Empirical Exploration of the Religious Landscape and Spiritual Marketplace of a Post-Catholic Ireland:

Perspectives of a Younger Demographic

Thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy by

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy, is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Publications

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Abbreviations

AIDS: Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

ANOVA: Analysis of Variances

ARCS: Action Research Church and society

ARIS: American Religious Identification Survey

AW: Awe and Wonder

CII: Contemporary Irish identities

CREDs: Credibility Enhancing Displays

CSA: Clerical Sexual Abuse

CST: Catholic Social Teaching

CTiP: Catholic Theology in Practice

C&R: Church and Religion

EENA: Ecclesiology and Ethnography North America

ESS: European Social Survey

EVS: European Values System

ESRI: Economic and Social Research Institute (Ireland)

FDI: Faith Development Interview

GDPR: General Data Protection Regulations (Ireland)

GSS: General Social Survey

HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Syndrome

LPI: Learning Pastoral Imagination

(*n*=) and (N=): Sample Size

PAR: Participatory Action Research

PERL: Psychiatric Epidemiology Research across the Lifespan

RCTs: Rational Choice Theories of Religion

TAR: Theological Action Research

TARN: Theology Action Research Network

‘3 B’s’ of Religion: Behaviour, Belief and Belonging

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Abstract

Padraig Mc Bennett

Empirical Exploration of the Religious Landscape and Spiritual Marketplace of a Post-Catholic Ireland: Perspectives of a Younger Demographic

The empirical, mixed-methods doctoral study that follows set out to explore contemporary perceptions of religion and spirituality from the perspective of a sample of young people living in Ireland. Conducted in the discipline of Practical Theology, and combining social science insights and methods, it explored an apparent epochal and dramatic cultural turn away from organised, institutional religion, and the loosening of the once tight normative link to Catholicism, traditionally the hallmark of Irish ethno-identity. It explored whether new forms of spirituality are replacing religious practices with a precise focus on those who self-identify as *Spiritual but not Religious*. Underpinned by the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas and using Gadamerian hermeneutics as its theoretical framework, I conducted the study in two phases. Phase 1 involved the distribution of a Google Forms questionnaire to a random sample of the demographic of interest which yielded (n=178) responses. Phase 2 involved the conduct of interviews (N=22) with a separate volunteer sample mainly in two Irish universities and some border regions. Data elicited suggest a wide spectrum of religious and non-religious worldviews. While qualitative data affirmed the drift from organised religion evident in my survey data, they suggested that irreligion is not a tidal wave, with some young people reconnecting to organised religion and faith practices following a period of either agnosticism or atheism in their mid-teens. Data suggest that young people living in Ireland think deeply about spirituality as a concept that transcends traditional religious boundaries. These data suggest that a sense of moral good is associated with young peoples' sense of spirituality.

Epigraph

I was born in a time when the majority of young people had lost their belief in God, for the same reason their elders had had it: without knowing why. And then, since the human spirit naturally tends towards judgments based on feelings instead of reason, most of these young people chose Humanity to replace God.

Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, [1998] (2001), 11.[1]

Pessoa's epigraph captures both the simple unquestioning faith that once permeated Ireland's religious and cultural landscape and also the subjective affectivity and emotional aspect of a growing spirituality where the "God within"[2] rather than the transcendent God of normative Roman Catholic belief is prized as some literature suggests. At the outset, it is important to state that I include definitions throughout my study emanating from my research data that reflect my own take on existing definitions that are more open-ended or ambiguous. Less ambiguous definitions are included in my glossary (appendix A). I am not solely exploring whether a new paradigm (basic set of beliefs) of spirituality is empirically rising in Ireland, suggested by other data, which I present in chapter 1. I am relatedly attempting to explore the meaning of this new paradigm from the perspectives of younger people in Ireland, whether they construe spirituality in either religious or secular terms, both or neither. I am interested in perceptions of whether new forms of spirituality relate solely to the natural material world, characterized by immediacy for the individual, or as something beyond the ontology of daily experiences, relating to God or a higher being. In this regard, I emphasize the crucial distinction between inner-life immanence as distinguished from theistic spiritualties. This is an important distinction when constructing my research instruments. Some researchers have not clearly discriminated this crucial point.[3] Based on data elicited from the present study I define the concept of spirituality as,

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[1] Pessoa, Fernando, *The Book of Disquiet*, Edited and translated by Richard Zenith, (Penguin Classics, 2001).
[2] Garelli, Franco, Guizzardi, Gustavo, Pace, Enzo. (Editors), *Un Singolare Pluralismo: Indigane Sul Pluralismo Morale e Religioso Degli Italini*, (Bologna: Il Mulino), 2003.
[3] Heelas, Paul, Woodhead, Linda. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 74. These scholars comment on British surveys for not making this discrimination.

