BRILL

# Blending Catholicism with Chi, Chakras and Crystals

*Research on the Lived Reality of Catholicism among Pre-Service Postgraduate Student Teachers in Catholic Third Level Colleges in the Republic of Ireland (ROI)*

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## Abstract

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

### Keywords

### Introduction

A recent Pew Report situates Ireland as the third most religiously observant country in western Europe.[1] Indeed, an examination of the raw data from this and other recent research might lead one to conclude that Ireland was an overwhelmingly religious and specifically Catholic country. For instance, the 2016 census data from Ireland exhibits very high rates of religious affiliation where 86 per cent of the population self-identified with a faith group.[2] In 2016 Roman Catholicism was the faith of 78 per cent of the population and a further 8 per cent identified as members of other Christian denominations or world religions. Stephen Bullivant's research draws on data from the European Social Survey (ESS 2014–2016) and presents Ireland as one of the top four countries (with Poland, Israel and Portugal) where more than ten per cent of 16–29 year-olds claim to attend religious services on at least a weekly basis.[3] Perhaps this is unsurprising given that in 1972, 91 per cent of people in ROI attended weekly mass. While this number reduced to 38 per cent in 2010, it is still remarkably high by European standards.[4] Yet such data merits further scrutiny. As Breda O' Brien remarks, although these percentages are 'high by European standards, the faith is being hollowed out from within in a way that the statistics fail to reveal'.[5] Vincent Twomey alludes to the significance of language and the importance of how statistics might be interpreted when he states that in the Irish context some previously interpreted the word Catholic, not in terms of belief but in terms of race, thus giving primacy to collective or national identity and not to personal conviction.[6]

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

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

3   S. Bullivant, *Europe's Young Adults and Religions*, Benedict XV1 Centre for Religion and Society, (2018) p.3 https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-mar-europe-young-people-report-eng.pdf.

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

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

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

The researchers undertook the current research to uncover what the growth of the religiously unaffiliated might reveal about identity, culture, education and the Catholic Church in the Irish context. They noted that while there are significant recent studies on the religiously unaffiliated in Australia,[7] Europe,[8] the UK[9] and USA,[10] there is little comparable research in ROI. Researching this religiously unaffiliated group provides a unique opportunity to explore the complex causal factors, manifestations and consequences of the unprecedented growth of non-religious worldviews in Ireland. As academics working in Catholic Third-Level Colleges of Education, the researchers were conscious of the Catholic Church's deep respect for humans to follow their conscience as well as the inviolable human right to practice freely and with dignity their chosen religious or non-religious belief tradition. The researchers were also inspired by Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Freedom* (1965) which stresses the right of all humans to 'act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty'.[11]

### The Research Focus

Given that Catholicism has had a major impact on Irish culture, education and society there is surprisingly little research on people's lived experience of Catholicism in contemporary Ireland.[12] The current research involves a two-part study of attitudes toward religious and non-religious beliefs among initial teacher education (ITE) students undertaking a two-year Professional Masters in Education (PME) programme in two third level Catholic colleges of education in ROI. Part One of the research profiled students' awareness of their own religious or philosophical belief identities. This research was undertaken when Irish society was in a state of flux and where one in ten people belong to the 'No Religion' group. Indeed, the religiously unaffiliated were the fastest

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

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

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

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

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

12   T. Inglis, 'Church and Culture in Catholic Ireland' *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 106(421), (2017) pp. 21–30.

growing belief group in the 2016 Census.[13] Part Two of the study explored understandings of and responses to religiously unaffiliated groups while also focusing on participants' future professional roles as educators in Ireland's primary school system. Drawing on both parts of the research, in this article the authors explore what the voices and experiences of the sample group of ITE students might reveal about lived Catholicism in contemporary Ireland.


### Research Context

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

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13    CSO 2016.

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

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

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

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

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

key factor.[19] In 2010 Pope Benedict wrote a pastoral letter apologising for clerical child sex abuse in Ireland.[20] The Ryan Report described the appalling 'systemic, pervasive, chronic, excessive, arbitrary, endemic' abuse of children in Ireland's institutions, most of which were Catholic.[21] The revelations of clerical child sex abuse in successive commissions of enquiry and reports left people repulsed, horrified and angered,[22] and shattered public confidence in the Church's leadership and moral authority.[23] The pace of change has been dramatic and is exemplified in the series of referenda removing the constitutional ban on divorce (1995) as well as the legalising of same sex marriage (2015) and abortion (2018). The Church is on rapidly shifting ground and in the five years separating the last two censuses, the Catholic population declined by over one percentage point each year, a decrease from 84.2 per cent in 2011 to 78.3 percent in 2016. Numerically speaking, the Catholic Church is still the overwhelming majority Church in Ireland, yet its exercise of power and influence is drastically reduced and it 'no longer has a monopoly over morality or spirituality'[24] and while Scally notes that for some Catholics it appears as if the Catholic majority has been reduced to a modest even mocked minority.[25]

