Ireland’s New Religious Movements

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Edited by

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CHAPTER ONE

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING IRELAND'S NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

OLIVIA COSGROVE, LAURENCE COX, CARMEN KUHLING AND PETER MULHOLLAND

In recent decades, the religious landscape of the island of Ireland has transformed dramatically. In the Republic, the Catholic church, dominant since the late nineteenth century, has faced a steady decline in levels of practice and a dramatic cultural crisis. Similar processes, albeit less dramatic, are taking place north of the border and in the established Protestant churches, while Irish Judaism is also in decline. At the same time, ways of being which classify themselves as non-religious or which consciously resist religion (new and "alternative" spiritualities, atheism, humanism, agnosticism etc.) have become more widespread. World religions – Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and so on – have arrived, with migrants and through conversion; while established churches face the simultaneously enlivening and unsettling arrival both of African churches and of large numbers of new parishioners with sometimes very different orientations to what is nominally the same denomination. Beyond these, new religious movements (NRMs) are flourishing, and what is sometimes called the "New Age Movement" (NAM) – bringing very large numbers of Irish people in contact with yoga, meditation, traditional Chinese medicine, reiki and other forms of "alternative" and/or "complementary healing".

In this context, the study of new religious movements in Ireland becomes an interesting and enjoyable topic as well as one which is manifestly important if we are to understand and live with each other; perhaps particularly *on this island*, where religion has historically been bound up with ethnic and political identity, and where both north and

south of the border religious affiliations have statutory implications – whether in education and health in the Republic or in political structures in the North.

What's new?

The island of Ireland, north and south, has conventionally been seen as religiously monolithic. The nineteenth century saw an ever-closer identification between ethnicity and religious denomination, to which the twentieth century added an identification with particular states, so that "Protestants" and "Catholics" are popularly understood as ethnic categories in the first instance, and secondarily as separate *religions*, rather than versions of a single world religion. In Northern Ireland, what are sometimes referred to as "tribal loyalties" have traditionally made religious alternatives unthinkable, while the Republic is often seen as one of the most homogenous and conservatively Catholic countries in the developed world, on a par perhaps with Poland. Consistent with this, the scientific study of religion in modern Ireland has primarily been the study of these processes: of how the identification of religion with ethnicity and with state allegiance, not unknown in Europe or elsewhere, became so absolute; of religiously-based political mobilisation from Daniel O'Connell to Ian Paisley; and of debates over the institutional power of the Catholic church in the Republic. With a handful of honourable exceptions, such as the study of Judaism in Ireland and histories of forms of Dissent which did not become part of the institutional fabric of the island, "religion" has been understood as meaning Roman Catholicism, the Church of Ireland, Presbyterianism and Methodism.

This has also meant that the bulk of such studies have been decidedly insular and determinedly institutional[1]. Although Irish religion, and Irish Catholic organisations in particular, have been a central point of reference for ethnic formation abroad, in Britain, the US and Australia (Cusack, this volume), and inter-sectarian conflict has been shared with British cities such as Glasgow and Liverpool, this has typically been kept separate from the study of "religion in Ireland". So too has the developing field of research on the massive missionary activity, Catholic and Protestant, through which these organisations were exported to the Irish diaspora and offered to or forced on the "heathen" abroad (Collins 2009.)

[1] The *absolute* bulk of studies of religion in Ireland, of course, have been theological in nature.

This provincialism has also often obscured the strategic *choices* represented by religious affiliation. Despite four decades of "second-wave" feminism, and the increasing identification of Catholicism with anti-feminist positions, both globally under recent papacies and nationally since the 1980s in particular, the study of religion in Ireland has rarely if ever asked *which* Irish people choose to remain "loyal" under these circumstances and why, and which defect and why. Conscious atheisms as opposed to general processes of lapsing and secularisation, show interesting census results (Macourt, this volume) but are severely understudied.

More culpable is the absence of a serious engagement, on the part of the Irish sociology of religion, with the systematic involvement of dominant religious institutions in large-scale processes of incarceration and the systematic abuse of young people (Mulholland, this volume). To some extent this silence parallels the "politics of memory" of how other twentieth-century authoritarian societies are remembered. Since there has been no "change of regime" requiring legitimation and purges, such as that marked by the defeat of European fascism or democratisation processes in Latin America and Eastern Europe, and since collusion vastly outweighed what resistance existed, it would be surprising if it were otherwise. Nevertheless, future studies of Irish Catholicism that aim to be taken seriously will have to understand this integral part of its institutional structure.

Similarly, pre-Christian religion in Ireland, notably the massive megalithic remains of Neolithic and Bronze Age religion, and the putative textual remains of Iron Age ("Celtic") religion, has been of great interest to archaeologists, as well as a global point of reference for neo-pagans (Maignant, this volume) and other "Cardiac Celts" (Bowman 1996). It has also, however, become part of a kind of civic nationalism in which Celtic legends are taught in school, key archaeological sites are presented as central to national (Gierek, this volume) and local identities (Butler, this volume). Furthermore, though literary reflections of this process (Murphy, this volume) form part of general educated knowledge, this too is excluded from conventional discussion of Irish religion.