> Subjective and embodied lived experiences relating to the *spirito* aspect of holistic human beings perceived in either theistic, non-theistic or secular terms, sometimes but not necessarily connoted with religion. Humans may perceive the indwelling, illuminating Holy Spirit as the root and centre of religion and mystical experience. Others may find spiritual expression in a range of privatized, humanistic, individualistic experiences with emotional and affective components that relate to personal sacralities. In essence, spirituality transcends traditional religious boundaries.

My data suggest immanent forms of contemporary spirituality which I define as those characterised by

> Emphasis on experiences relating to the *spirito* that have their basis in a natural as opposed to transcendent worldview.

In my view, spirituality closely relates to emotion, which I define as,

> Subjective human responses, expressed as feelings to a range of objective stimuli, and cognitive appraisal of these stimuli.[4]

There are numerous attempts in the literature to define religion. My definition is,

> An inescapable, intrinsic and basic form of human life relative to an individual or community's sense of moral good, sacralities and ultimacy, and the values that they live by, embodied in a relationship with a God/gods or a higher power, perceived as existing either in the natural, material world or in transcendence beyond that world.

Sacralities, then, in my view are,

> The exceptional value and importance placed by humans on experiences, people or objects perceived as having higher significance to human life beyond normal everyday experiences.

Chapter 2.2 presents other definitions of these constructs following my literature review. The next brief section outlines the background, significance and context of my study, introduces its paradigmatic stances, methodologies, methods, conceptual, ethical and theoretical frameworks. I discuss how I bring personal and professional heuristic influences to bear on the conduct of my research and to signpost the chapter contents

[4] This definition is influenced by Kleinginna, Paul R. Jr., Kleinginna, Anne, "A Categorized List of Emotion Definitions, with Suggestions for a Consensual Definition", Motivation *and Emotion*, (5), (1981), 345-79.

General Introduction

At the outset, it is important to state that using mixed methods, which I define as "the collection, analysis, and use of both quantitative and qualitative empirical materials in a single study", has engendered debate in the research literature. Expressing some misgivings about the paradigmatic epistemological, ontological and axiological underpinnings of their use, leading research authors Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln suggest that nowhere is the theoretical and methodological tumult of the past decade more evident than in the crucible of mixed methods. However, they concur with the view that there are situations where both quantitative and qualitative data can illuminate different aspects of the same phenomenon so that a sharper and bolder picture emerges.[5] The precise quest of the present study, I use a sequential,[6] mixed-methods empirical approach, to explore the perceived nexus (if any) between spirituality and the "three B's" of religion[7] (behaviour, belief and belonging) from the perspective of a random sample of young people. I define beliefs as,

> A range of subjective mental attitudes that relate to either acceptance of propositions without material proof regarding the existence of God or gods, or the replacement of these propositions with alternative attitudes.

Religious behaviours then, in my view, are forms of ritual devotion to a perceived God, gods or deities. I define belonging as the sense of association or linkage perceived by individuals to a community of like-minded individuals regarding belief systems. As I use the term embodiment throughout my thesis, I define it as tangible or visible evidence of how human thinking and feeling bodily incarnate. In my discussion of findings, I refer to inward, outward, intrinsic and extrinsic religion based on my data. Inward orientations in my view

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[5] Denzin Norman K. Lincoln Yvonna S. (Editors) The *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research,* 5th edition. (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications, 2018). Uwe Flick differentiates between 'hybrid' and 'mixed-methods.' He describes mixed-methodologies as approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative methods at a pragmatic level, whereas hybrid methodologies are those that include elements from more than one method or approach as in ethnography. See: Flick, Uwe, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research: Theory, Method, and Applications,* (London: Sage, 1998). Also: Denzin, Norman K, *The Research Act: a Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods.* 3rd Edition. (Englewood Cliffs: NJ. Prentice Hall, 1989), 141.

