

**Current debates: new religion(s) in Ireland
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Introduction

Recent decades have seen a sea change in the study of religion in Ireland. Numerically dominated by theology until very recently – to the extent that Ireland is one of only two European countries without an association for the non-confessional study of religion – the quantitative decline in academic theology, the generational change of staff, the merging of seminaries and the increasingly lay character of their students are all pointing towards a gradual transformation into departments of religious studies, following the experience of other Northern countries.

Parallel to this, however, there has been a decline in sociological and anthropological studies of religion, and in the relative weight given to teaching the sociology of religion. Much of this has to do with the fact that the sociology of religion in Ireland has long had a clear and obvious object of study: Irish society, north and south, is on most indicators far more 'religious' than most other Northern countries, with the exceptions of the USA and Poland. Religion has been a central aspect of Irish politics and history for centuries, and remains a widely-deployed folk explanation of many features of Irish society.

However, this traditional object of study has been in retreat for some time, albeit not in such dramatic ways as would lead to startling breakthroughs in the study of secularisation; rather than the radical shifts in the public meaning of religion familiar from, say, British, French or Italian history, the Irish experience is perhaps becoming more like the Japanese, where a generalised religious sentimentality and near-universal biographical rituals mean rather than the practical salience of religion ebbs within individual lives than that whole sectors of the population become actively or consciously anti-religious.

As the sea of faith (or more exactly the institutions and practices which have been the traditional object of Irish sociology of religion) ebbs, so too the interest among researchers, teachers and students wanes – as does the scope for

saying something new about a topic whose biographical importance is far less for younger generations. After all, who wants to devote an academic career to explaining why their topic of interest matters far less than it used to?

If the theologians have been gradually giving way to the sociologists, then, the sociologists are gradually giving way to the historians as the whole problem (with some sighs of relief) can perhaps be shuffled off as part of the nightmare from which we have been struggling to awake for rather a long time: the world of sectarianism and boundary-formation along religious lines, the massive institutional power of the churches, and the occasional study of peasant folklore, Irish Judaism or radical Protestant Dissent can fade into 'rare owl times'-land, with occasional attempts to reassert the continued validity of particular kinds of intellectual capital.

While there is, of course, some truth in this perspective – religion is, thankfully, massively less important in twenty-first century Ireland than it was in the nineteenth century, a change which the middle-aged and elderly have registered in their own lifetime – there are nevertheless a series of new developments which do not fit within this increasingly sepia-tinted picture.

Firstly, widespread immigration has brought migrant religion with it, in a variety as great as that of the immigrant population itself. At the opposite end of the social scale, mind-body-spirit publishing (Puttick 2005) and alternative medicine (Ross 1992) have become increasingly visible features of the consumption of urban educated groups, though they are by no means restricted to these. In more overtly religious forms, adherence to new religious movements and conversion to world religions are flanked by looser New Age practices and alternative spiritualities. The folk religion of those who define themselves as Christian, for its part, is increasingly influenced by development such as New Age theories of angels, the appropriation of Buddhist meditation techniques, the use of self-help genres of a loosely religious kind, vague beliefs in reincarnation, astrology or magic, explorations of 'healing' and a rhetoric of ecumenism and 'perennial religion' completely at odds with the aggressive sectarianism of earlier decades. Another way of putting all of this is to say that the study of religious change in Ireland is, increasingly, the study of new religions.

This situation poses new kinds of problems. If authors such as Inglis (1998) and Taylor (1995) could analyse the seemingly all-powerful and monolithic Catholic Church to disentangle the multiple meanings, for different believers, of an apparently singular object, the problem is now rather to discover the common significance of apparently diverse objects (for example multiple processes of migrant identity formation around religion, or the attribution of similar meanings to an immense range of alternative medicine practices), and to relate these to broader social processes such as racism, the commodification of the body, women's movements, utopian imaginaries and so on.

