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The new ‘nones’:  
the implications  
of ticking the  
‘No Religion’  
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Ireland

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# The new ‘nones’: the implications of ticking the ‘No Religion’ census box for educators in Ireland

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Patricia Kieran and Aiveen Mullally

In recent decades every census in the Republic of Ireland has given a snapshot of the rising number of people who self-identify under the category of ‘No Religion’. In 2016, one in ten people in Ireland belonged to this group. The manner in which the data is gathered changes over time<sup>1</sup> but the data collected is both fascinating and significant. In 2016 the census question asked ‘What is your religion?’ followed by seven tick box options. This format first appeared in 2002 when ‘No Religion’ was given as the final tick box option in the Religion section. Prior to this people simply wrote their non-religious beliefs in the box provided for religion. For example, under the category of ‘Religion’ in the 1991 Census results, 320 people self-described as ‘Atheist’, 823 as ‘Agnostic’, and 66,270 people described themselves as having ‘No Religion’.<sup>2</sup> Between 1991 and 2016 this number increased seven-fold and currently represents the fastest growing category in the Religion section in the 2016 Census.

At the outset it is important to acknowledge that in Census data terms, Ireland has a very high rate of religious affiliation. In the most

1 A proposed amendment to this question in the 2021 Census will read ‘What is your religion, if any?’ and the option to tick ‘No religion’ will come first and not last (where it was placed from 2002-2016) in a series of tick boxes.

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

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recent 2016 census, 78 per cent self-identified as Catholic with a further 8 per cent identifying as other Christian denominations and minority faiths. Although the ‘nones’ represent ten per cent of the entire population,<sup>3</sup> there is surprising little sustained research into the composition of this group in Ireland, what they believe and what they reveal about identity and culture. Further, understanding this group provides a unique opportunity to explore the complex causal factors, manifestations and consequences of an unprecedented growth of non-religious worldviews in recent decades.

### THE WIDER CONTEXT

Ireland is not unique in witnessing rising numbers of non-religious citizens. Many Western countries have experienced a rapid increase in those who profess no religious affiliation. Andrew Singleton notes that in Australia ‘census data reveal the proportion of the population who declare they have no religious affiliation increased from 7% in 1971 to 22% in 2011. Census results from England and Wales show the proportion of the population with no religious affiliation grew from 15% in 2001 to 25% in 2011.’<sup>4</sup> In the United Kingdom, Linda Woodhead contends that the category of ‘no religion’ is a new cultural majority that rivals ‘Christian’ as the preferred self-designation of British people.<sup>5</sup> In the USA, Victor Sensenig draws on data from the Pew Forum’s survey where ‘the number of Americans who answer “none” when asked about their religious affiliation has been increasing over the last 20 years’.<sup>6</sup> Sensenig notes that this has occurred almost uniformly across gender, income levels, and educational attainment. In a 2012 survey ‘almost 20 percent of the American public do not identify with a formal religion, an increase from 10 percent in 1970 and from about 15 percent in 2007.’<sup>7</sup> In Europe Stephen Bullivant’s 2018 report paints a vivid picture of young adults and religion. Drawing on data from the European Social Survey (2014-2016) Bullivant notes that ‘The proportion of young adults (16-29) with no religious affiliation (‘nones’) is as high as 91% in the Czech Republic, 80% in Estonia, and 75% in Sweden. These compare

3 [https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/population/2017/Chapter\\_8\\_Religion.pdf](https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/releasespublications/documents/population/2017/Chapter_8_Religion.pdf).

4 Andrew Singleton (2015) Are religious ‘nones’ secular? The case of the nones in Australia, *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 36:2, p. 239.

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

6 Victor Sensenig The Rise of the “Nones”: Does Education Explain the Decline in Religious Affiliation? p.339.

7 The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. 2012. “‘Nones’ on the Rise.” The Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, <http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/noneson-the-rise.aspx>.

to only 1% in Israel, 17% in Poland, and 25% in Lithuania. In the UK and France, the proportions are 70% and 64% respectively'.<sup>8</sup> The statistics here clearly show that age is a major factor in a very strong trend toward the emergence of 'nones' in religiously unaffiliated younger age groups in Europe.