[6] Sequential refers to quantitative followed by qualitative methods.

[7] Burge, Ryan P, *The Nones: Where They Came from, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 8.

are the embodied cognitive and affective aspects of religion as perceived by an individual, whereas outward orientations refer to extra-corporeal religious aspects such as perceived sacred objects and sites, rituals, worship practices and texts. Alternatively, they are definable in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic religion. Intrinsic religion, in my view relates to,

> Subjective perceptions of God/gods or a higher power normatively connected to transcendent faith belief systems and practices to which an individual commits.

Extrinsic religion, in my view refers to,

> Less stable, changing, transitory belief systems that may not necessarily involve commitment, ritual or practice.

Extant research that predominantly uses an empirico-analytic (quantitative) paradigm points to the fact that more individualized forms of spiritual expressions are replacing organized institutional religious practices among a younger demographic. They increasingly follow a Western trend to irreligion, described in the present study as "deliberate indifference towards religion."[8] Indifference in this context refers to the '*So what*?' attitude as opposed to indifference relating to internal freedom in Ignatian spirituality.[9] For example, according to research conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2018, young adults aged 18-39 are less likely than those aged over 40 to consider religion very important to them in 46 out of 106 countries surveyed.[10] Against this backdrop, the present study, straddling both theology and the social sciences attempts to occupy a research gap and deepen the trajectory of scholarly understanding in the academic study of religion and spirituality in Ireland by applying conceptual and empirical approaches to the exploration of the country's 'Post-Catholic' religious/spiritual landscape or market. I explore key issues relating to an apparent rejection of institutional religious authority by young

[8] Campbell, Colin. *Towards a Sociology of Irreligion.* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 7. There are many terms used in the literature to denote unreligious positions, however I chose 'irreligious.' This term best describes the mind-set suggested by my data as opposed to, for example, perceived hostility to religion.

[9] White suggests that indifferent to matters related to God or organized religion, millions shrug their shoulders and say, "So what." See, White, James Emery, "Snapshot", in The *Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*. (Baker Books, 2014), 28.

[10] Pew Research Centre. "The Age Gap in Religion around the World," 2018. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/06/13/the-age-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/#: Accessed on 20/02/22024.

people coupled with the emergence of new forms of spirituality. Some theologians and sociologists of religion express anxieties about how to deal with the issue of contemporary disaffiliation and how young people can be encouraged to participate in Catholic Christianity.[11] There are also concerns about a growing sense of fragmentation of religion and society to which social science readings of the Church have contributed insights in addition to those of ecclesiologists.[12]

I employ a Gadamerian philosophical framework to undertake a hermeneutic of this perceived irreligious drift in Ireland. I base my claim regarding the empirical nature of the study on the conduct of online surveys (n=178), and in-person interviews (N=22) mainly in two Irish universities. American sociologist Nancy Ammerman suggests that college campuses can be important settings in which one can encounter a broad "extra-theistic" discourse about spirituality,[13] which is my core research aim. Irish sociologist of religion Gladys Ganiel also suggests that the university experience can prompt change in religious practices and thus constitutes a fertile research milieu.[14] My research explores the apparent metaphysical and cultural tectonic shift towards irreligion in Ireland from the perspective of a random sample of the precise demographic used in the Pew Research Centre study cited above. There is an apparent severing of the once tight normative link to Catholicism, traditionally the hallmark of Irish ethno-identity. This is an epochal macrosocial change, explored in chapter 1, where Catholicism no longer shapes worldviews or lifeworld's (in phenomenological terms) of Irish youth culture and identity. Thus, my research focuses on the perceptions of those who will shape future religious and spiritual trends in Ireland. Young adulthood is often a time of exploration and change.[15] Roberta Katz *et al* term this demographic *Generation Z* - people who were born in the