Beyond this again, syncretism and creolisation – fuzzy-boundary religion – has become increasingly important. Reversing centuries of Irish religious

history whose dominant theme has been above all the construction of boundaries and opposing identities in the context of the wars of religion, processes of colonisation and penal law, the rise of religious nationalism and the development of sectarianism at every level of Irish society, ‘good sense’ now identifies tight religious identities with power and conflict.

As a result (and not only in Ireland), religious partisans often find themselves defending the public role of religion per se (as ‘faith’ or ‘tradition’) against secular critique. Meanwhile, less invested Christians often distance themselves, verbally and in practice, from their specific orthodoxy in ways that would have been publicly inconceivable only a few decades earlier.¹ At the broadest level, researchers such as Heelas and Woodhead (2005) argue convincingly that new religions and the New Age represent simply the most articulated form of a broader shift (at least in Northern countries) away from the institutionally and doctrinally-focussed religiosity of recent centuries and towards a looser and more inner-directed spirituality, less easily measured by organisational affiliation or assent to particular principles.

These two processes – diversification of the apparent object of study and the deconstruction of boundaries – present researchers on Irish religion with profound methodological problems as well as substantial intellectual challenges, not least given the speed with which these changes have occurred, moving many ordinary Irish people within one lifetime from unquestioned loyalty to religious leadership on matters such as contraception and education to a point where overt sectarianism is severely frowned upon, and interfaith events are something of a norm, routinely sanctified by the presence of a ‘bridge-building’ President.²

Economies of scale

In grappling with these issues, Irish researchers have at least the advantage of scale. Where in Britain, not to speak of the USA, fields such as Buddhist Studies, new religious movement (NRM) research, the study of migrant religion, new developments within established religion, New Age/alternative spirituality studies, etc. are studied under very different headings and within their own institutional contexts,³ in Ireland those working in these fields are still able to come under a single roof, and bring those different approaches into dialogue with one another.

Early in 2009, Peter Mulholland initiated a process which brought Patricia Neville, Olivia Cosgrove, Carmen Kuhling and Anthony d’Andrea from Limerick together with Ciara O’Connor, Maria Griffin and Laurence Cox from Maynooth to do precisely this, and host the first academic conference in Ireland on this topic – appropriately enough, at Samhain in Maynooth.

The organisers were initially dubious whether there were any other researchers in the field; somewhat to their surprise, the conference attracted

44 presentations and 67 participants, from 3 continents, 11 countries and 15 disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, religious studies, theology, history, Irish studies, folklore, drama and film studies, computer science and census studies. The vast majority, both of presenters and participants, were either young researchers (graduate students and recent Ph.D.s) or established researchers who have developed a recent research interest in the area in response to its increased significance.

This finding parallels the increased development of research networks in the field: thus moves are afoot to develop a broad, non-confessional network for the academic study of religion (contact Brian Bocking at UCC); an Irish Network for Studies in Buddhism is already in existence (contact Eilis Ward at NUIG), as is an Irish Network of Islamic Studies; and a network for those working on alternative spiritualities, new religious movements and the New Age is also in process of formation (contact Olivia Cosgrove at UL). If the absolute numbers of participants are in some cases small, the sheer volume of empirical understanding needed to do adequate work on any single religion makes collaboration almost imperative.

The recent date of most conference participants' research interests and their prior lack of connection ties with the relative absence of published academic research on this topic in Ireland hitherto (see Kuhling 2004 for a rare exception), but also means that – as should be more frequently the case – the conference represented a genuine learning experience for all involved. Prior to the conference, in fact, we simply did not know what the field looked like, because there was no overview that went beyond the anecdotal or the enumeration of the official accounts of relatively mainstream religious institutions.

A surprising number of conference participants came from abroad, highlighting the intensely global nature of Irish religion: as the institutional or imagined homeland not only for Irish Catholic institutions throughout the English-speaking world but also for 'Celtic religion' of many different varieties, as the new location for many migrant religions, in conversion to world religions and in the globalisation of the Irish religious market in trends as diverse as Christian evangelicalism and New Age healing.