### Education and the Catholic Church in Ireland

Education in Ireland is largely a Church-State co-operative, enshrined in the Constitution, enacted in legislation and upheld by the Supreme Court.[26] Instead of having a state system of education at primary level, it is more accurate to say that Ireland has a state-funded privately-owned, largely denominational system of education.[27] In contemporary Ireland 96% of all

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19    O'Brien 'Young People', p. 185.
20    Benedict XVı, *Pastoral Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVı to the Catholics of Ireland*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland.html.
21    Government of Ireland, *The Report* of the *Commission* to Inquire *into Child Abuse* (2009), https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3c76d0-the-report-of-the-commission-to-inquire-into-child-abuse-the-ryan-re/.
22    G. Jeffers, 'Telling Tales – Cruelty and Abuse in Schooling in Ireland'*, Education Research and Perspectives* 43 (2016), pp. 101–136, p. 104.
23    Ganiel 2019, p. 277.
24    Inglis 2017.
25    Derek Scally, *The Best Catholics in the World: The Irish, the Church and the End of a Special Relationship* (London: Penguin Books, 2021) pp.352.
26    D. Glendinning, D. (2012) *Education and the Law*. Haywards Heath, West Sussex: Bloomsbury Professional.
27    G. Byrne and L. J. Francis (eds), (2019) *Religion and Education: The Voices of Young People in Ireland*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2019).

primary schools are managed by churches with 88.9% under the patronage of the Catholic Church; 5.5% under the patronage of the Church of Ireland; 4.8% under Multi-denominational patronage and 0.8% under the category of 'other'.[28] In Catholic primary schools, faith formation as well as sacramental preparation forms a core part of the school day.[29] Religious Education (RE) is one of seven curricular areas in the 1999 curriculum.[30] The recommended time allocation for the subject area is 2.5 hours per week.[31] Under Rule 69 of National Schools parents and guardians have a right to withdraw children from Religious Instruction of which they do not approve.[32] Since there is no pre-scribed state curricular content for RE, the 1998 Education Act stressed the rights of the different Church authorities to design RE curricula appropriate to their school ethos. This means that as school patrons, Catholic bishops are responsible for the design, delivery, and assessment of the RE programmes in Catholic schools. In 2015 the Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC) published an inaugural RE curriculum framework for Catholic pre-school and primary schools in Ireland North and South, with an aim 'to help children mature in relation to their spiritual, moral and religious lives, through their encounter with, exploration and celebration of the Catholic faith'.[33]

In contemporary Ireland Catholic schools seek to serve the learning needs of a belief-diverse population and are not perceived by the Church as being exclusively *of* and *for* Catholics,[34] instead they are increasingly recognised as places of welcome and dialogue for those of different beliefs.[35] Precisely

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

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

30   Department of Education, *Primary School Curriculum Introduction* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1999), p. 58.

31   Department of Education, *Rules for National Schools under the Department of Education* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1965).

32   Department of Education, *Primary School Curriculum Introduction* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1999).

33   Irish Episcopal Conference, *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland,* (Dublin: Veritas, 2015).

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

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

because they are Catholic[36] they recognise and respect the religious freedom of students[37] and serve 'all, non-Christians included'.[38] The National Catechetical Directory *Share the Good News* (2010) affirms that 'In embracing young people from beyond the Catholic community the Catholic school treats them with the greatest honour. It respects the faith and beliefs of all young people under its care '.[39] For their part, Catholic schools adopt a holistic, inclusive approach to RE and faith formation.[40] As generalists, pre-service teachers are educated to deliver all seven curricular areas in the primary school and to this end they study RE as part of their ITE programmes. In order to qualify to teach in a Catholic primary school, pre-service teachers are required to complete an additional voluntary Catholic Religious Education and Religious Studies Certificate that is recognised by the Irish Episcopal Conference.[41] This qualification equips teachers with the foundational Catholic theological and pedagogical knowledge and skills to communicate the Catholic faith to children in primary schools and it is mandatory for teachers seeking employment in Catholic schools.[42] However, there are persistent criticisms of what some perceive as the Catholic Church's near monopoly of the Irish educational system.[43] Ganiel notes that for 'centuries, Catholicism exerted a monopoly on the religious field in Ireland, functioning as a form of religious nationalism, defining the Irish against the Protestant British colonisers'[44] and Atheist Ireland's

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36    Leahy, B, 'Catholic Perspectives on Interreligious Dialogue' in Kieran, P. (ed), Connecting Lives: Interbelief Dialogue in Contemporary Ireland (Dublin: Veritas, 2019), pp.119–128.

37    D. Lane, *Catholic Education in the Light of Vatican II and Laudato Si'* (Dublin: Veritas, 2016).

38    Congregation for Catholic Education, *Catholic Education on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (Vatican City: Congregation for Catholic Education,1997), par 85.

39    Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), p. 101.

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

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

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

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

44    Ganiel 2019, 477.

'Teach don't Preach' campaign advocates a secular Irish education system based on human rights laws.

