

Mind the Gap: measuring religiosity in Ireland

At Census 2002, just over 88% of people in the Republic of Ireland declared themselves to be Catholic when asked their religion. This was a slight decrease from the 1991 (the last time this question was asked) figure of almost 92%. Results from Census 2006 point to an increase in the numbers of Catholics resident in Ireland but a declining share of Catholics among those who profess a religion. Surveys of religious practice in the Republic of Ireland point to lower numbers of Catholics routinely attending church services. For example, recent European Social Survey data points to a weekly (or more frequent) rate of attendance of 63% among Catholics living here. It would appear then that mass attendance is a necessary but not sufficient condition for Catholic profession in Ireland today. A multi-dimensional secularisation thesis puts forward that in Western Europe, a decline in the religious sub-system is a reflection of the increasing influences of other sub-systems within highly differentiated societies. While secularisation is not solely concerned with explaining declining levels of practice, it is a significant part of current conceptualisations.

It is argued here that a divergence in the levels of Catholic profession and reported weekly mass attendance asks questions about some of the assumptions underlying a secularisation process in Ireland. Furthermore, commentary suggesting that Ireland is undergoing a process of fundamental secularisation remains contested given the relatively high levels of practice.

The ESS

The European Social Survey (the ESS) is an academically-driven social survey administered every third year or so across a number of European countries. It examines attitudes and beliefs across a range of topics including the media, social trust, political interest and participation in socio-political orientations. Now in its third round (after 1999 and 2002), the survey covers 23 nations in all. In the Republic of Ireland, the representative sample in 2002 was made up of 2,046 people of whom 78% (or 1,600) indicate that they are Catholic. It is the results from this sub-sample that are examined in this article. The variables chosen for analysis here represent measures of individualised faith and do not measure the influence that institutions hold within Irish society as a whole and so this article only examines one aspect of a multi-dimensional process of secularisation.

Firstly, respondents are asked to indicate on an 11 point scale "Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?" where 0 is not at all religious and 10 is very religious. Among the sub-sample of Catholics in Ireland the following responses came forward:

	Percent
Not at all religious	0.8
1	1.3
2	3.2
3	4.6
4	6.2
5	21.2
6	15.5
7	18.3
8	16.1

9	6.9
Very religious	5.9
Total	100.0

Source: ESS round 2

Mean 6.24; Median 6.00

The results indicate that a large proportion feel themselves to be religious or very religious, where 84% rate themselves 5 or above on the scale. The mean of this spread of scores is 6.24 indicating that the majority of the respondents see themselves as somewhat religious. Just over one third of respondents judge their own religiousness at the 6 and 7 mark on the scale. There is a relatively high percentage of respondents who chose the midway point on the scale – 21% - or over 1 in 5 respondents. It would appear from the results that most people would think of themselves as religious but not intensely so. Respondents' sense of being very religious may be tempered by social considerations of what being 'very religious' actually is. In many attitudinal surveys social desirability – or telling the interviewer what is socially acceptable – can be a factor in overestimation. As we will see with mass attendance, respondents may give the interviewer the answer that she seeks rather than a 'true' reflection of their religiousness. Perhaps respondents identify the 'very religious' as those ordained or professed in orders?

In comparison to all of the Catholics in the entire European sample, Catholics polled in Ireland judge themselves more religious. The average for of the sample's Catholics is 6.09 with a median score of 6, the same as the Republic's score.

Attendance at religious services is routinely used to measure the definition or strength of people's religious conviction. Catholics in Ireland are unique among Europeans for their high levels of weekly observance, historically and currently, with a measure of 91% of Catholics attending weekly mass recorded in the early 1970s by NicGhiolla Phádraig and others. From the current survey, the numbers attending *only* weekly religious services now stands at 50%. As the table below shows, weekly mass attendance is still a central focus of Catholic practice in Ireland with 63.4% indicating a regular (defined here as weekly or more often) attendance at mass. 14.2% attend at least once per month while 4% of Catholics state that they never attend mass. A majority of Catholics attend mass between once per week and once per month.