#### BELIEF FLUIDITY

While gender fluidity is a relatively recent and commonly acknowledged concept, belief or religious fluidity is less generally recognised. Maurice Harmon's work on the voice of the child involved working with primary school children in Ireland, over an extended period of time, to ascertain their perspectives on religions and beliefs. His research provides evidence of a kind of belief fluidity among children, where categories become plastic and porous. In his research children attending a Catholic primary school self-described as belonging simultaneously to a range of different traditions without exhibiting any sense of contradiction. One child in Harmon's research stated 'My parents ... well, my dad's atheist, my sister is Christian, my mother is Catholic ... they're really religious. Um, my brother I think he's atheist as well. There's a few atheists in my family but a lot of them are Russian Orthodox and Christian. I am Catholic, I think!<sup>9</sup> Harmon speaks of children's 'blended' religious identities as evidenced by another child who described themselves as a 'Catholic Atheist'. Elsewhere another child said 'I am a Catholic Buddhist'. These children exhibited very high levels of awareness of the varieties of belief traditions and perspectives in contemporary Ireland and in their immediate families. One child stated: 'Like my mother, she don't [sic] believe in anything. Her mother was Christian, and her sister is Christian, but she just doesn't believe in anything. Just sometimes people are kind of like and she is shunned by some people, like judged for not believing in anything.'<sup>10</sup> It is not only the young primary school cohort who show this awareness of diversity of religious and non-religious belief. Recent *Religions and Beliefs in Changing Times* (RBCT) research explored 900 third-level students' perspectives on religion and belief in contemporary Ireland. One focus group participant self-identified as Catholic but in a manner consistent with what British sociologist Grave Davie terms belonging without believing. The RBCT participant said 'My dad's view of the Catholic religion .... I don't believe in it but

8 Stephen Bullivant *Europe's Young Adults and Religions* (2018) p. 3.

9 Harmon, Maurice (2018) "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.

10 Harmon 2018, p.72.

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it influences me because he's a sweet person. I have more respect for religion because I was born into it not because I believe in it.'<sup>11</sup>

## THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITHIN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

As a consequence of this type of religious and belief fluidity, an analysis of the beliefs of the 'nones' is all the more challenging. Even the very terminology of 'nones' is problematic as it could present a very large diverse group under a homogeneity that is non-existent. There is an acute need for sensitive exploration of this area because of its complex and contested nature and it is worthwhile to listen to what young people have to say about this issue. In 2012 *The Report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* included the viewpoint of a primary school child who stated that the school '... think that Christian is the only good religion'. In this report, issues such as children noting that 'having to say prayers and go to Church even though you are of a different religion or an atheist' also came to the fore. In an attempt to address the diverse and fluid educational needs of a changing society, educational resources such as *Signposts* have been developed for primary school teachers in Ireland. In this resource a group of teachers developed multi-belief lesson plans including resources on non-religious naming ceremonies. The resource begins a lesson with the words 'Many people have no religion. They do not believe in god and do not pray to god. They believe that life is very important and that every baby is very special. Sometimes they have naming ceremonies to celebrate the arrival of a new life. Family and friends come along and say poems and sing songs and everyone is very happy.'<sup>12</sup> It is evident that teachers perceive a need to educate children accurately and respectfully about non-religious perspectives.

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE NEW NONES

Affirming diversity is at the heart of what it means to be Catholic. The roots of the word Catholic originates from the Greek *kath'holou* which means universal and there are numerous documents from the Catholic Church emphasising the inclusive nature of Catholicism.<sup>13</sup> At the heart of the Catholic tradition lies a deep respect for

11 Marie Parker Jenkins, Patricia Kieran & Anne Ryan, (2019) *Religions and Beliefs in Changing Times*, Scotens Report.

12 Darmody, A., Ward, F. Kelly, E. (2010) *Signposts Lessons for Living: Lessons on Diversity for Junior Infants to Second Class*. Original Writing. p.109.

13 *Nostra Aetate*, 1965; *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 1997; *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, 1998; Vision '08, 2008; *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools*, 2013.

humans to follow their conscience and the inviolable human right to practice freely and with dignity their chosen religious or non-religious belief tradition. In the *Declaration on Religious Freedom* (1965) Vatican II stresses the rights 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'.<sup>14</sup> So what might the rise of the new nones mean for Catholics in Ireland? Research by St Mary's Press in the US (2017) on why millennials (ages 18-25) leave the Catholic Church highlights that 40% of people under the age of 30 identify as having no religion. Some of these participants described themselves as 'sorta Catholic', 'atheist', 'none' and 'anti-theist'.<sup>15</sup> Three categories emerged in the research identifying why the participants disaffiliated from the Catholic Church; the injured, the drifters and the dissenters and this has challenged ministers in the US to reflect on how they are engaging with people's experiences and identity within the Church. The Catholic Church might learn much from researching and understanding the complex reasons behind the rising numbers of those who are religiously disaffiliated.

Catholic schools in Ireland are no longer exclusively *of and for* Catholics and seek to be places of welcome and dialogue between different beliefs. They recognise and respect the religious freedom of their students and of their families and 'offers itself to all, non-Christians included'.<sup>16</sup> While there is much to indicate that Irish Catholic schools are inclusive, welcoming, respectful and supportive of belief difference, there are also signs that educators face a challenge to ensure that the needs of students from a range of religious and non-religious world views are acknowledged and addressed. In response to this the Catholic School Partnership (CSP) published examples of good practice on the inclusion of all pupils regardless of belief in Catholic Primary schools in 2015<sup>17</sup> and the Joint Managerial Body have published two editions of *Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students of Different Beliefs in Catholic Secondary schools* (2010, 2019).<sup>18</sup> These publications affirm the inclusive nature of Catholic schools and offer practical recommendations on how to welcome, include, encourage and enter into dialogue with students from different religious and non-religious worldviews in Catholic school communities.