[11] McKinney, Stephen J. 'Voices of Young People in the Synod,' *Journal of Religious Education*, (71), (2023), 340.
[12] Watkins, Clare, Bhatti, Deborah, Cameron, Helen, Sweeney, James, "Practical Ecclesiology: What Counts as Theology in Studying the Church?" In: *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* Edited by Pete Ward, (W.B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2012), 167.
[13] Ammerman, Nancy. "Spiritual but Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52: 2, 2013), 271.
[14] Ganiel, Gladys. 'Highly Religious Young Catholics in Northern Ireland: Renewing the Catholic Landscape?" *Sociology Compass*, 17:7, (2023).
[15] Katz, Roberta, Ogilvie, Sarah, Shaw, Jane, Woodhead, Linda, *Gen Z Explained: The Art of |Living in a Digital Age*, (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

1990s and who compile the first generation never to know the world without the internet, and, they argue, the most diverse generation in history.[16] They inhabit what Ammerman calls "an enormously plural and functionally complex modern world."[17] A staggering plurality of marketplace options compete for attention in virtually every aspect of life, including ideologies that pertain to life meaning. Philosopher Charles Taylor argues that people in postmodernity now live without reference to God, the Divine, or personal connection or aspiration to any form of transcendence, which he terms immanence or the immanent frame, making sense without reference to God, the Divine or transcendent. Taylor terms the multiplication of believing and unbelieving positions emanating from new forms of exclusive humanism replacing God's presence in the social space as the "Nova" effect (see appendix A).[18] According to Taylor, the fractured culture of the Nova becomes generalized to whole societies.[19] I further explore Taylor's philosophical interpretation of secularism in chapter 1.2.

An important concept underpinning my study is French sociologist Danielle Hervieu Léger's idea of religion as a chain of memory based on community ritual.[20] This chain links people in the present to the religious traditions of the past and future. Both Hervieu Léger and British sociologist Grace Davie emphasize the persistence of religion through memory. What Karen North terms the "limbo of non-belonging"[21] within "a contemporary milieu of cultural and creedal interruption"[22] is an example of a break in the chain to the religious traditions of the past. Despite this trend, religion remains important to many young people, as evidenced by my qualitative findings. In this context, Davie describes "the persistence of the sacred in contemporary society despite the

[16] Katz *et al*, (2021).
17 Ammerman, Nancy T, "Modern Altars in Everyday Life", In: Berger, Peter L. *The Many Altars of Modernity: Towards a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age*, (De Gruyter, 2014).
[18] Taylor, (2007), 531.
[19] Taylor, (2007), 299.
[20] Hervieu Léger, Daniele, *Religion as a Chain of Memory.* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).
[21] North, Karen, "Research among Young Catholics in England and Wales: How to Disrupt the 'Limbo' of Non-Belonging", (London: St. Mary's University, Twickenham Aquinas Centre, 2018), 2-27. https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/catholic-education/docs/2018-apr-limbo-of-non-belonging.pdf
[22] North, (2018), 3.

undeniable decline in Churchgoing."[23] In my view, this takes many diverse contemporary forms relating to sacralities and requires exploration of where spirituality as a construct interrelates with religion. Regarding the prefix 'post' in my title relating to Catholicism, although conceptually significant in my study, it is not my nomenclature. In her empirical exploration of Catholic Ireland's religious practices and diversity in late modernity, Ganiel attributes the term to then Archbishop of Dublin Diarmuid Martin in an article he wrote for *America: The National Catholic Review* in 2013.[24] Ganiel's own use of the term is an attempt to capture what she considers the "momentousness and drama" of the religious change that has occurred in Ireland.[25] For her, "Post-Catholic" is a descriptive, empirical concept in the sense that a dominant form of Irish Catholicism, once a defining characteristic of national identity no longer holds a monopoly on the Irish religious market.[26] Applying the prefix to her own scholarship, which I discuss in chapter 2, Ganiel draws similarities between her use of the term and that of Jürgen Habermas' description of 'Post-secular' (see appendix A). She describes contemporary religion in Ireland as a "mixed," in addition to a post-Catholic, religious "market."[27] She argues that the descriptive term 'market' aptly captures Ireland's evolving religious landscape and provides a better lens for explaining religious persistence in its diverse forms.[28] She suggests, for example, that when Davie describes the shift from obligation to consumption (relating to the idea of *Vicarious Religion*),[29] she is using the language of consumer choice. Thus, in Ganiel's view, Davie is accepting the logic of religious (and in my view, spiritual) markets. Davie uses the concept of vicarious religion to replace her original *Believing without*