	Percent
Every day	4.6
More than once a week	8.6
Once a week	50.2
At least once a month	14.0
Only on special holy days	9.6
Less often	9.1
Never	3.9
Total	100.0

Source: ESS round 2

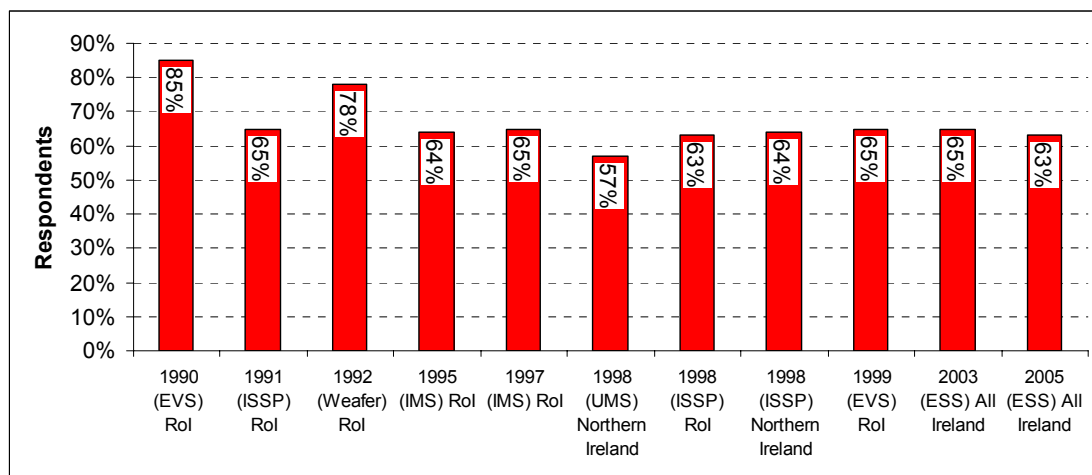
Mean 3.58; Median 3.00

Smaller fractions of Irish Catholics attend only on special holy days and on a monthly basis. Less regular mass attendance is on the increase but weekly mass attendance has been declining steadily from the high proportions recorded in the mid-1970s by NicGhiolla Phádraig and others. Unfortunately the European Social Survey does not measure additional indicators

of religious devotion such as frequency of confession or a belief in a personal God, for example.

Aligning this data with the results of other surveys for the last 15 year period, we can see a trend in attendance, especially since the 1998 ISSP survey. While this series of surveys was carried out for a number of purposes and the regularity of survey is not uniform across the 15 year period examined, some trend does emerge. Through the 1970s and 1980s, weekly mass attendance was consistently high at about 80 to 90% of the resident population (not graphed here but available in Inglis, 1998). In the 1990s, attendance declined steadily. In the last 10 years, these surveys show a trend of regular mass attendance amongst Irish Catholics at about the 65% mark.

Figure 1: Percentage in attendance at religious services 1990 - 2005. Source: ESS and Council for Research & Development.



Key: EVS – European Values Survey; ISSP – International Social Survey Project; IMS – Irish Marketing Surveys; UMS – Ulster Marketing Surveys.

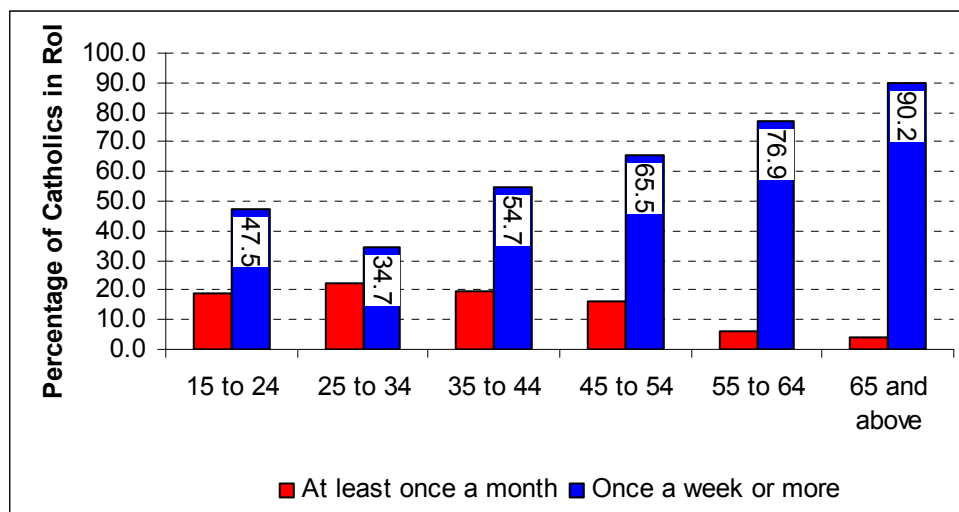
On a broader European palette, Irish church attendance figures have historically been far above those measured elsewhere. Even at 63% of Catholics, the figure is higher than most other nominally Catholic countries, e.g. Italy. 34.4% of the entire sample's Catholics attend mass once per week or more often with 13% in total never attending. 22% of Belgian Catholics are regular mass attendees, 26% of Spain's, 37% of Italy's Catholics and 33% of Portugal's. The decline in the percentage of Catholics attending mass regularly in Ireland can partially be accounted for by demographic change. It has been argued elsewhere (Fahey et al., 2005) that the decline in mass attendance in Ireland was coincidental with other socio-economic changes, many of these largely outside of its control. It would be difficult to statistically determine the level of correspondence between these two broad changes and is not the subject of this paper.