Finally, of course, the successful self-presentation by the post-Famine church as the representative of "traditional" Irishness means that histories of alternative religious affiliation which predated or resisted this religious closure (Cox and Griffin, this volume), the forms of folk religion which the church tried to eliminate or incorporate (Brownlee, this volume), migrant religion in Ireland (Scharbrodt, this volume; Lacey, this volume), a more recent wave of NRMs which is now half a century old, and the increasing number of Irish people who do not identify with any religion

(Macourt, this volume) are simply written out of a relentless discussion, particularly in the Republic, of the peculiar institutions of Irish Catholicism as they have developed over the last 150 years as if they defined religion altogether. That they are dominant, have exerted pressures on and set substantial limits to the development of other forms of religion cannot be doubted; to accept their own self-image as being the whole story of religion, even in the Republic, is a mistake.

The Maynooth conference

This book comes out of an attempt to understand religion in Ireland in ways which do not simply translate the folk narrative of the homogeneity, universality and timelessness of post-Famine institutional Catholicism into a theoretical universalism. Early in 2009, Peter Mulholland initiated a process which brought Patricia Neville, Olivia Cosgrove, Carmen Kuhling and Anthony d'Andrea from Limerick together with Ciara O'Connor, Maria Griffin and Laurence Cox from Maynooth to co-host an interdisciplinary conference on "alternative spiritualities, the New Age and new religious movements in Ireland" - appropriately enough, at Samhain in Maynooth.

The organisers were initially dubious whether there were any other researchers working in the field, but somewhat to their surprise the conference attracted 44 presentations and 67 participants, from 3 continents, 11 countries and 15 disciplines. The vast majority, both of presenters and participants, were either young researchers (graduate students and recent PhDs) or established researchers who have developed a recent research interest in the area in response to its increased significance, along with representatives of some established Christian churches, members of new religious movements, a few "anti-cult" activists and some members of the general public (see the conference reports by Mulholland 2010 and Cox 2010a).

The conference – and this publication – are particularly valuable because prior to this, the first multidisciplinary conference on the subject in Ireland, there was literally no information on this field other than from a confessional, anti-cult, and journalistic perspective with anecdotal overviews and some enumeration of how relatively well-established religions present themselves.[2] With the important exception of Kuhling (2004), most researchers have only recently developed an interest in the area (whether

[2] Such overviews have been published by bodies ranging from the religious publisher Columba (Skuce 2006) to the Health Services Executive (HSE 2009).

as postgraduates or as established academics), so that the conference represented a genuine learning experience for all involved.

This book therefore represents both the "state of the art" in terms of research on new religion in Ireland and an empirical overview of some of the major *types* of new and alternative religiosities: migrant religion (Scharbrodt, Lacey); conversion or sympathy with world religions other than Christianity (Cox and Griffin, Murphy); "folk religion" and New Age syncretism (Brownlee); Ireland as institutional or imagined homeland for religious identities abroad (Cusack, Maignant); the rediscovery of "Celtic" religion, whether as paganism (Butler) or in co-optation by Catholicism (Gierek); new forms of established religion (Jackson Noble); and the globalisation of the Irish religious market (Bradby). Related themes tackled include the strengths and limits of statistical approaches to religion (Macourt), the psychology of religious experience (Verrier and Hughes, Mulholland), consumption as religion (Kuhling) and the politics of religion (O'Connor).[3]

Studying religion

The scholarly study of religions necessarily adopts a stance of methodological neutrality towards its subject matter. What this means is that – while individual scholars may follow different religions or none – they aim to carry out research according to universally-shared criteria and arrive at conclusions which can be defended independently of the personal beliefs of participants. This distinguishes such study from approaches which either assume prior commitment to a particular religion or whose purpose is to provide arguments for or against particular beliefs and practices.

Given this, content alone cannot serve as a means of categorising religions. Rather, they can be usefully discussed in terms of their social power, or lack of it. Thus what makes migrant religion, migrant is not its content (there are migrant and convert Christians just as there are migrant and convert Buddhists, for example) but its use to serve the needs of immigrant populations. What makes a "new religious movement" is not

[3] Other topics covered in the conference included "unaffiliated spirituality", healing wells, the role of religion in the Polish immigrant community, fiction-based religions, Rainbow Family rituals, the marketing of spirituality, the theology of cyberspace, Buddhist art in Dublin, African churches, spiritual discourse in Alcoholics Anonymous, Catholic responses to reiki, Irish shamanism, the psychology of new religious movements, astrology in postwar Ireland, feminist spirituality, and the role of interpretation in belief.

the absolute age of its beliefs, sacred texts or practices, but the fact that most of its members are converts, that it has little power, social status or wealth – and that it faces established religions which are embedded in the fabric of society. (Christianity was once a new religious movement within the Roman Empire, for example).

Similarly, what makes "alternative spiritualities" alternative is not participants' experiences *per se*, but the fact that those experiences – or the interpretations put on them – are at odds with those which are part of the familiar spectrum of experience within established religion or society (this is the difference between a powerful experience of a Celtic deity or of "energy flow" on the one hand, and a vision of the Virgin Mary or a ghost on the other). The "New Age", for its part, is a rare example of a category which is almost exclusively used by those who do not identify with it; those who use angel cards, reiki healing and so on rarely if ever use this category, which has come to be more commonly used as an implied criticism.