[23] Davie, Grace, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 94.
[24] Ganiel, Gladys. *Transforming Post – Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity*. (UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.
[25] Ganiel, Gladys. 'Ireland as a Post-Catholic Religious Market? The Role of Extra-Institutional Religion', *Studies* (Dublin), 106: 421, (2017), 32.
[26] Ganiel, (2017), 32.
[27] Ganiel, (2016), 2.
[28] Ganiel, (2017), 34.
[29] Davie, Grace, *Religion in Modern Europe,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Belonging concept following critique of this conceptual description as being vague and ill defined.[30] She describes vicarious religion as,

> The notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who implicitly, at least not only understand, but quite clearly approve of what the minority is doing.[31]

Vicarious religion suggests what Davie describes as *A Persistent Paradox*,

> The decline in active membership in most, if not all Churches in this country, alongside the growing significance of religion in public-and therefore in political life.[32]

Davie's *Believing without Belonging* concept suggests that people continue to express high levels of religious belief in the absence of institutional practice and commitment. In her view, the concept mirrors an individualist Scandinavian religious outlook *a la bricolage.* People identify with a Church, without actually attending its services except for crucial rites of passage, while professing widespread scepticism about its theology, thereby weakening its hold. Juxtaposed with Davie's concept, Ammerman's concept of *Belonging without Believing* relates to declaration of religious affiliation while not actually believing any of the tradition's dogmas.[33] I define religious affiliation as,

> Human subscription and practice commitment to a set of denominational or creedal Church doctrines and rituals that are historically enshrined.

Conversely, disaffiliation, in my view is,

> Indifference towards or refusal to subscribe to a set of denominational or creedal Church doctrines and associated practices and rituals.

My thesis explores whether religious trends towards spirituality are manifestations of these concepts in an Irish context and to what extent *Belonging without Believing* (in Ammerman's terms) applies. Ammerman argues that understanding religion requires that "we take spiritualties as seriously as we have always taken belief and belonging."[34] Other scholars describe the current Irish

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[30] Voas, David, Crockett, Alasdair, "Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging", *Sociology*, 39 (2005), 11-28.
[31] Davie, Grace, *The Sociology of Religion.* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 127.
[32] Davie, Grace. *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox,* 2nd Ed. (UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 205.
[33] Ammerman, (2013), 258-278.
[34] Ammerman, (2013), 276.

religious landscape in Ireland as constituting "Ex-Catholicism."[35] Many scholars consider non-orthodox spirituality adherents as a misunderstood population.[36] Mark Chaves, for example, states that it is difficult to know what people mean when they identify in the *Spiritual but not Religious* category.[37] Chaves uses General Social Survey (GSS, see appendix A) data to report that the number who self-identify in this category significantly increased a decade ago, with the most marked increase among those under 40. Available data since then suggests an upward trajectory in either 'no religion' or *Spiritual but not Religious* self-attribution. To enhance understanding, my focus is on eliciting the meaning participants attribute to the *word* spirituality as opposed to the scientific concept and thus forms my conceptual framework. My research questions attempt to elicit the extent (if at all) that my sample connect spirituality to religion or conversely to experiences in the natural world. In other words, whether they construe spirituality in theistic terms as outwardly oriented towards Christianity or other religious traditions or alternatively inwardly towards this-worldly immanence. It also explores whether institutional religion is being replaced by more "intuitional"[38] forms of 'New Age' spiritual practices and whether these practices correspond to a culture of health, personal development and wellness (the 'Holistic' milieu) as some literature suggests, or conversely if my sample connect these spiritual practices to forms of sacralities. In this regard, some decades ago Practical Theologian Elaine Graham identified a resurgence of the sacred, especially in New Age and other religious movements as a feature of postmodernity.[39] Based on my data, I define wellness culture as,

> The increasing adoption of activities and practices derived from Eastern philosophies to enhance holistic personal growth,