When the different age groups are disaggregated, the results from the ESS in regard to mass attendance differ considerably. The ESS data was recoded to conform to the age bands used by the Central Statistics Office's Census allowing some simple comparisons. (It should be noted that the Census data used are for the entire population, not just for Roman Catholics.) From the chart below we can see that regular mass attendance is higher for older age groups. Regular mass attendance is just under 50% of the 15 – 24 year old age group and about 35% for those in the 25 – 34 age group. It is evident that it is the older age cohorts in this sample who attend weekly mass in greater numbers: 65% of 45 to 54 year old Catholics attend weekly mass while for those aged over 65, the figure is above 90%.

	Census 2002	ESS Round 2
15 - 24	16.4	47.5
25 - 34	15.8	34.7
35 - 44	14.4	54.7
45 - 54	12.3	65.5
55 - 64	9.0	76.9
65 and above	11.1	90.2

Source: CSO, ESS round 2

Figure 2: Attendance at religious services outside of special occasions (selected) by age groups. Base: Rol Catholics. Source: ESS C14 & F

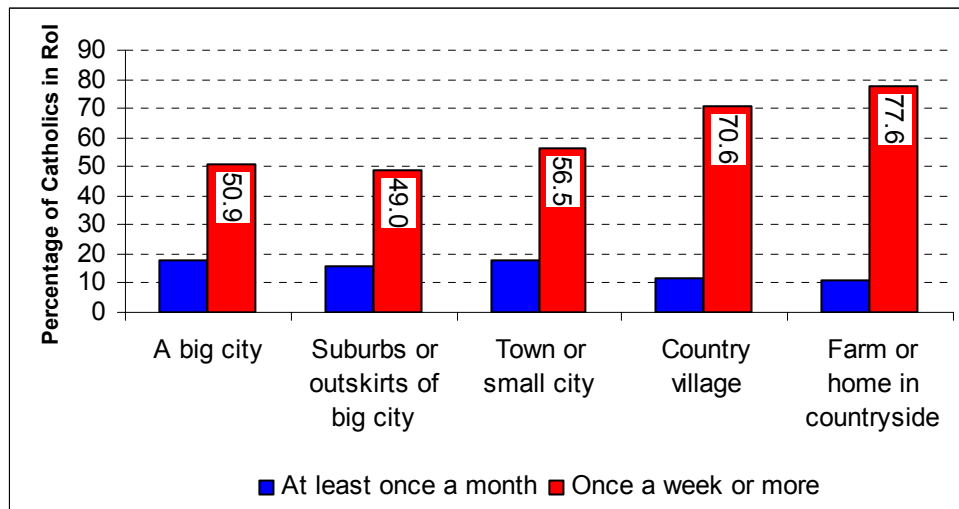


Chi-square .000

From the graph we can see that monthly mass attendance declines with the older age groups but it is among the more regular attendees that we see the sharpest difference. Just over half of 35 to 44 year old Catholics attend weekly while attendance for those aged between 25 and 34 is at 35% of that cohort.

Secularisation theories suggest that, in a secularising society, those in urban areas who are younger and those with a higher educational attainment are the first to modify and abandon traditional forms of practice. From the data in this survey and based on the geographical categories available, there is considerable difference between places and between regions within Ireland. Respondents to the ESS were given a card and asked "Which phrase on this card best describes the area where you live?" If we analyse mass attendance data within this framework of place we see that regular mass attendance is far higher in country villages (71%) and in households on farms / other homes in the countryside (78%). Less frequent mass attendance (indicated in blue) is more prevalent among Catholics who live in households in cities (20%), or the outskirts of these cities (approx. 15%) than in rural households.

Figure 3: Attendance at religious services (outside of special occasions) by location of respondent's household. Base: Rol Catholics. Source: ESS F5



Chi-square .000

Once again, monthly mass attendance is higher in more urbanised areas and much lower in country villages and farms. Although a time series of data has not been examined here, it will be interesting to note any medium term changes over successive waves of this survey. The data are available on a regional (but not a County basis) and tell a similar story. The administrative regions used by Government and others (known as NUTS3) were also available and the following data should be examined in light of the large scale of these regions. While 78% of Catholics in the Western region attend mass weekly or more often, 67% of Catholics in the adjacent Border region do so. The lowest recorded percentage in at least weekly attendance is in the Dublin and mid-east regions where (based on Census 2002 figures at least) the greatest concentration of urban and suburban settlement is to be found.