Finally, we should note that there is no universally accepted definition of "religion"; in fact, with the decline of institutionally-focussed religious practice, it is increasingly common to find people insisting on other ways of understanding their own experience and practices, whether in terms of science, psychology or spirituality.

For all these reasons, when we use the widely accepted academic term "New Religious Movement" (NRM), we are using the phrase for convenience's sake. The reader should be aware that many have long histories; some reject the term "religious"; and many are single organisations rather than the networks of related groups often implied by the term "movement". Nor is there any such thing as a community of new religious movements, except in the specific sense that all such movements may face (for example) particular threats of legal persecution, moral panic, media campaigns – or the negative costs of not being institutionalised, such as difficulties in having participants' beliefs recognised and respected in settings such as schools or hospitals.

The long history of religious diversity in Ireland

As already indicated, it is a mistake to think of a "traditional" past of religious uniformity. While the archaeological and literary evidence leaves space for much interpretation (see Raftery 1994), it is clear from the former in particular that pre-Christian religions in Ireland changed dramatically over time. Similarly, if one thing can be confidently asserted from both forms of evidence, it is that such religion also varied hugely

across the country; the literary evidence of Celtic religion in particular underlines the sense of an intense localism, whatever the underlying structural similarities.

While it is true that – with the exception of pre-conversion Vikings – there was a long medieval period during which virtually everyone on the island was a member of the same church, this too was neither homogenous nor static. At the elite level, the tensions between monastic and secular clergy, and between Gaelic and Norman foundations, are well-known. Below this level, the medieval church was catholic in the sense that it made room for a wide variety of religious needs, from the scholars who could read Origen or Clement on Buddhism in the seventh century through to the peasant focus on the life and death of crops, animals and family. It is only in the nineteenth century (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig 1995) that the newly resurgent Catholic church set about stamping out folk religion and forcing everyone into an apparent uniformity of practice and belief which we now think of as traditional.

Long before the Catholic Revival, of course, Ireland had its Jewish population, and from the Reformation onwards an increasing variety of Protestant groups, again up until the late nineteenth century. While popular myth identifies the latter with settler populations, there were native as well as immigrant Protestants, and conversion – in both directions – was such a common feature of Irish life that the Manuscripts Commission decided not to publish the conversion rolls for fear of giving offence. Dissent – those who were neither Catholic nor Anglican – was a very diverse category, starting with sixteenth century Presbyterianism and seventeenth century Quakers and running through the eighteenth century Unitarians and Methodists to nineteenth century groups such as the Christadelphians.

From the start of the development of the capitalist world-system in the sixteenth century, Irish people were involved in processes of colonisation, trading (including slavery), and conversion. This brought them into routine contact with unfamiliar religions, while at home clergy, gentry and increasingly the middle classes had access to reports from Jesuit missionaries and collections of travel narratives (Cox 2010b).

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular saw the rise of Enlightenment perspectives such as deism and popular anti-clericalism: the works of Thomas Paine, for example, were a great favourite among hedge schoolmasters and blamed by some for the insurrection of 1798, while freethought and secular societies existed briefly in a number of towns at various points in the late nineteenth century (Royle 1974, 70). The radical left also served as a means of transmission for anti-religious

perspectives, though these were typically secondary to nationalist concerns which mandated religious observance if not belief.

Also in this period, the Romantic development of new forms of cultural nationalism, linking together ancient myth, contemporary folktale, archaeology, antiquarian history, nationalist literature, a re-identification with landscape and a particular orientation to emotion and expression – explored for Ireland by authors such as Joseph Lennon (1994) and for Britain by authors such as Ronald Hutton (1995, 2007) – became normative for many educated Irish people; much of this "cultural religion" was enshrined in the new state's education system in particular.

In the nineteenth century, a wave of more global "new religious movements" arrived in Ireland – Mormons, spiritualists, theosophists and astrologers were all established before the turn of the twentieth century, for example. World religions such as Buddhism (Cox and Griffin, this volume) and Islam (Scharbrodt, this volume) also had their representatives – whether local converts or immigrants – before 1900.

This went hand-in-hand with an increasingly direct Irish involvement in the British empire – the training of Orientalists, recruitment of soldiers, stocking of museums, consumption of popular culture and so on. From the late nineteenth century on, Irish nationalists forged cultural, political and at times even religious links with Asian anti-imperial groups in particular. It is no coincidence that Joyce's Dublin is full of Theosophical meetings, Buddhist statues, lectures by missionaries and the like. There is thus a "broken tradition" of new religious movements or – put another way – a slowly increasing diversity, comparable to the rest of Europe, which was reversed by the ethno-sectarian processes of the late nineteenth century and largely pushed out of sight by the intensely confessional character of post-independence society. In this respect, the tentative revivals of recent decades seem more like picking up an older pattern than a radical break with this older past.

Even the first half of the twentieth century saw the appearance in Ireland of another wave of new religious movements, including groups such as the Monaghan-founded Elim Pentecostalist Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'i. By the late 1950s, as Mulholland (2011) notes, an "Irish Society of Diviners" was established, while clerical condemnations of "superstitions" appeared, simultaneously with the revival of formal astrology (Roberts 2009). A new "enthusiasm" entered established churches with the revival of religious healing within the Catholic and mainstream Protestant churches, parallel to a growing interest in faith healers such as Finbar Nolan, and the arrival in Northern Ireland of American Evangelist Billy Graham in the '60s. The Baha'i also reported

some modest growth during this period and Transcendental Meditation (TM) came to Dublin in 1964 (Mulholland 2011).

