



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

## Religious practice in a post-Catholic Ireland: Towards a concept of 'extra-institutional religion'

Ganiel, G. (2019). Religious practice in a post-Catholic Ireland: Towards a concept of 'extra-institutional religion'. *Social Compass: International Review of Sociology of Religion*, 66(4), 471-487.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768619868418>

### Published in:

Social Compass: International Review of Sociology of Religion

### Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

### Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

### Publisher rights

© 2019 The Authors.

This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

### General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

### Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [openaccess@qub.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@qub.ac.uk).

### Open Access

This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: <http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback>

# **Religious practice in a post-Catholic Ireland: Towards a concept of ‘extra-institutional religion’**

Gladys Ganiel

Queen’s University, Belfast, UK

19 University Square

Belfast, BT7 1NN

G.Ganiel@qub.ac.uk

**Funding:** Irish Research Council.

**Acknowledgements:** John Brewer provided helpful feedback on this article.

**Biographical note:** Gladys Ganiel’s research interests are religion and peacebuilding, evangelicalism, the emerging church and religion on the island of Ireland. Current projects include research on how Presbyterians responded to the Troubles and a biography of Fr Gerry Reynolds, a peacemaking priest from Belfast’s Clonard Monastery.

## **Abstract**

This article develops the concept of ‘extra-institutional religion’ to describe how some religiously committed individuals practise religion in a ‘post-Catholic’ Ireland. Rooted in an island-wide study, it describes extra-institutional religion as the practice of religion *outside or in addition to* the Catholic Church, Ireland’s historically dominant religious institution. As a new concept, extra-institutional religion provides an alternative to the theoretical emphasis on religious individualisation advocated by sociologists of religion and general theorists like Ulrich Beck. It builds on the concepts of British sociologists of religion Grace Davie (‘believing without belonging’ and ‘vicarious religion’) and Abby Day (‘believing in belonging’ and ‘performative religion’). It argues that extra-institutional religion may have application outside Ireland in the mixed religious markets of Europe. Extra-institutional religion also may contribute to wider change by balancing its two structural strengths: its position on the margins, and its continued links with institutional religion.

## **Keywords**

Extra-institutional religion, secularisation, individualisation, religious markets, Ireland

## **Introduction**

The dominance of secularisation theory within the sociology of religion has given way to approaches which recognise secularising patterns alongside plural religious markets and religious individualisation (Pollack, 2008). While Pollack (2008: 169) has argued that secularisation theories do not claim that secularisation is ‘inevitable,’ ‘irreversible,’ or ‘desirable’, they do assert that it is ‘probable’, especially in Europe. This raises a question: will religion retain any social significance in Europe?

A dramatic change in how many sociologists thought about secularisation, especially those outside the subfield of the sociology of religion, was reflected in the publication of the late Ulrich Beck's (2010) *A God of One's Own*. Now, one of the world's leading theorists of reflexive modernity was arguing for a central *social* role for religion, even in Europe. Beck highlighted religion's potential to produce ethical, reflexive individuals who could contribute to a peaceful cosmopolitan world.

As a prominent general theorist who late in his career advocated the social importance of religion, Beck's 'conversion' seems to confirm that the sociology of religion is more than the sociology of secularisation. Brewer (2018) argues that scholars from outside the subfield like Beck, Jurgen Habermas and Craig Calhoun have fuelled the turn to reflexive religious individualisation among sociologists of religion. Reflexive religious individualisation is characterised by a turn to choice and experience, alongside a cosmopolitanisation of belief which Beck believed equipped religion for an age of pluralism and global risk. On the other hand, Beck has been critiqued for simplistic depictions of religion (Speck, 2012). While Beck contrasted the reflexively religious individual with fundamentalists, he did not adequately acknowledge the problem of fundamentalism nor offer extensive analysis of the causes of religious violence. Yet it could be argued that *A God of One's Own* has fed into a burgeoning literature in which reflexive religious individualisation is replacing secularisation as the most important paradigm for explaining contemporary religious change (Marti, 2015; Marti and Ganiel, 2014). Religious individualisation is not limited to the form analysed in Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's (2004) *The Spiritual Revolution*, which focused on alternative or new age spiritualities. Reflexive religious individualisation also includes those who still identify in some ways with Christian identities.

In addition, studies of 'lived religion' or 'every day religion' have downplayed the importance of religious institutions (Ammerman, 2013; McGuire, 2008). Even the subfield of

Christian congregational studies has de-emphasised the importance of denominations, except perhaps in relation to the demarcation between Catholics and Protestants (Guest, Tusting and Woodhead, 2004; for an exception see Richter, 2004). The emphasis on individualisation has highlighted that conventional approaches in the sociology of religion, like measuring declines in church attendance and belief in ideas such as God, heaven and hell, do not adequately explain individuals' practices and beliefs – nor their social impacts.