Fields of research

One implication of the Irish 'economies of scale' is that often a researcher studying a new religious phenomenon in Ireland will be the only, or one of a handful of researchers, studying it, and frequently the only person other than participants to write about it. While (for example) there are extensive literatures on Islam in France, on neo-paganism in the US or on feminist religion globally, so that an author can focus on a tightly-defined research question, an Irish author on any of these topics is likely to have to establish the history, size, geographical distribution, dominant trends and so on themselves, while drawing material

from what is often only a handful of public events, key informants or online information to focus on their own specific research question. Thus although the vast bulk of researchers go well beyond the initial collection of basic empirical data to focus on issues defined within a particular international literature, there is a strong tendency to interdisciplinarity.

What, then, can be gleaned from these interdisciplinary conversations about the changing faces of religion in Ireland? In what follows I have tried to combine a brief summary of major findings presented at the conference with other 'state of the art' work on new religion in Ireland (to do so for the many global disciplines involved would require a major survey article).

The long history of new religions in Ireland

Literary studies has stressed the past history of Irish religious explorations beyond the established churches, most famously of course in relation to the figure of W.B. Yeats (e.g. Harper 1974) – recoverer of Celtic myth and peasant folklore, theosophist, occultist, spiritualist, patron of astrologers, associate of Hindu gurus and Zen enthusiast. Yeats, and the Irish Theosophists more generally, were simply the best-known representatives of a much broader phenomenon.

As Joseph Lennon's now-classic *Irish Orientalism* (2004) highlights, the drawing of parallels, including religious ones, between Ireland and 'the Orient', has been a feature of Irish culture for centuries, a point underscored by Selina Guinness's work on the politics of Theosophy (2003, 2004) and various contributors to Foley and O'Connor's (2006) *Ireland and India*.

John L. Murphy's work on the invention of 'Celtic Buddhism' drew out the way in which antiquarians, artists and (occasionally) Buddhists have constructed relationships between these terms over the past two centuries, while Audrey Whitty's study of the Albert Bender collection of Tibetan thangkas and other Asian art, donated to the National Museum in the 1930s, shows the role of museums and collectors in this process – a point also evident in Philip McEvansoneya's (2009) research on Sir William Gregory, the Irish governor of Ceylon who founded its National Museum.

My own paper with Maria Griffin on the early history of Irish Buddhism shows that this relationship went deeper than a purely aesthetic or literary one: as with Britain or America, there have been Irish Buddhists, at home and abroad, since the 1870s. As the history of the working-class freethinker and international Buddhist organiser Lawrence O'Rourke / U Dhammaloka shows, they were not all Anglo-Irish or of elite backgrounds (Cox 2009). Courtney Roberts' findings on the history of astrology as a spiritual pursuit in Ireland, which highlights a small but serious interest dating back to the 1920s, underscore the length of this alternative religious history, and suggest that further research will probably uncover other such histories, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Swedenborgianism, spiritualism, theosophy, esoteric Christianity and occultism are of course already attested for the pre-independence period, along with at least a literary paganism. While (as with virtually every unorthodox activity in Ireland) there was a sharp downturn between the 1930s and the 1960s, Peter Mulholland's research, which uses media reports to give an overview of new religious movements in Ireland from the 1960s, shows what can be done by going beyond the study of individual movements, arguing that an account which focuses on crisis within society and established churches is too simple, and over-emphasises both the homogeneity of the past and the ruptures in the present.

Changes in mainstream religion

As Stanley Brunn's paper on global changes in religious behaviour, highlights, the fixity of mainstream religious behaviour is problematic in an age of rapid global flows. If it is not quite the case that 'all that is solid melts into air' (Berman 1982), then certainly the policing of boundaries and the preservation of purity is particularly problematic in the present age.

One important development, highlighted both by Dominic McCambridge and Joantine Berghuijs, is the increasing numbers of those who describe themselves as spiritual but 'not religious' or 'disaffiliated'. McCambridge explores some of the complexities of disentangling spirituality as internal psychological phenomenon and religion as institutional affiliation, while Berghuijs discusses the impact of these self-descriptions on social engagement. It is clear both that this category is increasingly relevant in many if not most Northern societies, and that it marks an important shift in the interaction between religion and society.