### Catholicism in Ireland

In 2014 a study of one hundred people, from all walks of life living in different parts of Ireland, led sociologist Tom Inglis to conclude that there were four main types of Catholics in contemporary Ireland. First, orthodox Catholics who tend to believe and practise their faith. Secondly, cultural Catholics who tend not to have a strong belief or practice yet continue to engage in Catholic rites of passage such as christenings, weddings, funerals etc. Thirdly, creative Catholics who tend to combine Catholic beliefs with other spiritual traditions and practices. Finally, disenchanted Catholics who tend to reject and resist the Church.[45] Indeed, Twomey notes that those who were born Catholic but who are 'now of no religious persuasion' often tend to be virulently anti-Catholic.[46] Inglis alludes to the stew of bewilderment, confusion and doubt that characterises many people's lives in contemporary Ireland. He suggests that in contemporary Ireland, 'Religion is not in the hearts, in the minds or on the lips of Catholics. Yet more than four in five people see themselves as Catholics, nine in ten children go to Catholic primary schools and the majority of people are baptised, married or buried with Catholic ceremonies'.[47]

Gladys Ganiel's research on post-Catholic Ireland (2019) explores people's religious practices and beliefs on the island of Ireland. She developed the notion of on 'Extra-Institutional Religion' to explore religious practices and beliefs that have developed 'outside or in addition to the Catholic Church, Ireland's historically dominant religious institution'.[48] This concept highlights the non-traditional or unorthodox manner in which a range of eclectic and highly individual beliefs drawn from outside the formal ecclesial institution characterises people's contemporary practice of Catholicism. As a sociologist Ganiel draws on empirical data from her research in Ireland and develops this concept of 'Extra-Institutional Religion' to explain how people are practicing their religion.[49] Ganiel uses the term post-Catholic to signal 'a shift in consciousness in which the institutional Catholic Church is no longer held in high

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45   T. Inglis, *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland: Webs of Significance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
46   Twomey 2003, p. 19.
47   Inglis 2017, p. 21.
48   Ganiel 2019, p. 473.
49   Ganiel 2016; Ganiel 2019.

esteem by many, including practising Catholics'.[50] In an increasingly secular context she notes the enduring dominance of religious institutions in the way that people think about and practice their religion. She develops this idea building upon Davie's notions of believing without belonging and vicarious religion[51] as well as Beck's concept of reflexive religious individualisation or the turn to individual choice and experience, drawing not just on alternative or new age spiritualities but including those who identify in some way with the Christian tradition.[52]

> People who practised extra-institutional religion were reflexively individualistic in their beliefs and practices. But their individualisation was moderated by the dominance of the institution in how they thought about and practised their religion. Even those who defined themselves against the Catholic Church maintained some links with it. These were individuals whose religious practice was important in their lives. They either found or created extra-institutional spaces in order to pursue personal and collective transformation through religion. So extra-institutional religion is not simply all religious practice in Ireland outside the Catholic Church; it is committed religious practice that defines itself and its practice over and against the Catholic Church.[53]

While religious individualisation partially explains what is happening in Ireland, Ganiel has developed this 'provisional concept' of extra-institutional religion to explain how people are practicing religion. She also notes that studies of 'lived religion' or 'every day religion' tend to downplay religious institutions.[54]

### Religious Disaffiliation Among Young Catholics

The Centre for Applied Research in Georgetown conducted a ground-breaking study (2016) of the various reasons for disaffiliation from the Catholic Church

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50    Ganiel 2019, p. 479.
51    G. Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without belonging*, (Oxford: Wiley and Sons, 1994); G. Davie, *Religion in modern Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); G. Davie, *Religion in Britain: A persistent paradox*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).
52    U. Beck *A God of one's own: Religion's capacity for peace and potential for violence*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).
53    Ganiel 2019, pp. 472–473.
54    Ibid.

among the 15–25 year-old age-group.[55] This study revealed that 35 per cent of the participants are 'done' with religious affiliation but continue to believe in something bigger and maybe even God. This echoes with Woodhead's research[56] in the U.K. which argues that those who may disaffiliate from the Church and now identify with no religion are not necessarily atheists. They are diverse in their make-up and resist religious labels and some continue to believe in God. The research findings suggest three categories of disaffiliation: the injured, the drifters and the dissenters. *The injured* are those who have been hurt by Church teaching or disillusioned by the fact that people they love died despite their prayers. *The drifters* do not find meaning in the rituals and rules of the Church and do not see how faith connects to the real world. *The dissenters* are those that fundamentally disagree with Church teaching on matters such as same-sex marriage, abortion and contraception. Some also state that their questions about life and life after death are not adequately answered by Church teaching. Nagle also writes about American Catholics who migrate beyond the influence of the Catholic Church.[57] He highlights the complexity that lies at the heart of the religious lives of young Catholics. His study reveals that despite many young people denying membership of the Church, many maintain a religious worldview and practice. These studies raise questions about young people's lived experience of Catholicism and suggest a lack of a sense of belonging within the Church. They also point to young people's ongoing religious and spiritual development beyond the boundaries of conventional ecclesial communities. As Nagle says 'learning religion in liquid modernity involves inheriting a shared tradition, receiving insights from various relationships and extra-ecclesial experiences, testing what is good, and moving beyond what is not...liquid modernity has expanded and made more viable a space at the edge of affiliation where a faithful but critical praxis can continue outside of the established boundaries of religious communities.'[58]

## Methodology

This mixed-methods research methodology was implemented using anonymous online questionnaires using SurveyMonkey software and in-depth

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55   R. McCarthy, and J. Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*, (Minnesota: St Mary's Press, 2016).