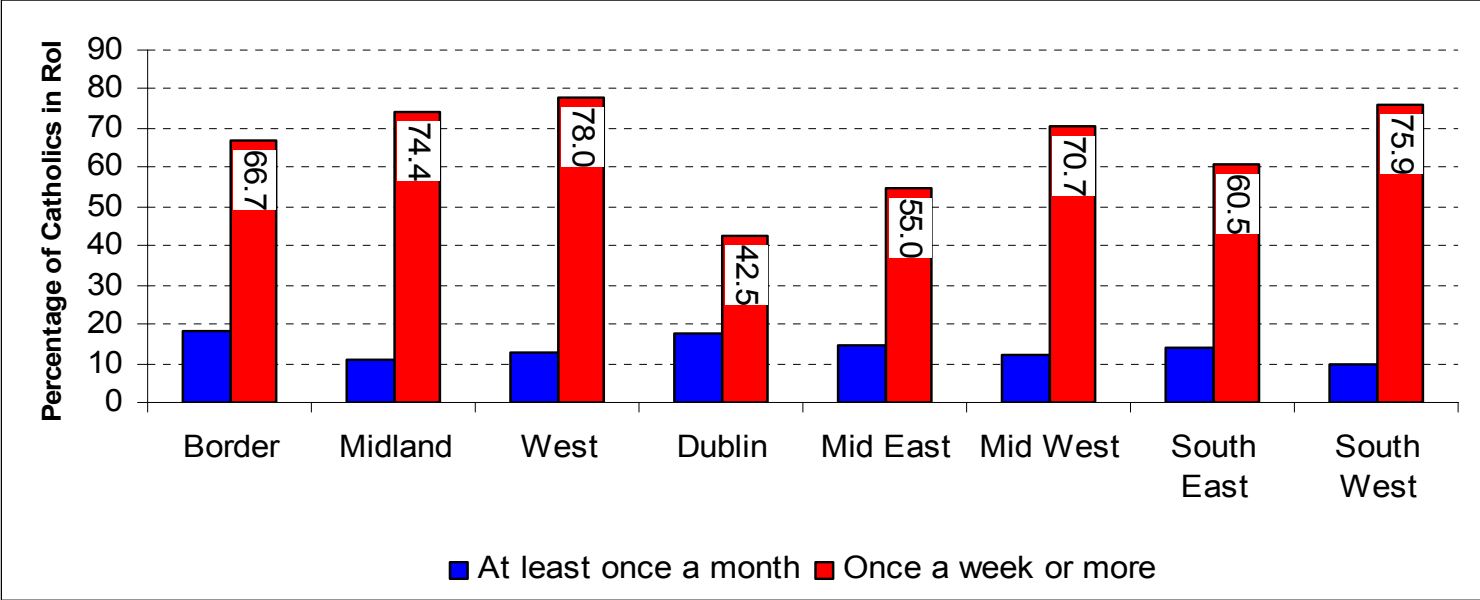
Proportionately, more Catholics in the Dublin region go to mass at least once a month (18%) than all but one other region (Border) and this may hold some significance in terms of patterns of practice yet to emerge. Mass attendance in the more urbanised areas appears to be based on lessening frequency rather than outright non-attendance. While those in more rural areas do attend mass more frequently, there are higher numbers of monthly attendees in more urban areas. Generally speaking, a majority of the Republic's regions have above average mass attendance albeit in areas where population densities are lower.

Regular mass attendance among those with higher educational attainment is also evident. The table below outlines the results of this analysis with about 77% of Catholics with a primary schooling attending mass regularly compared to only 55% of those with a primary degree.

	At least once a week
None/primary not completed	71.8
Primary or equivalent	76.5
Intermediate/junior/group cert	63.1
Leaving cert	60.2
Diploma/certificate	55.0
Primary degree	55.4
Postgraduate/higher degree	55.4

Chi-square .000

Figure 4: Attendance at religious services outside of special occasions (selected) by area of residence. Base: Rol Catholics. Source: ESS C14 & F



Chi square .000

Table 1: Frequency of service attendance (outside of special occasions) by country with more than 75% Catholic population - 2005. Base: All Catholics. Source: ESS C14