In the study of religion on the island of Ireland on which this article is based, individualisation alone could not explain how people were practising their religion.<sup>1</sup> So I developed the concept of 'extra-institutional religion' to describe how some individuals who are relatively committed to religion practice it in a 'post-Catholic' Ireland. My earlier book introduced this concept (Ganiel, 2016a). This article grounds it more deeply in relevant debates, clarifying and refining its utility and theoretical potential. As explained below, extra-institutional religion is a provisional concept, based on empirical data from a limited study in Ireland. I define extra-institutional religion as the practice of religion *outside or in addition to* the Catholic Church, Ireland's historically dominant religious institution. The remainder of this paragraph elaborates on this initial short definition. People who practiced extra-institutional religion were reflexively individualistic in their beliefs and practices. But their individualisation was moderated by the *dominance of the institution* in how they thought about and practiced their religion. Even those who defined themselves *against* the Catholic Church maintained some links *with* it. These were individuals whose religious practice was important in their lives. They either found or created extra-institutional spaces in order to pursue personal and collective transformation through religion. So extra-institutional religion is not simply all religious practice in Ireland outside the Catholic Church; it is committed religious practice that defines itself and its practice over and against the Catholic Church. It may (though not always) include continued engagement with the Church, such as attending

mass. It is this preoccupation with the historically dominant religious institution that sets extra-institutional religion apart from other concepts, like lived religion. Such people are a minority among Europeans – and even among the Irish. But their practice provides insight into one way religion functions even in secularising societies. This article is an invitation for further research to test and refine the concept, in Ireland and elsewhere.

This article proceeds in four stages. First, it builds on the concepts of British sociologists of religion Grace Davie (‘believing without belonging’ and ‘vicarious religion’) and Abby Day (‘believing in belonging’ and ‘performative religion’), arguing that many European societies are characterised by ‘mixed’ religious markets where what were previously monopoly religions (historic state churches) shape and influence religious choice. Accordingly, religious institutions may remain more important than has been supposed, even in Europe. Second, it overviews of the role of religion in Ireland, arguing that the island is now a mixed, post-Catholic religious market. Third, it outlines my methods and explains how I developed the concept of extra-institutional religion. Finally, it argues that although it is a provisional concept, theoretically, extra-institutional religion may be applied to other European contexts. Extra-institutional religion also may contribute to wider change by balancing its two structural strengths: its position on the margins, and its continued links with institutional religion.

### **Mixed religious markets**

A long-standing debate in the sociology of religion has been between advocates of secularisation and advocates of Rational Choice Theories (RCT), sometimes called market theories. RCT developed to counter the once-dominant secularisation theories, in particular to explain why the United States was not following what was assumed to be the normative European pattern of secularisation (Blasi, 2009). Rational choice theorists conceive of the religious field as a market, assuming people are rational actors who choose their religion.<sup>2</sup> It

follows that religious activity increases where there is a large *supply* of religion—more options to choose from—and decreases where there is little choice. Rational choice theorists argue that the monopolistic religions of Europe stifle religious vitality (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994; Finke and Stark, 2003). For them, the churches of Europe—well-endowed by the state and too lazy to compete for adherents—withered away. In the United States, with its early separation of church and state, religious groups compete in a crowded market, and are ambitious for souls.

But there is an alternative perspective on Europe and the decline of its religious monopolies: European societies also have religious markets; they are just different from the free-wheeling religious market of the United States (Martikainen and Gauthier, 2016; Gauthier and Martikainen, 2016). In other words, if people can be conceived as religious consumers, in Europe they are presented with a very different suite of consumer choices than in the United States. Europeans' choices are shaped and even dominated by historic state churches. Europeans' indifference to conventional religious belief and practice is therefore balanced by continued (albeit limited and ambiguous) relationships with historic state churches. So European societies can be conceived as having 'mixed' religious markets, where historic state churches retain residual social influence and political privilege. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the varied extent to which historic state churches retain influence and privilege across Europe. But what is common in many European nations is that a particular church was linked with the state and/or informed national identity. Historically religiously plural countries like Germany or the Netherlands divided their state support for churches between Catholic and Protestant denominations. France attempted to create a purely secular state, but even there the historical importance of Catholicism is evident (Hervieu-Léger, 2000). Similarly, in arguing for the continued importance of religion in the West, Jean-Francois Laniel (2016: 380) used the term 'cultural religion' to signal the importance of

‘a relationship with *a single* Church, with distinct role and societal functions’, within particular countries. Rather than reducing religious individualisation to those who partake in alternative spiritualities and in the process neglecting how people relate to historic Christian churches, mixed religious markets and cultural religions provide alternative insights into how individuals practice religion.

Two scholars working in the British context – Grace Davie and Abby Day – have made significant contributions to understanding how religion functions in Europe’s mixed religious markets: Davie through her concepts of ‘believing without belonging’ (1994) and ‘vicarious religion’ (2000); and Day (2011, 2010) through her emphasis on ‘believing *in* belonging’ (emphasis mine), and the key role of institutions in ‘performing’ religion on behalf of a nominal public.

Davie’s best-known concept is believing without belonging, which she described as individuals maintaining belief in God and other Christian ideas, but with little or no participation in church activities. While this concept arose out of research in Britain, Davie was influenced by her research in Nordic countries, where people seemed content to *belong* to their state religion, but did not report conventional religious *beliefs* (Davie, 2007: 141). Davie (2007: 127) prefers her later concept of ‘vicarious religion’: ‘the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, *who implicitly at least not only understand, but quite clearly approve of what the minority is doing*’. In *Religion in Modern Europe* (2000), Davie characterises religion as a form of collective memory, secured by the institutional churches, educational systems and media. While rational choice theorists see vicarious religion as a problem for a competitive religious market by encouraging free riders who stifle the vitality of religious firms, for Davie it helps explain religion’s persistence. Vicarious religion resonates with Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s (2000) idea of religion as a chain of memory which links people in the present to the religious traditions



of the past and future. Like Davie, Hervieu-Léger emphasises the *persistence* of religion through memory, conceived as a reservoir that can be drawn on at key times.

