Léger *Individualism* 165).

Then there are individualist Catholics who while they identify themselves as Catholics do not believe in some of its fundamental teachings. In the EVS (1999), 17 per cent of Irish Catholics did not believe in life after death and 44 per cent did not believe in hell: as we saw the figures for other European Catholics are even higher (see table 1). What is striking however is the proportion (88 per cent) who go to Mass at about once a month or more often. As in Italy and Spain, this is higher than the proportion who believe in life after death. Is this evidence of a new type of Catholic, who likes to go Mass for the experience and sense of community; a case of belonging without believing? Although their supernatural beliefs have been weakened by reason and rationality, they experience an immanent sense of belonging to their family and community through going to Mass (Davie *Praying Alone* 332; Voas & Crockett 25; Fuller). However, it may also be that because Catholic bishops are patrons of 95 per cent of the Primary Schools in Ireland, some individualist Catholics go to Mass more as means to an end of being seen to belong to the Catholic school and community (*The Irish Times* 3 November 2005).

## Conclusion

There is an ongoing debate as to whether or not Catholic Ireland is becoming a secularised society (Fahey, Hornsby-Smith, Inglis Moral, Greeley and Ward). I have argued that the religious transformation taking place is best understood as a process of deinstitutionalisation. The majority of Irish Catholics still see and understand themselves as Catholics, have a strong sense of belonging and loyalty to a Catholic heritage, and accept most of the key teachings and beliefs of the Church. But an increasing number of Irish Catholics are becoming spiritually and morally detached from the institutional Church. Being Catholic no longer permeates everyday life as it did a generation ago. To what extent are young Catholics being taught to say Catholic prayers and to engage in Catholic rituals? To what extent has there been a decline in religious iconography, particularly putting up holy pictures and statues? In becoming less involved in the institutional Church, Irish Catholics have become more like their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. And insofar as they see themselves as belonging to a religious heritage without embodying institutional beliefs and practices, they have become more like their Protestant counterparts.

Any changes in the way Irish people see and understand themselves as Catholics – the ways in which they identify with each other and with the institutional Church – have to be put within the context of long-term processes of change. Throughout the long nineteenth century of Irish Catholicism – which effectively lasted up to the 1970s – Irish Catholics developed a very strong identification with the institutional Church. This was linked in with an interest in becoming part of an economically developed, nationally independent, modern, civilised society. It was also linked to a more specific religious interest in becoming as spiritual and moral as their Protestant colonial oppressors who during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had tried to symbolically dominate them. Irish Catholicism was an equal and opposite reaction to English Protestantism. Whatever else Irish Catholics were or became, they did not become Protestants. During the twentieth century, particularly with the establishment of Catholic civil society, the tables were turned and it was Catholics who symbolically dominated Protestants. At the same time, there was a decline in the importance of Catholic cultural capital in social, political and economic life (Inglis ‘Catholic’). It was no longer necessary to identify strongly with the Catholic Church to be successful. It was no longer necessary to be an orthodox Catholic. However, although the influence of the institutional Church on the Irish Catholic habitus may have declined, Catholicism as a way of life, as a way of being in the world, did not decline. Although the findings from the CII study are limited, they suggest that Irish Catholics still like the Catholic way of being spiritual and moral; they like being recognised and accepted as part of a community and the feeling of belonging and bonding. Being Catholic is part of their cultural heritage. It is not something that will disappear quickly.

What we are seeing here perhaps is the demise of the influence of grand, ascribed social identities in the way contemporary Irish people see and understand themselves. Churches and nations are constructed rather than imagined communities. They are dependent on getting people to think of themselves as Catholic and Irish. This study would suggest that people still do think of themselves in these terms, but it is not part of their everyday image of themselves. It operates within specific contexts such as encountering people from other religions, going to Mass, going abroad or watching the national team in sports. It may well be that it is only when culture becomes unsettled, when the routine and ordinariness of everyday life is threatened,

that ascribed social identities come to the fore. Otherwise they remain hidden beneath the surface of social life, only coming to mind and finding expression, in response to specific prompts.

## NOTES

1. What it is necessary, as Davie ('Religion' 148) argues, is not to quibble about means of empirical measurement (Hornsby-Smith 'Believing'; Short and Winter), but to describe how certain aspects of religious identity and religiosity continue to persist 'despite the undeniable decline in churchgoing'
2. The European Values Study is a large-scale programme of survey research examining trends in values and attitudes in Europe. It was first carried out in 1981, repeated in 1990 and again in 1999–2000. The 1999 study was based on face-to-face interviews with random samples of the adult population in 33 European societies. The core data for the 33 participating societies are available from Zentralarchiv in Cologne.
3. There are other central elements to being a Roman Catholic such as taking sacraments, Mary as Mother of God, Papal Infallibility and the need to do good works (Hoge), but what most distinguishes Catholics from most Protestants is that salvation is institutional rather than personal.
4. Irish Catholics in everyday life participate in 'multiple, more or less discrepant, universes of discourses.' As they move in and out of these universes or social fields, we need to discover how a sense of being Catholic, of Catholic social identity, is announced and represented (Barth 81–93). People may have been born and raised a Catholic, they may have an ascribed Catholic social identity, they may have inherited a Catholic habitus, but the question is how this identity is actively negotiated by individuals, how it is presented with other social and personal identities, as they move in and out of different social fields and universes of discourses in the course of everyday life (Jenkins 102).
5. McSweeney and Fulton *et al.* have produced other ways of classifying Irish Catholics.

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Table 1: Religiosity of Catholics in France, Spain, Italy and Republic of Ireland 1999  
(Source: European Values Study 1999)

	France	Spain	Italy	Republic of Ireland
	%	%	%	%
<i>Belief in:</i>				
God	86.9	95.2	98.7**	98.5**
Life after death	56.0*	56.0*	78.0	82.9
Sin	56.8*	59.1*	80.3**	88.3**
Hell	28.4	39.0	57.2**	55.9**
Heaven	44.9	59.8	67.2	89.1
<i>Attendance at religious services:</i>				
At least once a week	11.8	29.9	48.3	65.2
About once a month	30.7	31.6	40.2	23.2
Once a year or less	16.7	18.0	5.6	6.5
Never, practically never	40.8	20.4	5.8	5.1
<i>How often pray to God outside of religious services:</i>				
Every day	13.8	25.5	44.2**	49.0**
Once a week or more	14.5	22.8	26.9**	26.2**
Less often	36.7	36.0	22.7**	19.5**
Never	35.0	15.7	6.2**	5.3**
<i>Are you a religious person?</i>				
A religious person	69.6	68.2	93.7	76.2
Not a religious person	26.9	30.4	6.2	23.0
Convinced atheist	3.4	1.4	0.1	0.8
<i>Importance of religion in your life:</i>				
Very/quite important	54.4	48.2	80.8	76.8
Not important	35.3	30.5	15.8	17.7
Not at all important	10.4	21.3	3.4	5.4

Overall Chi-Square findings for the different variables are significant at the .05 level except for those indicated:

\* Findings are not significantly different between France and Spain at the .05 level.

\*\*Findings are not significantly different between Italy and Ireland at the .05 level.