New religious movements take off

This wave of NRMs and religious revival gathered particular pace in the 1960s and 1970s, which saw both a counter-cultural move towards religious innovation or the recovery of supposedly ancient beliefs and practices, and the formation of fundamentalist groups within traditional or mainstream belief systems and religious regimes.

With the exception of faith healing – long part of traditional Irish belief – relatively little of this new wave of religious activity was locally developed: US, UK and west European immigrants played a key role in the introduction and promotion of new movements and practices (Cox and Griffin 2009, Mulholland 2011). Even the anti-abortion groups of the 1980s were largely reliant on American sources for their ideas. Given the powerful position of the mainstream churches in this period, it would be surprising had matters been otherwise and Ireland had been a more fertile ground for religious innovation.

In the early 1970s Fr. Martin Tierney, a chaplain at Dublin airport, witnessed an influx of "itinerant preachers", whom he described as being mainly "born again" type Christians. His book on the subject (1985) listed the Teen Challenge, Greater European Mission, World Vision, the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship, the Church of Christ, Youth With a Mission, the Hospital Christian Fellowship, and the Prison Fellowship among the Christian groups. He thought that most of these new groups had originated in the USA, but provided no estimates of the numbers involved. The Children of God ("The Family") was one of a number of offshoots from the "Jesus movement" that Fr. Tierney encountered at Dublin airport (1985, 5). Press reports from the period said the first "Jesus Colony" was set up around then. Jehovah's Witnesses were also having some success; in 1973 they baptized 71 converts in a Dublin swimming pool, while Evangelical healing crusades and "youth rallies" were being held in Southern towns and cities.

Alongside the Jesus movement and comparable NRMs, the arrival of Hindu-derived groups was particularly visible. Thus the first ISKCON (Hare Krishna) temple was opened in the mid-1970s; yoga teacher Tony Quinn had a "commune" and there was even a "Yoga for Health" programme on the national television station. ISKCON, Transcendental Meditation (TM), the Divine Light Mission, the followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho), and Ananda Marga all made some headway.

The 1970s were a good period for NRM foundation, in the Republic at least (matters were different in Northern Ireland); along with the groups mentioned above, Mulholland (2011) also notes the Moonies (Unification Church), the Way International, the Mormons, Wiccans and other neo-pagans, Buddhists and the Irish Diviners as claiming or showing signs of growth in this period.

Some new Catholic movements also emerged and flourished during this period. They included the Tridentinist movement, Mary's Followers of the Cross, the Charismatic Renewal Movement (CRM), and the House Church Movement (Mulholland 2011). Tierney thought that the House Church Movement mainly attracted "disillusioned Catholics" and some of them turned into the kind of "possession cult" that Taylor (1995) encountered in Co. Donegal in the 1970s. Then, in 1985, just as the CRM was losing momentum, the outbreak of Marian apparitions that came to be known as the Moving Statues threatened further schism and produced another clutch of what Allen (2000) called "visionary cults" (Mulholland, this volume).

The notoriously diffuse and multifaceted New Age Movement (NAM) was already attracting spiritual seekers in the 1970s. By the time of the Moving Statues in 1985, New Ageism was strong enough in Ireland to support the first of what came to be known as the national "Mind-Body-Spirit" fairs. The Mind-Body-Spirit movement (MBS) is a major carrier of New Age beliefs and serves as an umbrella movement for many of the groups and beliefs and practices that constitute the NAM here in Ireland. Many, if not most of those groups have never been studied and those that Mulholland (2011) found in his trawl through the popular press were likely to have been only a fraction of a much larger and diffuse phenomenon.[4]

Quantitative estimates

With an estimated 35 to 40 thousand members, the Charismatic Revival movement (CRM) was by far the largest organized NRM in the Republic. Like many of the other Christian and exotic religious movements that emerged then, the NAM was a highly experiential, millenarian movement (for further discussion of the correlations between the NAM and the CRM see Lucas 1992). However, while the CRM was

[4] Mulholland's survey of the popular media was limited to a couple of Sunday newspapers and is likely to have missed the less newsworthy NRMs. In the early 1990s, Clarke and Sutherland estimated that more than four hundred new religions had emerged in Britain since 1945 (1991).

"quieted" or had its charisma captured by the institutional Church and went into decline, the NAM flourished and by the turn of the twenty first century ten to twenty thousand paying customers were visiting the national MBS fair in Dublin (Szuchewycz 1989; Taylor 1995; Mulholland 2011).

TM claimed 12,000 practitioners but, like most such claims, this was almost certainly an exaggeration aimed at attracting popular interest. Some other groups claimed a few thousand members, but membership of most never rose above a few hundred and some only ever had a few dozen committed members – a fact which did not stop the national media from generating a "moral panic" (Cohen 1980) over the dozen or so "screamers" (practicing primal scream therapy) in Donegal in the 1980s.