Day's (2011) use of the term believing *in* belonging is an obvious play on Davie's well-known phrase. Day challenges what she sees as an inherent individualism in Davie's early approach. She argues that the sociology of religion has been captivated by individualisation, observing that luminaries of the discipline, like Weber, Berger and Luckmann, thought of 'making meaning' as 'a universal, and *individually driven*, human need' (Day, 2011: 8, emphasis mine). To correct this imbalance, Day (2010, 2011) draws on theories from the anthropology of religion, which stress that belief is linked with action, like ritual and performance. Day's argument is grounded in empirical research, which revealed that rather than constructing gods of their own, people are finding meaning through relationships. These relationships are mostly with each other: others like themselves or even their deceased relatives and friends. Only some spoke of relationship with god. This 'counters a prevailing fiction in social science that late modernity is characterized by individualism' (Day 2011: 204). Day also found that nominal Christians in Britain continue to 'align themselves to institutional Christianity and what, for them, it represents' (Day, 2011: 181). This alignment is linked with ethnic and class identities, or used to 'strengthen the perception of the UK as a Christian country,' in opposition to religious and ethnic 'others' (Day 2011: 189) – a finding confirmed by Ingrid Storm (2011). Day argues that the continued salience of institutional religion suggests a 'turn to the social' where 'the social significance of institutional concepts of religion' are increasing (Day, 2011: 189). Day then links the social significance of institutional religion to the concept of 'performative belief.' Performative belief explains how beliefs carried and conveyed by the institutional church play a 'role in bringing into being forms of identity that actors strategically create in order to adapt to and

integrate themselves into various social situations’ (Day, 2010: 10). This idea resonates with Davie’s vicarious religion.

Davie updated her work in a 2015 second edition of *Religion in Modern Britain*, which comes with substantial revisions and a new title: *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*. The paradox is ‘the decline in active membership in most, if not all, churches in this country, alongside the growing significance of religion in public—and therefore political—life’ (Davie, 2015: 205). She identifies six ‘factors to take into account’ when analysing religion in Britain, arguing that they apply to almost all European societies (Davie, 2015: 3-4). For this article her first two factors are most important: the role of the historic churches in shaping British culture; and an awareness that these churches still have a place at particular moments in the lives of British people, though they are no longer able to influence—let alone discipline—the beliefs and behaviour of the majority.

There is lively debate about Davie’s and Day’s concepts (Bruce and Voas, 2010; Cotter, Davie, Beckford, Chattoo, Lovheim, Vasquez, and Day, 2016; Laniel, 2016; Pollack, 2008; Voas and Crockett, 2005; Voas, 2009). It is beyond the scope of this article to fully review these debates. But it should be noted that some sociologists of religion remain convinced that the terminal decline of religion remains Europe’s dominant story (Bruce, 2001). For them, religious individualisation supports secularisation by privatising religion and negating its social and political importance. Others argue that secularisation is not so straightforward (Berger, 2014; Martin, 2005; Woodhead, 2016; Winkel and Ganiel, 2017). They recognise that though religion has declined in important ways, it remains significant. They observe that religious individualisation places less importance on institutions. But they see this as a potential sign of religious vitality. They see evidence that even when people neglect or abandon religious institutions, they draw on the resources of those institutions at certain points in their lives. Concepts like vicarious religion and performative religion depend

on such observations. Still, it is difficult to verify Davie's and Day's concepts. Extrapolating evidence from large-scale surveys where people can simply indicate that they believe in a god, etc., is not without its problems. For example, we do not know what sort of god the respondent has in mind when they assent to such a statement. Even when Davie and Day used in-depth interviews to build their concepts, which allowed them to dig deeper and explore how people used religion to find meaning, there is still the problem of scaling-up this evidence to wider populations. But Davie and Day weigh and combine evidence from surveys and in-depth interviews when they make their cases. So their concepts are informed by the careful use of multiple forms of data and triangulation with studies of other European countries. Overall, their concepts help us understand how European societies are characterised by mixed religious markets where what were previously monopoly religions (historic state churches) shape and influence individuals' market choices – even individuals whose religious practice is nominal. They help us see that religious institutions remain more important than has been supposed, even in Europe.

### **Ireland: a mixed, post-Catholic religious market**

For centuries, Catholicism exerted a monopoly on the religious field in Ireland, functioning as a form of religious nationalism, defining the Irish against the Protestant British colonisers. The Scots and English who migrated during the Plantations of the 1600s were Protestants. The indigenous population were Catholic and resisted conversion. The island was partitioned in 1921 after a war for independence, with 26 southern counties becoming the Irish Free State (now the Republic of Ireland), and retaining a Catholic majority of about 90 percent. Six northern counties – with a Protestant majority and a sizeable Catholic minority – remained in the UK. Alone among the island's social and political institutions, the churches remained organised on an all-island basis. In the Free State, there was no established religion, but the 1937 Constitution recognised the 'special position' of the Catholic Church and the State

granted it extraordinary power in education and health. The Catholic Church functioned as a monopoly in the Republic, similar to the historic state churches of Europe. In Northern Ireland there was not an established religion either. Northern Ireland produced two competing ‘civil religions’ that established monopolies within the oppositional ethno-national communities: a Catholic civil religion and a pan-Protestant civil religion, which was influenced by evangelicalism (Jones and Ganiel, 2012). Religious ideas and practices informed the oppositional ethno-national identities that characterised the most recent period of violence, the ‘Troubles’, circa 1969-1998 (Mitchell, 2006).