56   L. Woodhead, 'The Rise of "No Religion" in Britain: The Emergence of a New Cultural Majority' *Journal of the British Academy*, 4, (2016), pp. 245–61.

57   J.M. Nagle, *Out on Waters: The Religious Life and Learning of Young Catholics Beyond the Church*, (Oregan: Pickwick Publications, 2020).

58   Nagle 2020, p.119.

one-to-one interviews. Triangulation across both data sets increased the validity and accuracy of the study carried out in two third level Catholic colleges in ROI.[59] A mixed-method approach was selected because it extends and deepens researchers' knowledge, enabling them to appreciate the complexity of the area and to make more nuanced conclusions about participants' views and religious identities.[60] An online questionnaire was chosen as the most appropriate way to gather data from students as, due to Covid-19 restrictions, both colleges had pivoted to online teaching and learning at the time of data collection. Some of the questions and scales were selected from the *European Values Survey* (2017)[61] as well as Mc Carthy and Vitek's *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* study (2016) conducted in the U.S.A.[62] This enabled the researchers to compare and contrast relevant aspects of the gathered data with a much larger body of existing international research. Data was gathered from Postgraduate Masters in Education Year 1 (PME1) and PME Year 2 students in 2020 and PME Year 1 students in 2021 as questionnaire was distributed to four hundred students over two years. These questionnaires gathered both quantitative and qualitative data by asking respondents to explain and elaborate upon their answers in comments boxes. At the end of the questionnaire students were invited to voluntarily, self-select to participate in follow-up one-to-one semi-structured in-depth interviews. Schostak (2006) describes interviews as an extended conversation between partners which aims to uncover in-depth information about a certain topic through which a phenomenon could be interpreted in terms of the meaning interviewees bring to it. Due to the complexity and sensitivity of the issues being discussed, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews were deemed preferable to focus groups in order to give participants ample opportunity to present and discuss their individual ideas and personal experiences. Furthermore, this methodology enabled the researchers to gather rich detail about participants'

59    J.W. Creswell, *Educational Research Planning, Conducting and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*, (New Jersey: International Pearson Merril Prentice Hall, 2008).

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

61    https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/.

62    R. J. McCarthy and J.M. Vitek, 2017.

lived experiences by asking them to elaborate on specific points.[63] Interviews were conducted over Zoom due to the on-going Covid-19 restrictions.[64]

### Research Participants

The total sample group of 400 included postgraduate ITE students was selected on the basis that they had already completed a primary degree and may have had rich life experience, with an added capacity for enhanced reflection and analysis. 'Opportunity sampling' was employed because every PME student was invited to respond to the questionnaire. 'Self-selection sampling' was employed for the semi-structured interviews because each participant had a choice to take part in the interviews of their own accord. N = 400 questionnaires were distributed and n = 192 questionnaires were returned. Five students, all female, participated in the one-to-one interviews, each lasting for approximately 45 minutes. Students were asked to specify their age bracket and gender at the beginning of the questionnaire. The majority of participants (64%) were aged between 18 and 34 years with 31% aged between 25–34 and only 5% aged over 35 years. A question inviting participants to identify their chosen gender revealed a gender imbalance as 88% identified as female and only 12% as male. This reflects the reality of teacher education and the primary teaching profession in Ireland which is predominantly female.

### Findings

The findings point to the significant influence of Catholicism and Catholic education on participants where attendance at a Catholic school is normative in Ireland. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show how forx the sample group attendance at Catholic primary schools was 97% and 89% at post primary level (Figure 1). Further, 99% received the sacraments of First Eucharist and Confirmation (Figure 2).

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63    J. Lewis and C. McNaughton Nicholls, "Design Issues" IN: J. Ritchie, J. Lewis, C. McNaughton Nichools and R. Ormston (eds), *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. (London: SAGE Publications, 2014), pp. 48–76.
64    J. Schostak, *Interviewing and Representation in Qualitative Research*, (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006).
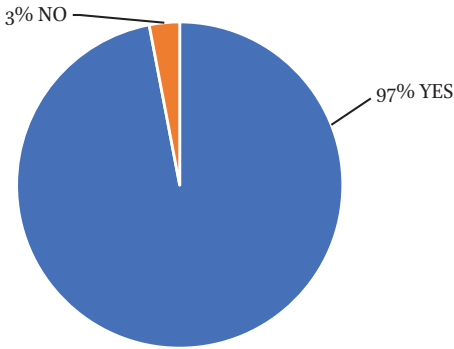
3% NO

97% YES

FIGURE 1      Attended a Catholic Primary School



Did you receive the Sacraments of First Eucharist
and Confirmation?