A more sober look at the statistics collected in the census suggests rather a slow but steady increase in non-mainstream religion of all kinds from the end of the period of economic autarky and cultural closure in the late 1950s on, expanding most dramatically in terms of actual adherents from the turn of the millennium. Thus, for example, while the 900-odd Buddhists registered in the 1991 census represented a steady growth in Irish-born converts (going back to the 1871 census at least) along with "blow-ins" from other western countries and immigrants from traditionally Buddhist countries, this figure was to more than triple between 1991 and 2002, and to double again between 2002 and 2006 (Cox and Griffin, this volume).

In other words – and lending support to those who argue that what makes an NRM an NRM is its lack of relative power rather than any "inherent" characteristics – a key feature in the rise of NRMs in twenty-first century Ireland has undoubtedly been the collapsing power of established religion. Northern Ireland, where sectarian identification remains stronger, has proportionately fewer NRM adherents (Cox and Griffin, this volume). The cumulative effect of feminist challenge in the 1970s and 1980s, declining sectarian identification and revelations over abuse, Magdalen asylums and industrial schools has been to diminish hitherto unquestioning loyalties to the church of one's birth – and hence to free up individuals to make other choices, of the most diverse kind.

One important caveat to any discussion of numbers is that religious affiliation does not mean the same thing from one religion to the next, or indeed from one period to another. As Scharbrodt (this volume) notes, Muslims typically do not have the intense identification with a particular institution that is characteristic of Irish Christianity, and thus are only poorly represented, either politically or statistically, by approaches which assume that Muslim institutions have the same kind of ownership of their flock as do Christian churches. More generally, those abandoning

established churches are often rejecting precisely this unique and controlling identification, and resistant to any classification. Rather, there is a strong tendency towards fuzzy religious boundaries and identification, towards eclecticism, or towards what Rocha (2006) describes as religious creolisation.

We are in this respect moving closer, for many Irish people, to a situation of multiple religious "identities" (or rather the strategic deployment of different religious vocabularies for different purposes) of a kind which has always been common in East Asia. It is thus common – and not only for the educated or those living in Dublin – to hold weddings and funerals in a Catholic church, to buy angel cards or statuettes, to practice some form of yoga or meditation, to make occasional visits to faith healers or reiki practitioners, and to hold strong feelings about Newgrange or Tara. We should thus be increasingly wary of the assumption that census returns represent more than a very partial slice of reality (Macourt, this volume).

Irish discourses on new religious movements

The global post-WWII surge of NRMs triggered a good deal of anti-cult activity, and the "brainwashing" theory (that NRMs used manipulative methods to recruit and undermine the personal autonomy of converts) was widely promoted. Though academics soon dismissed the brainwashing theory, it continued to serve as a "godsend" and a scientific rationale both for the parents of converts and for counter-cult organizations (Melton 1990). Along with campaigns of deliberate misinformation that feed on the popular media's tendency to sensationalise and simplify, the rather crude brainwashing argument has been used to marginalize NRMs and, in some cases, to persecute or prosecute certain groups through legal actions and in the media. Furthermore, as Eileen Barker emphasised in her plenary address to the Maynooth conference, while the media is inclined to report on the most bizarre or extreme groups or behaviour, little attention is paid to the vilification and violence sometimes inflicted on members of NRMs.

It is certainly true that some new religious movements have caused considerable suffering and harm to members or their families as well as to non-members - as have established religions. It is, however, also the case that uninformed and deliberately negative portrayals of all "cults" as deviant, dangerous and deceptive have generated unwarranted fears. They have also resulted in the persecution of people who may already be socially marginalised or troubled - a process which can in turn contribute to a "siege mentality", drive converts deeper into problematic organisations and escalate confrontations towards violent outcomes.

The negative effects of this kind of "cult-bashing" were an important spur to Barker's foundation of the UK's government-funded and Church-supported INFORM agency.[5] Barker has recently observed that, by comparison with some other European countries, NRMs have become a "reluctantly accepted component of the complicated religious pluralism that typifies contemporary Britain" (2004). In the same volume, Geertz and Rothstein held that attitudes towards NRMs are slightly less hostile in Denmark than is the case in Germany, France, Greece, Belgium, and Russia (no mention is made of NRMs in Ireland). Responses to NRMs, then, vary over time and from one country to another. Nevertheless, the ongoing suppression and persecution of NRMs in many parts of the world led Robbins and Lucas to conclude that "The future for NRMs and minority religions is not bright" (2004).

The social sciences play an important role in providing objective information on NRMs and, by helping to change people's perceptions and attitudes, have contributed to genuine dialogue and tolerance (in some parts of the world). However, "anti-cult" ignorance, aggressive secularism, sectarian intolerance, misinformation, prejudice, and bigotry persist in Ireland and abroad. Indeed, it was the indiscriminate and highly pejorative use of the term "cult" that forced scholars to adopt the term New Religious Movements as a neutral way of referring to all kinds of religious, quasi-religious, and occult groups and movements.[6] Such movements vary enormously (and far more than stereotypes would suggest) in terms of their background beliefs, religious practices, internal arrangements, and relationship to the external world; there is no such thing as a "typical" NRM.