Some argued that the importance of religion in maintaining ethno-political divisions contributed to the island’s high levels of religiosity (Nic Ghiolla Phadraig, 2009). As the Troubles wound down, and the Republic developed better diplomatic relations with the UK, religiosity declined –north and south. Other factors were at play, including the effects of modernisation and the impact of clerical sexual abuse scandals (Donnelly and Inglis, 2010; Keenan, 2014). The UK’s 2016 referendum to leave the European Union (Brexit) destabilised the improving relationships between the Republic, Northern Ireland and the UK, raising the spectre of a ‘hard border’ on the island and a possible return to violence. Whether or to what extent Brexit may contribute to a retrenching of ethno-religious identities on the island remains unclear.

In the Republic, the percentage of those identifying as Catholic first dipped under 90 percent in the early 1990s and now stands at 78 percent, according to the 2016 Census. Mass attendance in the Republic has declined from 91 percent in 1972 to 38 percent in 2010. The decline has levelled off since then, with the figure at 36 percent in the 2016 European Values Survey (Quinn, 2017). In Northern Ireland, mass attendance has fallen from 95 percent in 1968 to 39 percent in 2012 (Hayes and Dowds 2010: 3). Identification as Catholic has held steady in the low 40 percent-range. Declines have been most profound in the 18-29 year-old

cohort. The 2006 Church and Religion in an Enlarged Europe survey revealed that in the Republic this cohort prayed and attended mass less frequently. It also found that while 94 percent of Irish Catholics over 60 agreed that religion was important in their lives, only 63 percent of those 18-29 did (Andersen 2010: 28). By 2017, just 56 percent of Irish Christians (all ages combined) said religion was important in their lives, signalling further declines among all age cohorts (Pew, 2018: 97).

The latest Census also found that more people than ever are choosing to identify as ‘no religion’ or ‘not stated.’ In 2016, this was 12 percent in the Republic, up from eight percent in 2011 and six percent in 2006.<sup>3</sup> The figures stand at 17 percent in Northern Ireland in 2011, up from 13 percent in 2008 and nine percent in 1998. A 2012 survey commissioned by the Association of Catholic Priests showed that most Catholics do not agree with church teachings on a range of matters. It found official Catholic Church teachings on sexuality have no relevance for 75 percent of Catholics, 87 percent believe priests should be allowed marry, 77 percent believe there should be women priests and 72 percent believe older married men should be allowed become priests.<sup>4</sup> This lack of agreement with Catholic Church teachings was confirmed by the 2015 referendum approving same-sex marriage, and the 2018 referendum removing the constitutional amendment that prohibited abortion in all but the most restrictive circumstances.

Tom Inglis’ 2014 study, *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland*, captures something of the momentousness of religious change. Drawing on interviews with 100 people in the Republic, he observes that many still use Catholicism to weave webs of meaning. But he argues that Catholicism is ‘fragmenting’ and identifies four types of Catholics (2014: 126-149): 1) orthodox (people who ‘both believe and belong’); 2) cultural (people who ‘neither strongly believe in the church nor feel that they belong to it,’ yet maintain some beliefs and participate in Catholic rites of passage; 3) creative (people who

mix and match their Catholic beliefs and practices with a variety of spiritual sources); and 4) disenchanted (people who oppose the Church). Inglis found that even among orthodox Catholics, religion was compartmentalised in particular times and places, limiting its personal and social impact. Other sources of meaning, such as place and family, money and success, politics, sport, and love, usually trumped Catholicism. Inglis (2014: 188) concluded: ‘One of the main findings of the study was how little not just the Catholic Church but religion in general was part of the cultural repertoires of the everyday lives of people ... There were few indications that God was in their minds and hearts and on their lips.’ At the same time, the presence of cultural Catholics indicated a continued significance for Catholicism, as a ‘cultural ingredient’ used to ‘mark major life transitions, to celebrate, and to mourn’ (Inglis 2014: 188). Similarly, in her analysis of the Irish data in the Church and Religion in an Enlarged Europe survey, Karen Andersen concluded that Catholics were retaining their Catholic identity but becoming more detached from the institutional church. She described this as ‘a new Catholic habitus ... where being Catholic entails exercising individual choice and being critical and selective’ (Andersen, 2010: 37).

But Ireland still remains more religious than most other European countries. Pew’s (2018: 95) report on Being Christian in Western Europe revealed that the Republic is Western Europe’s third most ‘religiously observant’ country, with 24 percent showing ‘high levels of religious commitment.’ Pew’s religiously observant index included ‘frequency of attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer, degree of importance of religion in the respondent’s life and belief in God.’ Only Portugal (37%) and Italy (27%) scored higher.

In this article, I use post-Catholic as an empirical description of such trends, not an epochal one. I am not arguing that Ireland was once Catholic, and now it is not. Rather, a particular form of Irish Catholicism has been displaced. This was a Catholicism that had a monopoly on the religious market, was a defining characteristic of national identity, had a

strong relationship with state power (in the Republic), elevated the status of priests to exceptionally high levels, and emphasised the evils of sexual sin (Inglis, 2014, 1998; Fuller, 2004). My use of post-Catholic signals a *shift in consciousness* in which the institutional Catholic Church is no longer held in high esteem by many, including practicing Catholics. As such, I use post-Catholic in a way that resonates with how Habermas (2008) uses the term ‘post-secular’ when he writes about Europe. Habermas asserts that the post-secular is characterised by a shift in consciousness in the way Europeans think about the public role of religion. It is not that Europe was once secular and now it is not; rather, Europeans have recognised that religion is not going away, and will continue to influence society and politics. In post-Catholic Ireland, Catholicism is important but no longer monopolises the religious market. The Catholic Church is part of a mixed religious market, where there are more options available than in the past.