1%
NO

99%
YES

FIGURE 2      Reception of the Sacraments of First
Eucharist & Confirmation

## A Commitment to Non-Commitment

Given this very high level of sacramental initiation and education within
Catholic schools, the survey asked if participants currently belonged to a par-
ticular religious tradition or non-religious worldview. In response to this ques-
tion 80% said 'Yes'; 12% said 'No' and 8% said 'Don't Know'. Given that this is
a cohort of highly educated postgraduate University students it is interesting
that one in five do not belong or do not know if they belong to a religious
tradition or non-religious worldview. It suggests that for some there may be
a growing uncertainty or reluctance to identify with any one perspective or
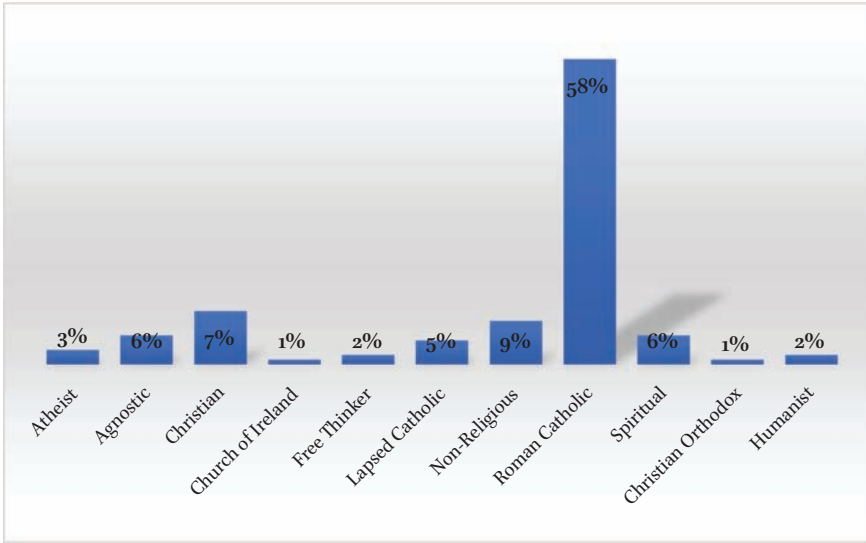position. A further question invited the 80% who said that they belonged to

FIGURE 3     Beliefs identified by participants

a particular religious tradition or non-religious worldview to pick one belief from a list provided.[65]

   As detailed in figure 3 above, when given a range of options to choose from, findings exhibit a diversity of responses where 67% self -describe in explicitly religious terms including: Christian (7%); Church of Ireland (1%); Roman Catholic (58%) and Christian Orthodox (1%). 20% self-describe as: Atheist (3%); Agnostic (6%); Non-Religious (9%) and Humanist (2%) (Figure 3). Titles like 'Free Thinker' (2%) or 'Spiritual' (6%) are more nebulous and give less-specific horizons of interpretation as they are compatible with both religious and non-religious worldviews. Given that 99% have been initiated into the Catholic Church, perhaps it unsurprising that 58% self-identify with Roman Catholicism while only 5% self-describe as Lapsed Catholic.

   A question inviting participants to evaluate how strongly they are attached to their belief reveals that only 8% are attached very strongly or very weakly (8%) to their religious or non-religious worldview (Figure 4). Just over half of the participants (58%) are attached to their belief moderately, rather weakly and very weakly (See figure 4). There is a symmetry in the data as 31% are attached

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

rather or very strongly and 31% are attached moderately. Overall the results suggest that given that 99% received the sacraments within a confessional Catholic educational system designed to nurture faith and personal commitment, the sample group does not bear evidence of a very strong commitment to any religious tradition or non-religious worldview. Roughly one third are moderately committed, one third are rather/very strongly committed and one third are rather/very weakly committed. Theologian Paul Murray notes 'a prevailing attitude of commitment if, only, and for as long as something works for me further erodes any sense of inherited loyalties and transgenerational identity.'[66] One participant wrote 'I've seen myself that my grandparents get a sense of community, routine and comfort for practicing a religion and going to mass. Maybe when I'm older I may seek the same...I suppose I don't know what's ahead of me.' Among this educated sample group there is a sizeable percentage who may be perplexed, confused or indecisive about their own personal belief. This reinforces Inglis' reflection on a 'stew of bewilderment' and leads the researchers to question whether this is as a consequence of personal indecision or resistance to certitude. However, it may be part of a larger cultural existential response where, in a world of endless choice, there is also for some a paradoxical commitment to non-commitment.