While the academic study of NRMs was taking off elsewhere in the world, what response there was in Ireland came largely from the popular media and clerical scholars or other representatives of the mainstream Christian Churches. Some scholars strove to be objective: for example, quite early on in the life of the "brainwashing" thesis, Rev. Professor Liam Ryan of Maynooth publicly dismissed it.

Nevertheless, though some Catholic academics took a fairly liberal position regarding NRMs, the Catholic Church at the time was reluctant to engage in ecumenical processes, extremely wary of new Christian and Catholic movements like the CRM, and hostile towards most others. In 1983, a group of bishops issued a Lenten pastoral warning of the danger of

[5] Information Network Focus On Religious Movements: http://www.inform.ac.uk

[6] Academics do still use the term "cult", but it is generally reserved for discussing the quality of people's religious involvement and it is not used in a pejorative way (see Saliba 1995).

"cults" and "non-denominational Christian Groups". Within months of that pastoral Fr. Louis Hughes wrote a piece for a national newspaper about "Cults and Deprogramming" and, a couple of years later, Fr. Martin Tierney published his 1985 book *The New Elect*, in which he described a number of different groups as being "bizarre", "deceitful", and "counterfeit"; he also appended the 1983 anti-cult pastoral. Frs. Hughes and Tierney were both involved in setting up an anti-cult organization that, initially at least, had the support of the four main Christian churches in Ireland.

Then, in 1994, the Irish Theological Commission (ITC) published a book dedicated to helping people "discern the inadequacies", "the incompleteness", and the "destructive" elements of New Ageism (1994, 5-6). The ITC's book was largely based on American sources and listed a number of positive aspects of the New Age. As Kemp (2004) observed, however, it generally follows a "sensationalist approach" in talking about how the NAM threatened to "crush" the Church (ITC 1994, 5 - 6). Though the Commission echoed Fr. Tierney's characterization of NRMs as being "counterfeit", it used the term "cult" on just a couple of occasions; a recognition, perhaps, of just how pejorative and provocative the term had been made by anti-cult groups and the kind of indiscriminate reportage that followed the People's Temple massacre in 1978, when the *Sunday Independent* listed the pacifist Baha'i and Hare Krishna amongst Ireland's "extremist cults and religious fringe groups" (Mulholland 2011).

The study of NRMs in Ireland

In many other parts of the world, the surge of NRMs reinvigorated academic interest in religion, saw the study of NRMs emerge as a distinct sub-discipline, and was soon followed by the publication of a plethora of research papers, books, and new journals. Ireland's NRMs, however, were neglected. Even by the opening of the twenty-first century Tom Inglis's monumental study of Irish Catholicism, *Moral Monopoly*, could still be cited as being the "only systematic sociological study of contemporary religious experience in Ireland"(Tovey and Share 2000).

The fact that most of Ireland's NRMs were relatively small and often short-lived while the NAM was so fluid and amorphous and membership so nebulous that it went un-measured and under-studied (with the limited exception of Fay 1997) may have had something to do with the fact that the only sustained interest in them was confessional, pastoral, or anti-cultist. The usual difficulty of getting funding for research projects may have been a major obstacle. But it may also have been that the Catholic Church's monopoly over the religious field in Ireland also deterred

academic adventurism and, to paraphrase what Inglis said in his opening address to the Maynooth Conference, effectively eliminated any form of academic thinking outside of the Catholic box.

Whatever the reasons, the general surge of NRMs in Ireland and the type(s) of religious change that they represent were never subjected to sustained and impartial scrutiny or analysis and the complex interaction of national, cultural, historical, and personal forces and circumstances driving the surge has not been fully explored or explained. It would be nearly half a century on from the first sightings of NRMs in Ireland before the opening of the first non-confessional department dedicated to the Study of Religions, in University College Cork, in 2007.

When addressing the Maynooth conference, the head of that new department, Brian Bocking, observed that as recently as 2007 Ireland had been described as being "one of the two remaining 'blind spots' for the study of religions in Europe", with Portugal being the other (Stausberg 2007). A few relevant studies had, however, been carried out before then, though the little qualitative research that had been published was almost entirely concerned with developments within the mainstream Christian churches and the little quantitative analysis published was based on secondary data recorded in international surveys.

The qualitative research included Ryan and Kirakowski's psychological analysis of the "Moving Statue" phenomenon (1985). Anthropologist Michael Allen also wrote about those events and the "visionary cults" that emerged from them (2000). Szuchewycz published a paper on the "quieting" of the CRM (1989) and Taylor also discussed that movement and the emergence of a Christian "possession cult" in his 1995 ethnography of Irish Catholicism. More recently Kuhling published a sociological study of the New Age Movement in which she discussed the "mostly foreign" community of "New Age Travellers" in Ireland (2004). This marked the real beginnings of a new academic enterprise. We hope in turn that the Maynooth conference, and this volume, demonstrate the value of NRM studies in Ireland and marks a turning point in the hitherto underdeveloped and rather scattered academic interest in religious change and innovation here.

The few quantitative studies of Irish religiosity are based on the findings of the European Values Survey (EVS) and the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). In his observations on the 1981 EVS findings, Ryan highlighted the fact that nearly a quarter of Catholic respondents did not believe in dogmas such as a life after death; meanwhile, only 46% believed there was only one true religion and almost half did not believe in hell or the devil (1984). Cassidy interpreted the

EVS findings for the 1980s decade as having shown a 10% fall in the number of Irish people expressing belief in a personal God and a 9% rise in number expressing belief in some sort of spirit or life force (2002).