### **Methods and conceptual development**

I developed the concept of extra-institutional religion to describe how I observed people practicing their religion in Ireland. Originally the research was not overly concerned with Catholicism. The research asked questions about how churches were navigating increased diversity due to immigration, and/or addressing historic Catholic/Protestant oppositions through ecumenism or reconciliation projects. We conducted two surveys in 2009. The first canvassed 4,005 faith leaders, as near as we could achieve a universal sample of Christian clergy and other faith leaders; 710 responded. The second was an open, online survey for laity; 910 responded (Ganiel, 2016a). We also conducted 113 in-depth interviews as part of eight case studies of ‘expressions of faith’ between 2009–11. Some were Catholic, some Protestant, others ecumenical. They were: the Catholic Parish Pastoral Council of the Parish of Good Counsel in Ballyboden, Dublin; *Slí Eile*, a Jesuit young adult ministry; Abundant Life, a Pentecostal congregation in Limerick; St Patrick’s United, a combined Methodist and

Presbyterian congregation in Waterford; Jesus Centre Dublin, a congregation of the Redeemed Christian Church of God; Holy Cross Benedictine Monastery in Rostrevor, Co. Down (Northern Ireland); the Fermanagh Churches Forum (Northern Ireland); and a sample of individuals from religions other than Christianity.

The expressions of faith were selected for theoretical reasons: I wanted a focused sample of people with *committed* religious practice, so the groups and congregations were chosen because I thought they would put us in touch with such people. Some case studies were generated through responses to the surveys (respondents were asked if they would participate in further research); others were located through my own and associated researchers' embedded knowledge. In this way, my project can be contrasted to Inglis' study, discussed above, which did not seek out people whose religious practice was especially important to them. My analysis of the interviews with these relatively religiously-committed individuals inspired the concept of extra-institutional religion.

The most striking aspect of the interviews was that people could not stop talking about the Catholic Church. This was especially interesting because my questions focused on their personal faith or the particular local expression of religion with which they were involved. Although we did not ask specifically about the Catholic Church, people were eager to explain how they were engaging with it in ways that seemed to allow them to divorce themselves from what they called the 'institution.' For example, people who frequented the Benedictine monastery spoke about the monks there in positive terms – as if they were separate from the 'institutional' church, which they spoke of in negative terms (Ganiel, 2015). People on the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) in Ballyboden demarcated their parish and their 'good' priests from the 'institutional' church of the Irish bishops and the Vatican. Even in non-Catholic cases, people explicitly (and unprompted) contrasted their own faith to Irish Catholicism (Ganiel, 2016b). Simply put, in some people's minds, the 'institutional'



church was a dry and lifeless hierarchy. So they ignored it and found vitality instead in religious spaces (some of which were recognisably Catholic) which they perceived as outside the institution *as they defined it*. In this way, I learned about the methods and strategies people were using to keep their faith alive, *outside or in addition to the Catholic Church*, and began to conceive of these practices as extra-institutional religion.

People practised extra-institutional religion on the *margins* of Ireland's religious market; indeed, extra-institutional expressions of religion were usually small and often unnoticed. Inglis' study, for example, did not find many people in such spaces (Inglis, 2014: 149): '... it would seem that there is little attempt by most Irish Catholics to stimulate and invigorate their religious beliefs and practices. It may be that the church's domination of the religious field for so long has led to a form of religious disability. The laity were, for so long, spoonfed their religious beliefs and values by the church, that there is little desire or appetite to seek out new ways of being religious.' Michele Dillon's (2014) observations about Irish laity also confirm extra-institutional religion's marginal position. Contrasting American and Irish Catholicism, she argued that after Vatican II American laity began to think of the Church as their own, balancing critiques of the institution with loyalty to it. But Irish laity did no such thing: '... a significant element of Vatican II theology – the idea of the Church as the 'People of God' – did not secure a foothold in Irish Catholicism. ... Instead, a dominant view in Ireland is that the Church is the Church hierarchy and it, not the laity, owns and controls the institution and the larger Catholic tradition' (Dillon, 2014: 119).

Extra-institutional religion was an exception to these trends. Those who practised it were attempting to invigorate beliefs and practices, and they had – however unusually among Irish laity – imbibed the idea of the Church as the People of God. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide full descriptive data to support the concept of extra-institutional religion. Readers seeking more substantial evidence may refer to the book based on the

project (Ganiel, 2016a). Two brief examples will provide a sense of how extra-institutional religion was practiced.

Patricia was a member of the PPC in Ballyboden.<sup>5</sup> She recognised the role the institutional church had played over her life. She praised some nuns and priests who served in her local area. She was inspired by Vatican II, the set readings for mass, and even mass itself. Yet she distinguished between her personal experiences of faith, which included taking responsibility for interpreting the bible and connecting with other like-minded Catholics in small groups like the PPC; and the institutional church, which she saw as having betrayed not just Vatican II, but Christ himself. She said the institutional church was now largely irrelevant to her life, at one point exclaiming: ‘Sometimes I wonder do they [the institutional church] have copies [of the bible]!’ It is remarkable that even though she is a regular mass attender, Patricia thinks of much of her religious practice as *in addition to* the institutional church. She even seems to think of a few exceptional clergy as somehow *outside* the institutional church, uncorrupted by its sins.