	Every day	More than once a week	Once a week	At least once a month	Only on special holy days	Less often	Never
Austria	2.8	4.0	19.5	21.3	23.9	16.9	11.5
Belgium	0.9	1.3	19.5	14.7	20.3	20.9	22.4
Czech Republic	0.8	6.6	18.2	14.2	22.2	21.6	16.4
Spain	1.6	4.2	20.3	12.0	19.4	19.2	23.3
France	0.5	1.4	13.0	12.4	28.8	17.5	26.4
Republic of Ireland	4.6 (1st)	8.6 (1st)	50.2 (2nd)	14.0 (7th)	9.6 (9th)	9.1 (8th)	3.9 (8th)
Italy	2.4	5.1	29.9	13.3	22.2	19.7	7.4
Poland	1.0	7.0	51.7	20.1	15.8	2.7	1.6
Portugal	2.1	4.7	26.6	18.3	9.3	24.3	14.8
Slovenia	0.3	3.2	31.5	16.6	34.1	8.3	5.9

It was mentioned earlier that attendance at church services has historically been higher among the Irish than other European countries that are nominally Catholic. In the table above, we can see a comparison of the Republic of Ireland with a number of other countries, each of which has a population composed of at least 75% Catholics.

Aggregating the first three columns for each of the countries listed, we can see that the Republic of Ireland has the highest rate of weekly (or more often) mass going among countries with more than 75% of Catholics in the population. While 8.6% of Catholics in the Republic attend mass more than once per week, just over 6% of Czech Catholics and 7% of Polish Catholics do so. Among those who attend mass every day, Catholics in the Republic of Ireland again stand out: 4.6% of Catholics in Ireland attend every day whereas fewer than 3% of Austrian Catholics do - the next highest percentage in the array. As frequency at service attendance trails off after once a week, Ireland's rank among those countries with a 75% Catholic population drops dramatically. For Ireland's Catholics, at least in terms of mass attendance, there appears to be an 'all or nothing' orientation. It would appear as if being Catholic in Ireland is still about regular attendance at mass.

Table 2: Percentage of Catholics attending services (outside of special occasions) once a week or more often in countries with more than 75% Catholic population 2005. Base: All Catholics. Source: ESS round 2.

	Once a week or more often
Austria	26.3
Belgium	21.7
Czech Republic	25.6
France	14.9
Italy	37.4
Poland	59.7
Portugal	33.4
Republic of Ireland	63.4
Slovenia	35.0
Spain	26.1

Among these Catholic populations, 63.4% of the Republic of Ireland's Catholics attend religious services once a week or more often which is over 4 times that of France and 3.7% greater than the country with next highest percentage, Poland.

Conclusions

This article has examined the results from the Republic of Ireland for the second round of the European Social Survey 2005. The survey measures among other matters, frequency of mass attendance, disaggregated by place and by age and how religious people feel. As was seen from the data presented above almost two thirds of Irish Catholics feel somewhat religious. One third of all Catholics rate their religiousness at the 6 and 7 mark on the scale presented to them. The highest proportion of respondents feels neither very religious nor not at all religious indicating a preference for seeing their religious feelings as being about average. It is speculated here that a subjective feeling of religiousness might be based on not wanting to be perceived as *too religious* by others although this would have to be confirmed with a more detailed study of subjective feelings of religiosity.

Respondents were asked how often they attend religious services outside of special occasions. At least weekly (or regular) mass attendance in the Republic is steadying off at 63% of Catholics although this varies considerably by place and age. Almost 5% of Catholics in Ireland attend daily mass. Above average rates of at least weekly mass attendance is seen for those aged 45 and above. For those born before 1960, weekly mass attendance retains a central importance to their faith. Very high weekly mass attendance rates can be seen among those aged 65 and above. Among the younger age groups, it is the 15 to 24 year olds who have the higher regular mass attendance – 48%.

In terms of location, we see high rates of regular mass attendance in the Midland, West and South West regions. In contrast, Dublin has one of the country's highest at least monthly attendance rates – 18%. Lower rates of regular mass attendance are found in Dublin and the mid-east indicating differing forms of practice among those in more urbanised and suburbanised settings. This is confirmed (although the strength of the relationship has to be tested) by the respondent's description of the location of their household: below average regular attendance rates are to be found in the big cities and their suburbs. Higher rates are found in villages and farm households.

Further detailed examination of the data by geography demonstrates this trend: the percentage of respondents indicating feelings of religiousness (6 and above on the scale presented) is higher in the Midland, Border and South West regions.

Finally, Ireland has a very high rate of regular mass attendance when seen in a European context. Over 63% of Catholics in the Republic of Ireland attend mass at least once per week compared with under 6 in 10 for Poland and just under 4 in 10 in Italy. It is significant that both Ireland and Poland retain high levels of frequent mass attendance given the two countries close migration linkages in recent years. Choices about migration are influenced by more than economic opportunities.