[35] See: Turpin, Hugh P. *Unholy Catholic Ireland: Religious Hypocrisy, Secular Morality, and Irish Irreligion*. (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2022).
[36] Oman, Doug, "Defining Religion and Spirituality", In: The Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality. Edited by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park. (The Guildford Press, 2015), 23-47.
[37] Chaves, Mark, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends.* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 41.
[38] Burton, Tara Isabelle, "Who Are the Religiously Remixed (And what is a Religion Anyway?)" In: *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World.* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020), 15-34.
[39] Graham, Elaine, *Transforming Practice: Theology in an Age of Uncertainty*. (London: Mowbray, 1996), 2.

> development, empowerment and healthier attunement to the material world.

Thus, my precise research interest is on the *Spiritual but not Religious* category,[40] which has received mostly sociological and psychological international research attention but less so in an Irish context. Ganiel describes the phrase as capturing something of the sociological and popular zeitgeist of 1990s British religion relating to the secularization thesis (see appendix A), and argues that the phrase has a similar contemporary popular resonance.[41] The category forms part of what Ammerman among many scholars term a two-by-two typology ('both spiritual and religious', 'religious only', 'spiritual only', or 'neither').[42] Ammerman argues that while sociologists and psychologists have paid increasing attention to spirituality as conceptually distinct from religion, efforts to go beyond this simple typology have floundered. She underlines that even when attempting to explore and clarify the construct, many scholars still use the typology. A significant exception to this trend is the work by Abeles *et al*, aimed at developing a more nuanced measure that has utility in the study of religion and health.[43] The present study uses similar questions to those posed by Abeles *et al* to elicit participant perceptions of different forms of religiosity and spirituality. I use the two-by-two typology for the purpose of empirical consistency with previous scholarship on the constructs. Thus, my research instruments consist of a set of experiential questions concerning issues such as feeling touched or guided by God's presence, the beauty of creation, mysticism, awe and wonder, (hereafter AW), finding comfort and sense of community in religion and so forth. I define mysticism as,

> The experience of oneness with God as the essence of how Christians perceive the meaning of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

AW, then, in my view relates to,

> Random, peak moments of exceptional, sublime, otherworldly, emotional and affective experiences, evoked by a variety of

[40] Often referred to as '*Spiritual but not affiliated.'*
[41] Ganiel, (2016), 17.
[42] Ammerman, (2013), 258–278.
[43] Abeles, Ronald G., Ellison, Christopher., George, Linda K., Idler, Ellen L., Krause, Neal., Levin, Jeffrey., Pargament, Kenneth I., Powell, Linda., Underwood, Lynn G., Williams, David R, *Multidimensional Measurement of Religiousness/Spirituality for Use in Health Research: A Report of the Fetzer Institute/ National Institute on Ageing Working Group.* (Kalamazoo, MI Fetzer Institute, 1999).

> transpersonal, psychosocial stimuli that temporarily shift the cognitive human attention field from the everyday to fugue-like and sometimes mystical states.

My experiential type questions attempt to capture the affectivity and emotional aspect of growing spirituality trends referred to at the outset. My study has a socio-theological orientation for cogent reasons relating to my research questions. Leslie Francis, arguing that this approach offers fresh and stimulating insights into the concerns of both the Church and the academy, posits that accessing relevant social scientific empirical evidence and placing it in the context of theological critique and contemporary debate achieves this.[44] Identifying specific benefits of empirical research on religion and education, Francis emphasises the theme of listening to young people,[45] a central theme throughout my study, and to which I return in chapter 8.10 in the context of a new way forward through synodality. My study attempts to capture the voices and perceptions of Catholics, those who are unaffiliated, identify as spiritual only or hold a spectrum of non-religious worldviews. Lois Lee defines worldviews as "the broader assemblage of ideas that unbelief is one component of."[46] I define worldviews as,

> The lens through which humans perceive the meaning of being-in-the-world and their perception of the ultimate meaning of human life.