*Sli Eile*, which means ‘another way’ in Irish, was a ministry for 18 to 35-year-old Catholics that focused on the themes of spirituality, social justice, and community; and featured a popular gospel mass at the Jesuits’ Gardiner Street Church in Dublin. As a Jesuit ministry, it was embedded in the institutional church. But the young people who participated in it did not think of it that way. The Catholic Church had been tarnished in their eyes, and *Sli Eile* seemed to exist in a space *outside or in addition to* it. Some spoke of *Sli Eile* as an alternative to parish life, while others saw it as an addition to their parish. They said it was a safe space to express their doubts, and explore their faith in a holistic and intelligent way. Matt said: ‘There were no conditions put on what I believe. I was allowed to come to my own understanding at my own pace.’ Joe said: [Before *Sli Eile*] probably my faith wasn’t being maintained. ... At gospel mass you are not just being told – it’s getting you to think about

things.’ All the young people said *Sli Eile* had prompted individual transformation. Some, through their participation in its social justice programmes at home and abroad, saw *Sli Eile* as a mechanism for sparking wider change.

I developed the concept of extra-institutional religion over the course of the research, so the project did not include the means to identify what percentage of Irish Catholics were practising their religion in this way. Future research also could explore how extra-institutional Catholics mix the rituals and sacraments of the church with their religious practices outside and in addition to it, contrasting their practices to those of orthodox Catholics.

Because extra-institutional religion describes the practice of some people who are committed to their religion, it is fundamentally different from vicarious or performative religion. Extra-institutional religion describes the practice of those who exhibit relatively unique enthusiasm for religion, while vicarious and performative religion explain how religion retains significance for people whose religious practice is nominal or non-existent. Extra-institutional religion, then, is an alternative to religious individualism for describing how people who are committed practice their religion in a secularising context. But extra-institutional, vicarious and performative religion are united in two important ways: 1) the significance they place on historic religious institutions, and 2) the recognition that such institutions retain relatively privileged positions in the mixed religious markets of Europe.

### **The theoretical potential of extra-institutional religion**

Given that extra-institutional religion is so deeply rooted in the Irish case, I am framing it as a provisional concept, with the *potential* to explain religious practice in other European countries. Its theoretical potential resides in: 1) its ability to describe how some religiously committed individuals practice religion *outside or in addition to* historic state churches; and

2) its potential to contribute to wider change by balancing its two structural strengths: its position on the margins, and its continued links with institutional religion.

Further research is required to investigate whether, or to what extent, people in Ireland and other European countries are practising extra-institutional religion. Research in Poland, given the historical elision there between the Catholic Church and national identity; and Portugal and Italy, both historically Catholic and the two most ‘religiously committed’ countries in Europe, according to Pew, could be instructive. It also would be useful to explore extra-institutional religion’s usefulness in European countries that have exhibited greater degrees of secularisation. It would be necessary to evaluate any evidence that Europeans *for whom religion is important* are practising religion *outside or in addition to* their historic state churches – especially if they are maintaining links with those institutions.

The second area of theoretical potential – extra-institutional religion’s ability to contribute to wider change – is also inspired by the empirical data from Ireland. In the interviews, people spoke about their experiences of, and hopes for, individual and wider change. There was ample evidence that people who practised extra-institutional religion had experienced profound *individual* change. They perceived breaking free from the institutional Catholic Church as personally rewarding: they described it in terms of spiritual growth. In some ways, this confirms the religious individualisation paradigm. But they also longed for relationships with like-minded others, and for the expressions of faith they had created to change religious institutions themselves, or even society and politics. Unlike the examples of personal transformation, there was much less empirical evidence that extra-institutional religion was contributing to wider change. In my study, there were small localised examples such as the Benedictine monks inspiring new ecumenical initiatives outside the monastery walls.

But despite the limited empirical evidence for wider change, theoretically the practice of extra-institutional religion offers some *structural* advantages that are not available to other expressions of religion. These two structural strengths combine somewhat paradoxically. Extra-institutional religion's main structural advantage is its location on the *margins* of religious markets, which provides it with the freedom and flexibility to critique existing institutions. But this advantage is lost unless extra-institutional religion is able to communicate with – and therefore potentially change – the practices of more privileged and powerful mainstream institutions. For extra-institutional religion to work in this way it must strike a delicate balance between cultivating its freedom on the margins, and maintaining links with the institutions it critiques. Maintaining links through dialogues and relationships, speaking with a vocabulary familiar to mainstream institutions, and even gaining access to some of the human capital and resources of mainstream institutions ensure that creative ideas developed on the margins reach wider audiences – enhancing extra-institutional religion's potential to contribute to wider change. This is important in Europe's mixed religious markets, where historic state churches retain residual social and political privileges – though the extents of such privileges vary from case to case. Change may come in the form of new institutions or networks, or the reform of existing institutions. Of course, there are disadvantages of being on the margins, such as limited access to resources and power. In addition, people practising extra-institutional religion can be co-opted by those with privilege and power. In some cases this may be an advantage, giving them access to new resources and power. But it also may be a disadvantage because aligning with power-holders may mean they can no longer critique the abuse of privilege or argue for changes in powerful institutions.