Within established churches and their explicit adherents, too, change is evident, as Tom Inglis's keynote speech highlighted. Noting the relatively unadventurous nature of the Republic in this respect, he distinguished between orthodox adherents, ethnic identification, religious creativity (importing elements from other religious contexts) and individualism (nominal adherence).

Other researchers discussed particular encounters: thus Bozena Gierak explored the (by now largely positive) reception of 'Celtic spirituality' within both Protestant and Catholic churches, and the overlap with 'New Age' and pagan forms of Celticism. By contrast, Áinead Ní Mhuirthile noted that the Catholic Church remains largely critical in its response to Reiki healing practices. Lyn Thomas' fascinating research on the BBC TV programme *The Monastery* explores the negotiation between reality TV and cloistered monasticism, arguing that it shows a traditional Catholic institution responding to the 'subjective turn' in religion and selectively appropriating elements of the holistic milieu on its own terms. Finally, Brian Bocking's provocative paper argued for considering the Catholic Church as an example of a new religious movement.

A different kind of boundary issue appears in relation to evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, which often cut across distinctions between pre-existing Christian denominations as well as those between migrant religion and changes in established religious organisations. The papers by Kevin Hargaden and Ruth Jackson on evangelical churches, which have been particularly successful in numerical terms in recent years, both attempt to account for this by finding elective affinities between their practices and particular aspects of cultural change. From a more overtly theological perspective, Daniel Caldwell argued that the recent success of Pentecostalism represents a revival of elements already present in the writings of St Patrick.

Migrant and world religions in Ireland

Discussion of new Christian churches cannot avoid an exploration of migrant religion, which is by some margin the most visible form of religious change over the past ten years. Volume 13 of the 2006 Census (Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2007) highlights some of the changes in this regard. Malcolm Macourt's paper stressed some of the technical complexities involved in using this material to study new religions and the 'new Irish', while Gladys Ganiel's research sets out to explore the relationship between immigration and religious diversity.

Oliver Scharbrodt presented some initial results from a major research project on Islam in Ireland, exploring the complexities of Islamic organisations against the background of an extremely diverse Muslim population, while Richard Lacey's paper on the organisation of a neo-Sufi movement in Ireland drew on social movement theory to account for some of these organisational developments.

African Pentecostal churches in Ireland are one of the few forms of migrant religion to have benefited from a book-length study (Ugba 2009). Patrick Claffey's 'Fire and miracles from heaven' performs important work setting them in the context of West African independent Christianity and explores some of the different organisational and theological strands. As with Scharbrodt on Islam and Cox/Griffin on Buddhism, it is clear that this kind of institutional, statistical and doctrinal mapping is a necessary starting point in understanding the nature of the object of study.

The ethnographic study of immigrant religion in Ireland is clearly an area which can be expected to develop in the near future from this point. There are obviously linguistic and generational barriers to this work, but also a particular interest in the situation of a non-imperial immigration destination whose communities are correspondingly diverse and – crucially – small, so that (along with language survival, marriage issues and so on) the role of religious institutions as community definition mechanisms is particularly interesting.

Richard O'Leary and Lan Li's (2008) report on the religious behaviour of Chinese students in Ireland, the comments in Mark Maguire's (2004)

ethnography of the Irish-Vietnamese community on their religious practices, and Kerry Gallagher's research on Polish Catholics all represent starting moves in this direction, which promises to reshape often unspoken preconceptions about what 'religion' means in the Irish context.

The politics of religion

In a country where religion has often been written on women's and men's bodies in very destructive ways, it is unsurprising that one of the major areas of religious change is around feminist religion, and the rather different issue of the feminine in religion (which is by no means automatically incompatible with patriarchy).

Ciara O'Connor's paper started from the observation that women are the main consumers of 'New Age' religion and medicine, and asked from a feminist angle how far, and under what conditions, these can be said to be empowering rather than co-opting, exploring the different kinds of relationships involved.