In response to the question 'Do you ever attend religious services these days?', figure 5 below details how 30% replied 'Never' and only 1% attend more than once a week (Figure 5). The 13% who attend once a week is slightly above the (ESS 2014–2016) finding that in Ireland 10% of 16–29 year olds attended weekly mass. It is worth emphasising that within the Catholic tradition weekly

| | |
|---|---|
| Moderately | 31% |
| Rather Strongly | 23% |
| Rather Weakly | 20% |
| Don't Know | 10% |
| Very Weakly | 8% |
| Very Strongly | 8% |

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

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66    P. D. Murray, 'Living Catholicity Differently: On Growing into the Plenitudinous Plurality of Catholic Communion in God', In S. Hellemans, P. Jonkers (eds) *Envisioning Futures for the Catholic Church*. (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2018), pp. 109–158.
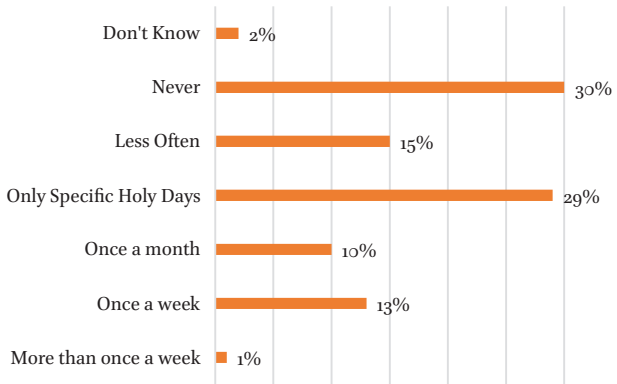
FIGURE 5     Religious practice of participants

attendance at mass is a minimum requirement for practicing Catholics.[67] For those who self-describe as Catholics (58%) patterns of practice may be changing as monthly attendance (10%) and attendance on Holy Days (29%) or Less Often (15%) appears to be the norm for this cohort.

These finding raises questions regarding the challenge faced by this cohort of future teachers entrusted with the task of teaching a Catholic faith formational programme, promoting the importance of prayer and weekly mass attendance. The data suggests that as teachers many may be required to teach something that there are not currently practicing in their own lives. In a one-to-one interview participant C stated: 'I must admit I am not a very religious person myself and it was always a worry of mine that it may affect the children's learning in religious education. Over the past few years, I have stopped attending mass, but I do still strongly believe in God'. For this participant belief in God is clearly separate from attendance at religious services. Participant E recalled 'A parent was at a communion and was amazed that the teacher was not receiving communion…they obviously were not a practicing Catholic. I remember this parent observing and being really surprised saying "you would think because they're (teachers) in a Catholic school that they would be, you know, Catholic". So obviously they weren't you know what I mean. But I was surprised, I suppose that somebody noticed and commented as well, and this was a young enough parent.'

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

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

FIGURE 6    Statements of Beliefs

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

The data presented in figure 6 shows that while participants have high levels of assent to religious worldviews (67% Figure 3) they have much lower levels of assent (30%) to belief in a personal God with whom they can have a relationship (Figure 6). Belief in a personal God is at the heart both of the Christian tradition and the RE programme in Catholic Schools in ROI. 16% believe that God is something within each person rather than 'out there' suggesting God is meaningful only in so far as God is relatable to human life and personal experience. The data points to an experience of an imminent rather than transcendent dimension of the divine among the participants. One in four opt for belief in a more open-ended 'spirit or life force' and 19% of participants do not know what to believe. These findings are consistent with O'Connell, Ryan and Harmon's five-year (2015–2019)[68] research on undergraduate ITE students' beliefs and practices in ROI where 34% of their sample group believe in a personal God and 22% don't know. There may be a sense in which language is at play here as the term God is heavily laden and has connotations of an institutional Church. Henry's research suggests that religious language in the Irish context can be encumbered and interpreted as narrowly doctrinal, lacking in critical thinking, leading to pious labelling and inhibiting dialogue with those from secular traditions.[69]

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

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

### Reasons for Disaffiliation

For those who once were but no longer consider themselves to be religious, a question enabling participants to tick more than one box asked 'Please indicate how important if at all each of the factors listed below were in your decision to no longer be religious'. Findings show that 69% of those who decided to no longer be religious did so because religion did not address their experiences and needs. In the one-to-one interviews, Participant A commented 'I think my religion needs to adapt to suit the current climate if it is to last, as currently it doesn't resonate with the young people of Ireland'. Participant D stated '*religious stances on sexuality and the status of women*' as key issues that prompted her to distance herself from her Catholic faith. This corresponds with McCarthy and Viteks' (2016) findings on disaffiliation in the U.S. which categorized one of the reasons for disaffiliation as no longer seeing how faith connects to the real world. The data also showed that the sexual abuse of children by religious was a major reason for disaffiliation. For 91% of the cohort sexual abuse of children by religious is either a very or somewhat important factor resulting in them walking away from the Church. The impact of Clerical Child Sex Abuse in ROI on participants' decision to no longer identify with Catholicism cannot be underestimated. While 23% felt their disaffiliation was due to a tragedy or death that prompted them to question their faith, 36% stated that they no longer felt part of the faith community.