My argument that extra-institutional religion's position on the margins offers a structural advantage is informed by the literature on religion and peacemaking, which has

provided evidence that religion on the margins is more effective at contributing to change than ‘privileged’ religions that are bound up with religious, social or political power. A few examples will suffice. John Brewer, Gareth Higgins and Francis Teeney (2011) found that in Northern Ireland, it was religious ‘mavericks’, brave individuals or organisations, which have been the most effective religious peacemakers. They observed that the mainstream Christian denominations and their representatives did little more than condemn violence. The practical work that made for peace was left to individual clergy and laity, or organisations like Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland. These worked on the margins yet engaged with mainstream actors, both religious and secular. Brewer et al argued that the institutional churches lacked courage and failed to lead, and the structural constraints were ones that could have been overcome. The effectiveness of the religious mavericks might even have been enhanced if they had received more support from the institutional churches. I came to similar conclusions in my research on Northern Ireland, arguing that it was networks of evangelical groups, working outside institutional churches, which contributed most to peacemaking. They were effective because they offered a credible critique of evangelicalism and its existing ideologies and institutions; and because they formed networks that enabled them to spread their ideas and practices beyond the margins (Ganiel, 2008). These examples demonstrate that those on the margins must communicate with the mainstream in order to contribute to wider change.

Extra-institutional religion’s potential to contribute to wider changes also depends on the extent to which a particular society is open to contributions from explicitly religious activists – a point made by Habermas (2008). Motivated by his concern that religion should not be excluded from democratic deliberation in plural societies, Habermas developed some rules of engagement for religious and secular citizens interacting with each other in the public sphere. Habermas expected both religious and secular citizens to be self-critical about their

own traditions, and open to the insights of the other. For the religious, this means reflecting on their own traditions in the light of reason. For the secular, this means resisting the temptation to be *secularistic*, recognising the historical contributions of religion to reason, and refraining ‘from passing judgment on religious truths’ (Habermas, 2008: 140).

Interaction between religious and secular citizens is expected to produce a ‘complementary learning process’ that is mutually enriching (Habermas, 2008: 144).

Habermas’ distinction between religious and secular citizens is problematic. Indeed, the concepts of vicarious and performative religion outlined in this article in many ways collapse the distinction between the religious and the secular (Beckford, 2012). It also is not clear if Habermas fully appreciates the difficulties his rules of engagement pose for citizens motivated by their faith, or the challenges for them in working with those with whom they fundamentally disagree on some issues. In Habermas’ public sphere, it seems religious citizens are at times required to suspend aspects of their identities and beliefs or to translate them for secular citizens; while similar tasks are not required of secular citizens. Habermas also provides little sense of *how* activists motivated by religion strike a balance between critiquing their own tradition, drawing on religious resources to create inspiring alternatives; while at the same time remaining in dialogue with other groups. Extra-institutional expressions of religion have the potential to enact the *how* that Habermas neglects, as they strive to strike the balance that his rules of engagement demand.

## **Conclusion**

Despite secularising trends, religion has persisted across European societies. We need concepts to explain how religion continues to function, even as people’s religious practices change and adapt. Extra-institutional religion describes how some individuals who are committed to religion practice it in a post-Catholic Ireland: they practice it *outside and in addition to the institutional Catholic Church*. As a new concept, extra-institutional religion

provides insight into one way religion functions, even in the midst of secularisation. Extra-institutional religion builds on Davie's and Day's insight about the continued social significance of religious institutions in Europe, but pushes further: because religious institutions like historic state churches retain some social significance and political privilege, extra-institutional religion can contribute to wider changes *through their continued links with institutions*. Theoretically, extra-institutional religion can capitalise on the *relatively unique enthusiasm of its practitioners* and their *position on the margins* to critique mainstream institutions, pushing and pulling them towards change.

Having said that, extra-institutional religion is agnostic on questions about the *character* of wider change. Extra-institutional religion could be practised by cosmopolitan religious actors advocating peace and pluralism; indeed, the nature of my study in Ireland was such that these people were over-represented among the interviewees. But extra-institutional religion also could be practised by fundamentalists and religious nationalists seeking change through coercion and violence. Finally, it is worth reiterating that extra-institutional religion is a provisional concept. It is empirically untested outside Ireland; and even in Ireland, there is not strong empirical evidence of its ability to contribute to wider change. Further research is needed to challenge or confirm the utility of the concept, in Ireland and other European contexts.



## References

Ammerman N (2013) *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Andersen K (2010) Irish secularization and religious identities: evidence of an emerging new Catholic habitus. *Social Compass* 57(1): 15-39.

Beck U (2010) *A God of One's Own: Religion's Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beckford J (2012) SSSR presidential address: public religions and the post-secular: critical reflections. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51(1): 1-19.

Berger P (2014) *The Many Altars of Modernity: Towards a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*. Boston: De Gruyter.

Blasi AJ (2009) A market theory of religion. *Social Compass* 56(2): 263-272.

Brewer JD (2018) The public values of the sociology of religion. In: Lindgreen, A., Kitchener, M., Brewer, J.D., Moore, M., Meynhardt, T., and Koenig-Lewis, N. (eds) *Managing Public Value*. London: Routledge.

Brewer JD, Higgins GI and Teeney F (2011) *Religion, Civil Society and Peace in Northern Ireland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bruce S (2001) Christianity in Britain, RIP. *Sociology of Religion*, 62(2): 191-203.

Bruce S and Voas D (2010) Vicarious religion: an examination and critique. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 25(2): 243-259.