Laura Sherman's talk, exploring the narrative of one feminist pagan, argues that patriarchy is a significant factor in women's move away from established churches. By contrast, Nadja Furlan's research on the relationship between radical feminist spirituality and Christianity argues for the possibility of a feminist re-reading of Christianity. Finally, Catherine Maignant's work on the Fellowship of Isis reminds us that one of the most successful NRMs based around a pagan reconceptualisation of feminine divinity is the Fellowship of Isis, a globally-organised religion founded and headquartered in Co. Carlow.

This last example highlights the role of Ireland as the global homeland, real or imagined, both of 'Irish Catholics' as an ethnic group in other countries, and of 'Celtic' and other pagan groups abroad, as noted by Gierek. Carole Cusack's discussion of Australia, the historical role of Irish religion in Australia and the rise of paganism, neatly brings together these multiple themes.

At the other end of these global relationships, Jenny Butler's research offers an ethnographic account of how pagans in Ireland engage with place in the (re-) construction of local myth, an issue also developed in Ronan Foley's presentation on the development of 'therapeutic landscapes' in Ireland.

Finally, and continuing the theme of boundary-crossing, Attracta Brownlee explored the ways in which Travellers draw both on 'healing priests' and on New Age healers, in their own religious terms which are often not recognised by either institution: religious agency, and the creative re-use of religion, are not the sole preserve of the privileged.

Psychological approaches

Psychology naturally remains an area of substantial interest. Jurek Kirakowski's paper on 'BVM' (Blessed Virgin Mary) apparitions, including the Ballinspittle

‘moving statues’, discussed how we come to attribute qualities of the miraculous to some experiences and not to others. In a related vein, Diarmuid Verrier and Brian Hughes noted the relationship between schizotypy and unusual perceptual experiences, and argued that New Age movements can offer a validation for the latter.

Alice Herron, discussing the psychological relationships in guru-centred religious movements, similarly argues that there may be specific relationships between the choice of new religions and particular individual needs. In more universalist tone, Brigitte Veiz’s presentation on the use of circles in ritual among the Rainbow Family movement and Geraldine Moane’s paper on the psychology of shamanism make the case for movements responding to or drawing on universally present capacities.

Understanding new religious movements

Psychological accounts, of course, raise the question of whether we should look for explanations at this level (of personality, or universal capacity) of adherence to *specific* religions or NRMs: one topic among many covered in Eileen Barker’s entertaining keynote speech, which noted their immense variety, the complex politics of researching what are often controversial movements, and the work of her London-based Information Network Focus on Religious Movements.

An important aspect in NRMs for new members is the construction and affirmation of shared meanings connected to the individual routes which have brought participants together, a topic familiar to historians of conversion in Ireland (Hynes 2005). Thus Ruth Bradby’s paper on ‘A course in miracles’ explored the negotiation between individual experience and ‘channelled’ authority in participants’ accounts. Seán O’Halloran’s work on ‘sharing’ discourses in Alcoholics Anonymous – a body not often seen as an NRM because of its familiarity – similarly notes the importance of life narratives in this context.

One of the most interesting features of NRM formation in recent years, noted in Markus Davidsen’s presentation, has been the growth of fiction-based religions, particularly with the development of morally serious fantasy and science fiction since the 1960s, and the concomitant reflexivity (not to say sense of humour) involved. Frances Clynes’ ‘Cyberspace and the world beyond the stars’ drew both on fiction and on technical developments to discuss the ways in which cyberspace itself has become the focus of particular kinds of religious sentiment and possibility, while Seán O’Callaghan’s paper discussed Irish participation in ‘dark occultural’ cyberspace.

The most dramatic kinds of religious change, perhaps, have been those which see Ireland brought into a globalised religious marketplace, a theme already highlighted in Carmen Kuhling’s (2004) *The New Age ethic and the spirit of Postmodernity*, and brought out further in her keynote address which stressed the way in which consumerism has acquired increasingly religious qualities in

contemporary Ireland. Anne Mulhall's 'The Feng Shui of Lough Derg' explored the way in which this globalisation interacts with 'heritage' and marketing. Finally, Olivia Cosgrove's work on the relationship between attitudes to globalisation and involvement in new religious movements noted that religion is a crucial site of difference in relation to these attitudinal factors, and one which cannot be neatly predicted in advance.