### Belief Fluidity

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

Given that 99% of the sample group were initiated into the Catholic sacramental tradition and the overwhelming majority (89%) had at least twelve years of primary and post-primary schooling in a Catholic context with an additional year of post-graduate study in a Catholic Third Level College, the data presented in figure 7 uncovers a range of participants' beliefs, many of which originate outside of Catholicism. The data reveals that belief in energy (53%) and souls (53%) is greater than belief in One God (39%) and the Holy Spirit (37%). While 44% believed in Spirits and 40% believe in Angels, 21% believe in Ghosts and 18% believe in Psychics. Participants blend Catholic beliefs with beliefs from other religious and secular traditions so that they exhibit some of the characteristics of what Inglis terms creative Catholics. In selecting Crystals (10%), Chakras (7%), Reincarnation (14%), Devil(s) (7%) and Magic (9%) as beliefs alongside more 'orthodox' Catholic beliefs (e.g. One God, Holy Spirit,
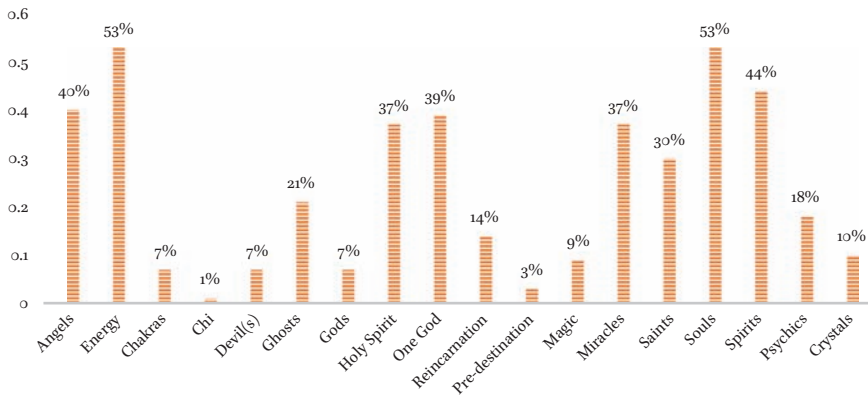
FIGURE 7     Results of participant beliefs

Saints, Angels) participants exhibit the liquid modernity that Nagle speaks of when he suggests that people move beyond the boundaries of conventional ecclesial communities for their spiritual development. Overall participants' religious and non-religious practices and identities blend seemingly incompatible, paradoxical and binary beliefs revealing a complex fluidity that defies neat categorisation and resists orthodox classification. This fluidity incorporates traditional Catholic teaching and practices with a wide spectrum of spiritual and secular traditions from across the world. It is not simply that one set of beliefs and practices annuls or replaces another but that multiple and seemingly incompatible practices and beliefs are simultaneously selected by participants. What Ganiel refers to as 'Extra Institutional Catholicism' means that in making their selection, many participants do not restrict their choices to adhere to the orthodox teachings of only one specific tradition. In this data set beliefs in reincarnation and gods, psychics, chi and chakras, are selected in addition to belief in the Holy Spirit, Saints and One God. Participant E places a focus not on the content of beliefs but on individual integrity and honesty in following one's beliefs. She notes 'I'm all for I suppose if you believe you believe and then you follow through with it and if you don't, then don't be going through the charade of it. You know what I mean. That's why I'd be much more open to somebody saying oh, I have no belief or I'm whatever.'

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

In one-to-one interviews five participants were asked how they felt about teaching RE in Catholic schools on school placement. Participant A said 'I go through

the motions. People do go in and teach, even if they don't necessarily believe what they're teaching... if you want to teach in Ireland then its regardless of your own views'. Participant C observed 'it is possible to engage with it, and still be separate from it' while participant B said 'I find it a little bit false. It's just stuff they're just rattling off... I mean you would just have to do it if it was in the ethos of the school and you were in a Catholic school.' Similarly, participant A commented '...people probably do go through with it and know that it's part of the job. It's ticking the box in the job and they have to do it, you know?' These comments reflect a lived experience of a type of cultural Catholicism that is disconnected from a personal practice of or commitment to Catholicism. Gearon notes a shift in post-enlightenment education moving from lived religion as the 'pursuit of the holy life' to the study of religion in a more factual manner.[70] Some participants are clearly trying to bridge this gap. Participant B noted 'religion is such a deeply personal and kind of emotive thing, you need to have that kind of element of belief in spirituality if you're teaching in a faith school. I think you have to respect the beliefs and faiths of the children who are there and to try your best, and even though I don't believe myself if parents and school are following that kind of religious curriculum I would have no problem praying and preparing for sacraments and all of this.' O'Brien notes that many pre-service teachers may have only experienced a thin, faded version of cultural Catholicism[71] in their own education. These findings have implications for Catholic schools and for faith transmission in Ireland.