Similarly, Stark interpreted the 1993 ISSP findings regarding the number of people believing in fortune tellers, good luck charms, and astrology as indicating that Ireland was fertile ground for "deviant" religious movements (1993). In 2000 Tovey and Share observed that there were signs of a shift towards mysticism and New Age religions. More recently Inglis has observed that "there may be an increasing number of Catholics in Ireland who, while identifying themselves as Catholics, have developed a nebulous New Age orientation to religion" (2007).

That observation lends some credence to the view that although the late twentieth-century surge of Irish NRMs was relatively modest, they were part of a substantial shift in Irish religiosity and indicated "a more diffuse phenomenon… an ethos or cluster of values and beliefs which accords a general place to spirituality" (Campbell 1982; also see Bellah 1976). The fact that NRMs are often harbingers of significant cultural change is one of the main reasons why academics study them. But there are other reasons.

The study of new religion in a global context

Though it has not been developed in Ireland, the study of NRMs has grown rapidly since the 1970s and '80s, when they were typically discussed either in terms of the secularization debate (see below) or as part of what came to be known as the *Cult Controversies* (Beckford 1985). Academic approaches to NRMs now explore such things as the cultural significance and the origins and/or purpose of innovative religious movements; issues of gender, family structure and sexuality; processes of religious creation and dissolution; religious organization and structures; relationships between cultures and between ex-colonies and "core societies"; spiritual experience and associated techniques; millenarian and apocalyptic beliefs; violence and pacifism; religious disaffection and schism; the representation or appropriation of indigenous religion; charisma, routine and hierarchy; social networks and wellbeing; recruitment and conversion; authority, politics, power, and abuse; etc. The academic, psychological and social scientific approaches are not concerned with judging, attacking, or promoting NRMs. But they are concerned with ignorance, intolerance, bigotry and the kinds of uninformed and exaggerated fears that can result in the stigmatization and victimization of people who are, in many instances, already socially marginalized or personally alienated.

NRM studies are inherently diverse; the participants in the Maynooth conference came from (among other disciplines) sociology, anthropology, psychology, religious studies, theology, history, Irish studies, folklore, drama and film studies, computer science and census studies. One leading researcher in the field has observed that:

> Unlike the major academic disciplines, it is a field more defined by its subject matter than by methodology. It is, in fact, self-consciously interdisciplinary and welcomes insights from a variety of methodological approaches, in spite of the obvious problems in communication such openness generates (Melton in Lewis 2004).

Given the relatively small number of people involved in NRMs, why do scholars from so many different backgrounds study them?

One obvious reason is that they provide an immediate way of looking at religious change and at the processes involved in the evolution and development of religious thinking and institutions. Every religion begins as a relatively small group (or "cult"); some grow to become great institutions or world religions that shape whole cultures and epochs while others stagnate, die away, or – occasionally - self-destruct. If by definition very few NRMs ever become major religions, by studying them in their infancy we can learn a lot about religious formation and, perhaps, the human condition.

Those NRMs which are recent creations (as opposed to migrant religions) are also typically relatively manageable in terms of scale. To research a world religion like Buddhism, or even a single branch such as Shi'a Islam, is an almost impossible undertaking: the historical knowledge, linguistic skill, familiarity with texts and commentaries, understanding of theological and ritual change, and so on means that even the most erudite and senior scholars are largely reliant on other people's research and only able to make small contributions in specific areas. By contrast, with a newly-established religion it is in theory possible to directly study its founders, institutions, texts, practices, history and context, and to do original research in some or all of these areas – a rare privilege for scholars of religion. Indeed, it is not uncommon to be the *only* scholar researching a particular group, at least in a given country.

Another way of thinking about NRMs is that they present – in particularly vivid form – many of the concerns and tensions of their time. Spiritualism or Theosophy, for example, are widely studied because of what they tell us about British or American culture in the Victorian era: how it managed the relationship between religious crisis, the rising status of natural science and the trauma of death, for example (Barrow 1986); or

how those brought up in the belief that their religion was the only one deserving respect coped with the discovery that the rest of the world also had great religions, with their founders, sacred texts, holy sites and religious institutions (Franklin 2008). In similar vein, Kuhling (this volume) explores the Irish New Age as a way into understanding the postmodern condition, while O'Connor (this volume) discusses its relationship to gender issues and Cox and Griffin (this volume) use Irish Buddhism as a lens to examine Ireland's fractured relationship to the wider world. Dawson (2003, 3) makes a similar point in arguing that NRMs enable us to study particularly vivid (or, as he puts it, extreme) versions of human behaviour from which we can extrapolate to understand what we find more familiar.