Scope for further research

The conference by no means covered all the possible ground for research in this area. Beyond the topics enumerated above, some other fields remain visibly in need of research.

There is clearly an urgent social need for a better sociological understanding of the relationship between institutional and clerical abuse and religion in the Irish past, not simply in the legal sense but in terms of institutional economies, popular collusion and resistance, class and gender aspects of abuse, the question of Irish exceptionalism or otherwise, and historical-comparative analyses of Irish authoritarianism in the mid-twentieth century in relation to continental fascism. No sociologist can seriously argue that such a widespread and institutionalised phenomenon is irrelevant to understanding Irish society and religion as we have known them.

Along with this topic go the religious implications of contemporary scandal; the role of survivor movements; the politics of memory, resistance and collaboration in relation to past authoritarianisms; the complex role of women's movements between the destabilisation of church authority and the reaffirmation of ethno-religious identity (Coulter 1993); the rise of consciously anti-religious movements such as rationalism; popular critiques of religion; the growth of 'spirituality not religion', and the longer history of Irish anti-clericalism.

Finally, to end on a less grim note, the legacy of cultural nationalism has undoubtedly left many Irish people with a strong emotional investment not only in the Christian past as 'heritage' but – more interestingly – in folklore, Celtic religion real and imagined, and beyond these again the largely unknowable religions of the Irish Bronze Age and Neolithic. This kind of popular religion – far more widespread than any institutional affiliation to pagan or shamanistic groups or practices, and often manifested through a popular interest in history and archaeology, myths and legends, visits to particular sites, consumption of poetry, drama, literature and music and so on – is not of course unique to Ireland (it is a common result of nineteenth-century cultural nationalism in particular, and has been widely commented on in relation to British children's literature: see e.g. Hutton 1999) but is perhaps particularly strongly present here, and indeed likely to be best-represented among those same educated groups from which academics and other intellectuals are drawn. The conference ended, appropriately, with

a trip to the Hill of Tara and the megalithic cemetery at Loughcrew, both sites of this kind of behaviour and emotional performance.

A volume of conference proceedings has been accepted for publication. It is to be hoped that the overviews gained by conferences such as this one, and the development of research networks, will enable future research to start from a broader basis and contribute a better-grounded sense of the changing role of religion in Irish society.

Notes

- 1 This rethinking process can be overestimated, however: I have found some academics startled by what should be the banal observation that Buddhism is now Ireland's third religion (after Christianity and Islam), because to them Catholicism and Protestantism remain different *religions*, in the traditional Irish sense of different ethnic identities.
- 2 One minor indicator of this rate of change is the fact that the sole hiccup in holding a conference on new religions in Maynooth came from a handful of 'anti-cult' activists holding forth at inappropriate moments on their theories of brainwashing. In an institution which as recently as 1997 was still blocking recognition of the gay, lesbian and bisexual society, the absence of any more serious objection is a telling sign of change. The level of personal abuse involved, and the intrusiveness of their tactics, in some ways underline the increasing marginalisation and 'fringe science' character of an intolerance which was once characteristic of the mainstream.
- 3 Highlighting the extent of this fragmentation, a new *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, associated with an International Society for the Study of New Religions, is in the process of formation to attempt to bring some of these disparate strands together, following several decades of increased specialisation.
- 4 Overviews of this nature have been published by bodies ranging from the religious publisher Columba (Skuce 2006) to the Health Services Executive (HSE 2009).

References

Papers to the 2009 Maynooth conference are simply referenced with the author's name. Thirty-four of these papers – those submitted in advance of the conference – are available on CD-ROM for €5 from Olivia Cosgrove, Department of Sociology, University of Limerick. For other papers and poster presentations, the conference websites at <http://nrmireland.net/> and <http://nrmireland.blogspot.com/> have details of the authors' affiliations.

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