### Discussion

The data reveals high levels of self-identification with Catholicism (58%) where participants exhibit complex multi-layered religious and non-religious identities which sometimes blend seemingly incompatible and binary beliefs originating from diverse traditions. While the research highlights the variety of factors lead to increased religious disaffiliation, it shows that for 91% of the cohort, sexual abuse of children by religious was either a very or somewhat important factor resulting in them walking away from the Church. Furthermore, a significant percentage perceived a disconnect between Catholic rituals, spirituality, ethical teaching and beliefs with youth culture and contemporary life. Clearly, the lived Catholicism of some of these future teachers is out of synch with orthodox Catholicism as presented in the *Catechism of the Catholic*

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70    Liam Gearon, *On Holy Ground: the theory and practice of religious education*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) p.8.
71    O'Brien p.187.

*Church*. The data suggests that participants blend a range of beliefs and practices such as Chi, Chakras and Crystals, Energy, gods, Predestination, Magic and Reincarnation with Catholic beliefs to form what Ganiel's describes as individual forms of 'Extra-Institutional Catholicism'. More research is needed to reflect on what these preliminary findings might mean for the lived experience and Catholic identity of ITE students in ROI. These findings also resonate with Maurice Harmon's research[72] on the voice of the child in one Catholic primary school Ireland. Harmon speaks of children's 'blended' religious identities as evidenced by a child in his research who described themselves as a 'Catholic Atheist'. Another child stated 'I am a Catholic Buddhist'. These children exhibit very high levels of individual agency as they combine simultaneously what may be perceived as distinct and incompatible religious worldviews. The same kind of individual agency can be identified in the current study where participants blend their identities. Further, with only 8% of the entire cohort being very strongly committed to their religious or non-religious tradition and only 10% attending weekly religious service, it may be appropriate to speak of a casual loyalty to the institutional Catholic church or evidence of what Voas (2009) terms fuzzy fidelity to Catholicism.[73] Moreover, further research is needed to investigate how these ITE students might teach RE in Catholic schools and whether in the long term, orthodox, cultural, creative and disenchanted Catholic teachers might have significant impact on the religious beliefs and practices of their students as well as on Catholic school ethos. Data from a very small sample of in-depth interviews suggest that participants may be unaware of the eclectic nature or extra-Catholic origin many of their own beliefs. O'Brien comments that 'it is now mostly uncatechised young adults who teach the programme to children. (The era of unfocused second level religious education class arguably started in the 1970s, so the uncatechised young people teaching RE today also have parents who had little or no formation). While teacher training colleges for the most part do their best, they cannot repair the lack of religious education that their young under-graduates demonstrate.'[74] The research points to the need for further research, reflection and dialogue involving not only teacher educators and ITE students, but those in positions of leadership in the Catholic Church. It is important to appreciate the lived experiences and complex beliefs of ITE students as well as the challenges they face in teaching confessional RE in Catholic educational settings in ROI.

72    M. Harmon, *'"I* am a Catholic Buddhist*": the voice of children on religion and Religious Education in an Irish Catholic Primary School'*, *Doctor* of Education thesis, Dublin City University (2018).

73    D. Voas, 'The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe'. IN *European Sociological Review*. 25, 2. (2009) pp. 55–168.

74    O'Brien p.187.

### Conclusion

This research indicates that Catholic educational institutions have impacted significantly on the lives of the research participants who exhibit very high levels of attendance at Catholic primary and post-primary schools. With exceptionally high levels of sacramental initiation (99%), almost two out of three of the sample group self-describe as Catholic (58%), yet the data suggests that for many the term Catholic is being used as a form of cultural identity as opposed to personal commitment to the Catholic faith and ecclesial community. One in five reveal a hesitation to commit to any tradition and for some there is confusion about what they believe. Further, among those self-identifying with a religious or non-religious tradition there were high levels (59%) of moderate or weak attachment allied to low levels (10%) of weekly attendance at religious services. For some participants, their lived Catholicism may best be described as a form of Ingles' creative Catholicism or Ganiel's Extra-Institutional Catholicism. While many participants self-identify with religious (67%) or spiritual (6%) traditions, the data from the profile of the beliefs of participants (Figure 7) suggests that they are not preoccupied with issues of doctrinal coherence or orthodoxy as beliefs are selected in so far as they make sense to participants' lives. When less than one in three believe in a God with whom they could have a personal relationship (30%), significant questions are raised about how, as future teachers, these participants teach faith formational and sacramental programmes to children in Ireland's Catholic primary schools (89%) where personal relationship to God expressed through prayer and liturgy is at the heart of the Catholic school life and RE programme. 69% state that religion does not address their experiences or needs and participants tend to supplement and extend their engagement with religious or non religious traditions in a way that makes sense to them. The data shows that participants blend multiple traditions and beliefs originating from other world religions and secular traditions without an explicit focus on conserving the doctrinal integrity and liturgical and pastoral coherence of Catholicism. Data suggests that these participants have created more flexible, fluid and individual religious and non-religious worldviews. As they move away from orthodox Catholic positions many still self-identify with the Catholic tradition and some articulate that teaching RE in Catholic schools can pose opportunities as well as challenges. Further research needs to be undertaken to profile the lived Catholicism of ITE students in ROI to evaluate how their own lives impact on the teaching of confessional RE programmes as well as sacramental preparation in Catholic schools.