14 *Dignitatis Humanae* Par 1.

15 McCarty, R.J. & Vitek, J.M. (2017). *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*. St Mary's Press: Minnesota.

16 Vatican City, *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* 1997, par 85.

17 Catholic Schools Partnership (2015), *Catholic Primary Schools in a Changing Ireland: Sharing Good Practice on Inclusion of All Pupils*, CSP: Maynooth.

18 Aiveen Mullally (2010, 2019), *Guidelines on the Inclusion of Students of Different Beliefs in Catholic Secondary Schools*, JMB: Dublin.

A lack of terminological consistency and clarity is a key issue in any exploration of the new ‘nones’ in Ireland. It is crucial to acknowledge the difficulty of achieving agreement on the use of terms when it comes to non-religious groups. ‘No religion’ is a vague category and contains within itself a whole range of possible positions ranging from strong or weak atheists to ethical atheists, to new atheists, to a wide variety of agnostics, humanists, free thinkers, sceptics, secularists, lapsed religious believers, unbelievers and many others. This means that the census category of ‘No Religion’ encompasses multiple positions and perspectives and is open to complex interpretations. Bullivant, Farias, Lanman & Lee’s study of *Atheists and Agnostics around the world* (2019) based on research in Brazil, China, Denmark, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, concludes that ‘Atheists (i.e., people who ‘don’t believe in God’) and agnostics (i.e., people who ‘don’t know whether there is a God or not, and don’t believe there is a way to find out’) exhibit significant diversity both within, and between, different countries. Accordingly, there are very many ways of being an unbeliever (i.e., atheists/agnostics combined).’<sup>19</sup> Indeed, defining terms such as atheism and agnosticism is highly contentious and contested and ‘it is important to recognize that the term “atheism” is polysemous – i.e., it has more than one related meaning – even within philosophy’.<sup>20</sup> For Atheist Ireland (AI) ‘Atheists are just people who do not believe that any gods exist. Most atheists believe things when there is reliable evidence that they are true.’ AI speaks of ethical atheists who ‘want to promote reason, critical thinking and science; atheism over supernaturalism; natural compassion and ethics; inclusive, caring atheist groups; fair and just societies; secular government; and local, national and global solidarity.’<sup>21</sup> So the language people use to self-describe, and the ways in which terms are used, makes the interpretation of census data extremely complicated. Further, when it comes to the exploration of non-religious beliefs, the difficulty surrounding the frustrating terminology and inadequate language sometimes creates friction and compounds a negative portrayal of these worldviews as a deficit. Moreover a plethora of terms describing worldviews such as non-religious, non-believer, no religion, non-theist, unreligious, unbeliever epitomise this approach. Critics argue that

19 Lanman, J., Bullivant, S., Farias, M., & Lee, L. (2019). *Understanding Unbelief: Atheists and agnostics around the world: Interim findings from 2019 research in Brazil, China, Denmark, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.*

20 Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy

21 <http://www.michaelnugent.com/2012/08/24/a-draft-manifesto-to-promote-ethical-atheism/>

the very attribution of the negative preface to the category ‘No Religion’ is problematic as it defines a dynamic diverse range of beliefs negatively while prioritising and normalising religion by inferring that the ‘nones’ are somehow deviant or lacking.

#### NON-RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES AND THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN IRELAND

Interestingly for educators, apart from lesson plans designed collaboratively by the Humanist Association of Ireland and Educate Together,<sup>22</sup> some resources designed by Atheist Ireland for teachers and parents,<sup>23</sup> and the book *Is my family odd about gods? An Introduction for children to the Freedom of Religion and Belief*<sup>24</sup>, there are few home-grown resources enabling educators to learn from and teach about the beliefs of the new ‘nones’ in schools in Ireland. In a country with an overwhelmingly denominational or faith-based system of schooling at primary level with a sizeable majority of faith schools at post primary level, it is important to explore what this rise of the religiously unaffiliated might mean for children, parents, and school personnel in Ireland. Further it is crucially important for faith schools to consider the experiences of the religiously unaffiliated within the educational system from preschool to tertiary level. As primary school teacher Emer Byrden asks ‘What are we teaching this group of children about themselves and what are we teaching other children about this group? ... What do children in this group hear or crucially not hear about themselves?’<sup>25</sup> These questions relate, not only to the curricular area of RE or Ethical education, but to the heart of school ethos in all aspects of school life.