Cotter CR, Davie G, Beckford J, Chattoo S, Lovheim M, Vasquez A, and Day A (2016) Around Abby Day's *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World*. *Religion in Society: Advances in Research*, 7(1): 97-111.

- Davie G (1994) *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*. Oxford: Wiley and Sons.
- Davie G (2000) *Religion in Modern Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davie G (2007) *The Sociology of Religion*. London: Sage.
- Davie G (2015) *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- Day A (2010) Propositions and performativity: relocating belief to the social. *Culture and Religion*, 11(1): 9-30.
- Day A (2011) *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dillon M (2014) The difference between Irish and American Catholicism. In: Inglis T (ed) *Are the Irish Different?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Donnelly S and Inglis T (2010) The media and the Catholic Church in Ireland: reporting clerical sex abuse. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25(1): 1-19.
- Finke R and Stark R. (2003) The dynamics of religious economies. In Dillon, M. (ed) *Handbook for the Sociology of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fuller L (2004) *Irish Catholicism Since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Ganiel G (2008) *Evangelicalism and Conflict in Northern Ireland*. New York: Palgrave.
- Ganiel G (2015) Christianity as a vocation: the Rostrevor Benedictines and the renewal of faith in Ireland. In: O'Grady J, Fernando JL and Higgins C (eds) *Mining Truths: Festschrift in Honour of Geraldine Smyth OP*. Germany: EOS, pp. 427-444.
- Ganiel G (2016a) *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Ganiel G (2016b) A charismatic church in a post-Catholic Ireland: Negotiating diversity at Abundant Life in Limerick City. *Irish Journal of Sociology* 24(3): 293-314.
- Gauthier F and Martikainen T eds (2016) *Religion in Consumer Society: Brands, Consumers and Markets*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Guest M, Tusting K, and Woodhead L eds. (2004) *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Habermas J (2008) *Between Naturalism and Religion*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hayes B and Dowds L (2010) Vacant seats and empty pews. ARK Research Update No. 65.
- Heelas P and Woodhead L (2004) *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hervieu-Léger D (2000) *Religion as a Chain of Memory*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Inglis T (1998) *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Ireland, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* Dublin: UCD Press.
- Inglis T (2014) *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland: Webs of Significance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jones P and Ganiel G (2012) Religion, politics and law. In: Woodhead L and Catto R (eds) *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*. London: Routledge, pp. 299-321.
- Keenan M (2014) Sexual abuse and the Catholic Church. In: Inglis T (ed) *Are the Irish Different?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Laniel J (2016) What ‘cultural religion’ says about secularization and national identity: a neglected religio-political configuration. *Social Compass*, 63(3): 372-388.
- Marti G (2015) Religious reflexivity: the effect of continual novelty and diversity on individual religiosity. *Sociology of Religion*, 76(1): 1-13.

- Marti G and Ganiel G (2014) *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Martikainen T and Gauthier F (2016) *Religion in the Neoliberal Age: Political Economy and Modes of Governance*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Martin D (2005) *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, Farnham: Ashgate.
- McGuire MB (2008) *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mitchell C (2006) *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Nic Ghiolla Pdraig M (2009) Religion in Ireland: No Longer an Exception? *Ark Research Update No. 64*.
- Pew Research Center (2018) Being Christian in Western Europe, [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org).
- Pollack D (2008) Religious change in Europe: theoretical considerations and empirical findings. *Social Compass* 55(2): 168-186.
- Quinn D (2017) Decline in church attendance in Ireland has levelled off for now. <https://ionainstitute.ie/decline-in-church-attendance-in-ireland-has-levelled-off-for-now/>, 6 November 2017.
- Richter P (2004) Denominational Cultures: The Cinderella of Congregational Studies? In Guest M, Tusting K, and Woodhead L. *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context*. Abingdon: Routledge, 169-184.
- Speck S (2012) Ulrich Beck's 'reflecting faith': individualization, religion and the desecularization of reflexive modernity. *Sociology* 47(1): 157-172.
- Stark R and Iannaccone L (1994) A supply-side reinterpretation of the 'secularization of Europe.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33: pp. 230–52.

Storm I (2011) Ethnic nominalism and civic religiosity: Christianity and national identity in Britain. *Sociological Review* 59(4): 828-846.

Van der Veer P (2012) Market and money: a critique of rational choice theory. *Social Compass* 59(2): 183-192.

Voas D (2009) The rise and fall of fuzzy fidelity in Europe. *European Sociological Review* 25(2): 155-168.

Voas D and Crockett A (2005) Religion in Britain: neither believing nor belonging. *Sociology* 39(1): 11-28.

Winkel H and Ganiel G (2017) The social dynamics of religion in the public domain. *European Societies* 19(5): 520-528.

Woodhead L (2016) Intensified religious pluralism and de-differentiation: the British example, *Society* 53: 41-46.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Island of Ireland' refers to the whole island, including the Republic and Northern Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Van der Veer (2012) critiques the assumption that market actors are rational.

<sup>3</sup> The Census has categories of lapsed Catholic, atheist, agnostic and lapsed Church of Ireland, which I added to 'no religion' and 'not stated.' If only 'no religion' and 'not stated' are calculated, the figure is just under 10 percent.

<sup>4</sup> 'Contemporary Catholic Perspectives', <http://www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Contemporary-Catholic-Perspectives.pdf>, posted February 2012; accessed 21 January 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Names changed to protect confidentiality.