New religious movements and modernity

The growth in NRMs is significant because it reveals underlying trends within society that strongly impact on our understanding of modernity. For the past 150 years, the "secularisation thesis" was predominant in the social sciences, a thesis which argued that increasing modernisation was inevitably accompanied by increasing secularisation. This secularisation thesis is best captured by Weber, who thought that the "fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation, and, above all, by 'disenchantment of the world'" (1946, 129). However, the rise of NRMs challenges this secularisation thesis, and calls into question the inevitability of this alleged tendency towards rationalisation, secularisation and disenchantment. The rise of NRMs shows how rationalisation and secularisation have in some ways produced tendencies towards their opposite; and how Western modernity has become in some ways "re-enchanted". The enormous popularity of the lucrative *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* films and their sequels which proposed, in various ways, enchanted worlds dominated by ancient and magical forces, all illustrate the scope, if not always the depth, of this desire for re-enchantment.

The more widespread rise in concern with spirituality also demonstrates the significance of the realm of the spiritual to contemporary people. For instance, if one enters "spirituality" into the Internet search engine Google this produces no fewer than 84 million hits; more than "catholic or Catholicism" (73 million) "protestant or Protestantism" (16 million) or even "porno or porn" (31 million) (Aupers and Houtman 2008,798). At an empirical level, the last quarter of the 20th century was accompanied by increased levels of religiosity in the US. Berger et al

(2008) provide some evidence that the rise of Pentecostalism across the developing world, the growth of Christianity in the southern hemisphere, the intrusion of Islam in global political affairs, and the increase in religiosity in the US all indicate that there may be global trends toward higher, rather than lower levels of religiosity. All of these examples call into question conventional assumptions regarding the relationships between tradition and modernity, religion and reason, and superstition and secularism, and in particular the idea that these categories are radically distinct from one another.

Despite Weber's warning that secularisation and disenchantment can lead to the soul-less, hollow, "iron cage", the idea that secularisation and modernisation are both equal to social "progress" has been a strong trend in the social sciences. For instance, Fukuyama's famous "end of history" thesis (1992) made the claim that all societies will inevitably "progress" through various stages of industrialisation, de-traditionalisation, and urbanisation, and that that Western- style democracy and free market capitalism represent the pinnacle or triumph of history. The secularisation thesis has recently been criticised for assuming that modernity as it was experienced in modern Europe would take over in all modern and modernising societies, and would eventually spread throughout the rest of the world, a Eurocentric assumption which in many ways has been a central tenet of classical and contemporary social scientific thought (Eisenstadt 1999).

This assumption, of course, is deeply problematic from the point of view of non-Western societies, many of whom are modernising in ways which diverge from the path taken by the West. In contrast with this view of modernity as involving a single path, Eisenstadt believes there are many models or templates regarding how modernity can potentially unfold, and proposes the idea of "multiple modernities". To him, the contemporary world, and indeed modernity, takes many different forms, and it is comprised of new institutional and ideological configurations, some of which are distinctly non-Western but undeniably modern (Eisenstadt 2002). Thus, the presence and persistence of NRMs challenge linear, triumphalist versions of history and call into question our ideas about the nature of social progress.

The fact that NRMs have appeared and persisted in the most supposedly secularised of societies throws a serious challenge to the secularisation thesis. Indeed, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) have claimed that the lower the level of practice of traditional religion in modern societies, the higher the likelihood of NRM activity. However, it is not so much that theorists are now unanimously claiming that the secularisation

thesis is indisputably wrong, but rather, that there is some confusion regarding what exactly it is that proponents and critics of the thesis mean when they speak of secularisation. Jeffrey Hadden for instance has argued that in and from its genesis secularisation constituted a "doctrine more than a theory", "a hodgepodge of loosely employed ideas" based on "presuppositions" that... represent a taken-for-granted ideology" of social scientists "rather than a systematic set of interrelated propositions" (1987, 588). Hadden argues that over time, "the idea of secularization became sacralized," that is, a belief system accepted "on faith." In other words, just as there are multiple modernities, there are also multiple secularisms. Under the generalised banner of "secularisation thesis", theorists often collapse three specific subcategories, and may indeed be referring to any of the following: (1) a social differentiation which took many social functions away from religion (the differentiation thesis), (2) an overall decline of religion (the decline-of-religion thesis), and / or (3) the extent to which religion has become a private rather than a public issue (the privatisation thesis) (Casanova 1994).

With regards to the latter, the "privatisation thesis", one of the key assumptions social scientists have made has been that with the rise of modernity what used to be "public religions" have now retreated to the realm of the private. This assumption of the "privatisation of religion" tends to assume that religion has retreated to the private psychological realm and has become an increasingly privatised, individualised psychological experience which has little or no bearing on social life or the lives of individuals, and exists independently from religious institutions or organizations (e.g. Yamane 1997; Roberts 1990; Bellah et al. 1985). However, even where such "private" religions may have no clear institutional basis, they can exert a strong cultural influence. Besecke for instance argues that far from retreating to the individual, subjective realm of the psyche, much of the religion that has been interpreted as privatized religion or religious individualism is remarkably "public", and takes place in very public places such as cafes, bookstores, lecture halls and discussion groups that are open to members of the public and available for public scrutiny. (2005, 179).

Compelling counterexamples to this idea of religion as "private" can be seen in the profound global effects of 21st century events such as "9/11", the American invasion of Iraq, Israel's recent attacks on Gaza aid fleets, and other ethno-nationalist struggles that have involved some degree of "religious" justification. The increasing political impact of Christian, Islamic and other "new fundamentalisms" demonstrate the extent to which religion is indeed a very public, rather than a private issue,