Understanding the changing religious and spiritual worldviews of a particular community requires ethnographic fieldwork and the use of academic conventions customary to exploring social change. My study focuses on a single social situation (the contemporary culture pertaining to a precise younger demographic in Ireland). It attempts to design a step beyond exploration of religious experience to include perceptions of spirituality. I argue that not limiting the quest for understanding of experience to religion per se but including spirituality can expand ways of empirical knowing derived from first-person 'for-me' perspectives of young entrants to the rapidly expanding spiritual

[44] Francis, Leslie J, "Comparative Empirical Research in Religion: Conceptual and Operational Challenges within Empirical Theology." In: *Empirical Theology in Texts and Tables: Qualitative, Quantitative and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Leslie J. Francis., Mandy Robbins and Jeff Astley, *Empirical Studies in Theology*, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 127-152.
[45] Professor Francis made these comments on 09/12/2019 during the launch of his co-authored book on the topic with Dr. Gareth Byrne at Dublin City University.
[46] Lee, Lois, "Western Europe," In: *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 596.

marketplace. Thus, both theoretically and methodologically, I organically use systematic triangulation, which I define as,

> The application of multiple (theoretical and methodological approaches) in the study of the same phenomenon.

Drawing on intradisciplinary empirical insights from the social science disciplines as necessary conversation partners with theology, I highlight epistemological and methodological points of convergence and divergence between these disciplines. For example, whereas psychology of religion and religious studies are not homogenous as disciplines, Ann Taves suggests there are strong foundations for "building blocks of sacralities."[47] Combining ethnographic/Practical Theological methods with phenomenologically enhanced/inspired interviews to achieve rich or thick descriptions, my study coheres with both the postmodern reflexive turn in epistemology and the contemporary hermeneutic turn to Practical Theology on which I expand in chapter 4.

The next section introduces how I bring to consciousness inflections from life experiences that influence my study and the concepts of autoethnography and reflexivity that I expand upon in a chapter 3.10.

Heuristic influences on the present study

In my hermeneutic quest, I am conscious of Hans-Georg Gadamer's ontological view that the traditions of their culture deeply influence researchers.[48] John Swinton alludes to the autobiographical natures of all research, so the present study is to some extent based on heuristic reflection, bringing to consciousness how professional and personal life experiences influence my belief systems and shape my research agenda. These experiences become a data source, requiring me to recognise the significance of particular, located and embodied experiences. As an embodied, temporal, contextualized social being, a Christian worldview into which I happened to be born shapes my social lifeworld and

[47] Taves, Ann, "Building Blocks of Sacralities: a New Basis for Comparison across Cultures and Religions", In: *The Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, Edited by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, (The Guildford Press, 2015), 138-164.
[48] Cited in Converse, Mary L, "Philosophy of Phenomenology", *Nurse Researcher*, 20:1, 2012), 28-32.

perspective on life meaning. Had I been born or lived in another socio-cultural context I might have different interpretations of experiences that shape my worldview. Thus, to become an effective Practical Theological researcher requires me to be a reflexive, critical and constructive inhabitant of an action-guiding lifeworld or worldview, based on the premise that no human world exists without worldviews, chosen or assumed. A critical foundational question for any researcher, theological or otherwise, is what it means to know, what kinds of knowledge are held to be of most value, and what paradigms, methodologies and methods are most likely to prize this knowledge. As a co-researcher or *bricoleur* I bring, what Australian phenomenologist Michael Crotty refers to as "tacit practice knowledge"[49] to the overall research process, shared in dialogue with participants. I define bricoleur as,

> The action word of *bricolage*, an emancipatory research construct of critical pedagogy. In the context of the present study, it refers to my movement beyond the particular discipline of theology to peer through the conceptual window of the social sciences research paradigm of knowledge production.[50]

In reflexive terms, the study of theology in addition to prior experience of conducting co-produced Participatory Action Research (PAR) interdisciplinary/intradisciplinary mental health research have contributed to shaping both my personal worldview and research approach. Essentially, PAR combines theory and practice in a participatory way.[51] These experiences elide with prior professional experience as a mental health clinician and manager. Hence, clinical experience of providing nursing care for young people experiencing a range of mental health challenges and psychopathology, coupled with teaching and research experience are important influences on my study. I consider epistemological similarities between Pastoral Theology and those underpinning mental health nursing as a practice-based profession. These epistemologies stem from Barbara Carper's seminal identification of four syntactical and conceptual structures of nursing knowledge: empirics (science),