An analysis of literature on the topic of non-religious perspectives and education in Ireland reveals some worrying issues. In a 2018 International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) report on the best and worst countries in the world for Atheists, Humanists and Non-Religious, Ireland comes 115th place out of a total of 196 countries.<sup>26</sup> In terms of educational policy ten different UN and Council of Europe reports stress that

22 [https://www.educatetogether.ie/sites/default/files/humanism\\_lessons\\_3rd\\_class\\_4th\\_class.pdf](https://www.educatetogether.ie/sites/default/files/humanism_lessons_3rd_class_4th_class.pdf)

23 <https://atheist.ie/2019/08/lesson-plans-about-atheism-for-teachers-and-parents/>

24 Atheist Ireland *Is my family odd about gods? An Introduction for children to the Freedom of Religion and Belief* <https://atheist.ie/shop/books/is-my-family-odd-about-gods/>

25 [https://moodle.mic.ul.ie/pluginfile.php/111310/mod\\_resource/content/1/What\\_about\\_the\\_nones.pdf](https://moodle.mic.ul.ie/pluginfile.php/111310/mod_resource/content/1/What_about_the_nones.pdf)

26 IHEU Humanists International At the heart of a vibrant global humanist community Annual Report 2018 [https://humanists.international/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2706-HI\\_AnnualReport\\_AW\\_Web.pdf](https://humanists.international/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2706-HI_AnnualReport_AW_Web.pdf)



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Ireland is infringing on the human rights of atheists, agnostics and minority faith members. Atheist Ireland's Human Rights Officer Jane Donnelly says 'In Ireland the non-religious are now the second largest group in society after Roman Catholics, but still face religious discrimination.'<sup>27</sup> One atheist parent speaks of her children's experience in the Irish education system where religion plays a major role. 'There's an assumption that everyone is okay with religious instruction or a priest coming into the classroom ... and if you're not, you're relegated to the back of the class and treated like a second-class citizen.'<sup>28</sup> While this experience may not be representative of many non-religious parents and children, the existence of such negative experiences in schools is a matter of concern for educators. In 2018 Peter Gunning, a retired principal with thirty-seven years of experience as a teacher and principal in a Catholic primary school in Ireland said that it was only when he took early retirement that he could come out as an atheist. He noted 'It was relatively easy to be an atheist principal of a Catholic school. All one had to do was to pretend not to be. The level of pretentiousness in primary schools is stark. As a principal who was lapsing from a la carte to non-practising to atheism, I wore my lack of belief in God with poker-face anonymity.'<sup>29</sup> Gunning speaks of the prevalence of teachers in denominational schools playing the pretend game. While such practice indicates a need for compassion and understanding it also suggests a need to take non-religious beliefs seriously at all levels of the Catholic educational system.

## CONCLUSION

When it comes to Catholic schools, there is no indicator of whether or not children are being educated compassionately and comprehensively about the fastest growing belief group within the Irish population. Further there is no way of knowing whether educators appreciate the diversity of perspectives associated with the new 'nones'. There is a real need for the Catholic Church to appreciate the complex composition of the new nones, the factors leading to increased religious disaffiliation and the reality of belief fluidity among certain groups in contemporary Ireland. For instance, is there a causal connection between the way we are practicing, understanding and representing the Catholic faith in Ireland and the rise of the new nones? A lot can be gained from research into

27 <https://www.thejournal.ie/best-and-worst-countries-atheist-4310703-Oct2018/>

28 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/schools-and-religion-non-believers-treated-like-second-class-citizens-1.3973464>

29 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/religion-and-schools-it-s-time-to-stop-playing-the-pretend-game-1.3647813>

and dialogue with non-religious groups. It is time to move away from a rhetoric that, in the past, tended to place religious and non-religious groups in competing, binary and even hostile positions. In advance of the 2021 Census with its rephrased question about Religion and its option to tick the 'No Religion' box, it is important for Church members to recognise that understanding the voices and beliefs of every citizen has the potential to enable educators to work toward creating a more compassionate, inclusive, educated society.

**Pope Francis on World Order.** Pope Francis is not a defender of the liberal order that brought in the neoliberal economic system. At the same time, Francis is also not an advocate of demagogic and simplistic solutions to the crisis of that order nationally and internationally, given the neo-nationalistic and xenophobic instincts of the anti-system and anti-establishment political parties. Francis's international actions amounted also to a rejection of the plan of Catholic traditionalism and anti-liberalism in America to take back Europe from secularism, multiculturalism, immigration, globalization, and, in particular, from the European Union. In this we see the connections between this global papacy and the anti-internationalist agenda, which is the agenda of the political opponents of this pontificate.

– MASSIMO FAGGIOLI, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis* (New York: Orbis Books) p. 176.