[49] Crotty, Michael, *Phenomenology and Nursing Research.* (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Churchill Livingstone, 1998).
[50] Denzin and Lincoln's seminal works on qualitative research over decades influences this definition.
[51] Denzin & Lincoln, (2018), 319.

aesthetics (art), personal knowledge, and ethics.[52] Clinically, I encountered varied scenarios where existential angst and a loss of personal agency associated with a loss of faith and/or spiritual dimensions to human living became an issue for mental health service users, especially in the context of affective (mood) disorders such as depression and suicidality. Influenced by my interview data, the concept of mental health, particularly its relationship to spirituality, interweaves throughout my study. In this context, Practical Theologian John Swinton and mental health service user and expert by experience Sarah Gibson outline the perception of religion as a formal system of beliefs held by a group of people who share certain perspectives on the nature of the world within which they consider the divine. These perspectives are communicated through narratives, practices, beliefs and rituals, which, taken together, create particular worldviews.[53] According to these scholars, intrinsic religion relates to a person's perception of their faith as central to who they are and their general worldview. They suggest that while religion and spirituality differ in significant ways, they each strive to answer four fundamental questions: *Who am I*? *Where do I come from*? *Where am I going*? *Why*? Religions therefore shape and form the ways in which those who participate in them see and respond to the world. These questions relate intrinsically to the present study's aims and objectives. Recognizing the deep interconnectivity between the constructs, Swinton and Gibson argue that a person's religion is a powerful force for shaping their understanding of mental health problems. They suggest that spirituality manifests itself in a variety of different forms, not simply religion, and forms a central dimension of the recovery model in mental health.[54] They view spirituality as a universal human experience, within which people seek to (re)gain, construct or maintain a sense of meaning, purpose, hope and value. This may not necessarily include a sense of God or the divine, though for some people it does, even if they have no formal connection to a religion.[55] Swinton sees spirituality as a subjective experience existing both within and outside traditional

[52] Carper, Barbara, "Fundamental Patterns of Knowing in Nursing", *Advances in Nursing Science*, 1:1, 1978), 13-24.
[53] Swinton, John, Gibson, Sarah, "Spirituality, Nursing and Mental Health", in *Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing: The Craft of Caring*. 3rd edition. Edited by Mary Chambers, (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, Abington, Oxon, 2017), 95/6.
[54] Swinton and Gibson, (2017), 95.
[55] Swinton and Gibson, (2017), 95/6.

religious systems. It relates to the way in which people understand and live out their lives in terms of ultimate meaning and value. It includes the need to find satisfactory answers to ultimate questions about the meaning of life, illness, and death. Importantly, spirituality provides a context in which people can make sense of their lives, explain and cope with illness experiences and find and maintain a sense of hope, inner harmony and peace in the midst of the challenges posed by mental health challenges. I concur with this view based on clinical and management experience in mental health in addition to qualitative interviewing for the evaluation of a national mental health project with family members whose loved ones received a diagnosis of schizophrenia, psychosis or bi-polar affective disorder.[56] Often perceived as a catastrophic diagnosis, especially first-onset psychosis that usually occurs in late teens, religion or spiritual connection appeared to mitigate the adverse effects of a family member receiving a diagnosis. Thus, people often ascribe meaning to their experiences of suffering, whereas conversely, in my experience, some people lose a sense of spiritual connection when they suffer mental health challenges. Spirituality, then, is not something that we can see or touch and is much more subjective and embodied.[57]

In short, my lived experiences derived from both professional and personal history are ethnographic "cultural sites"[58] that meet in a research context with a cultural community (potentially, but not necessarily similar to my own) but with which a convergence and divergence of worldview horizons may potentially meet or become fused. In my view, Gadamerian hermeneutics, which facilitates this potential fusion (or meeting, as I will argue in chapter 5.3) as part of the hermeneutical circle is the most appropriate choice of theoretical framework to achieve understanding. In this regard, Rasha Alsaigh and Imelda Coyne discuss

[56] Higgins Agnes., Hevey, David. Gibbons Patrick. O'Connor Caroline. Boyd Fiona., Mc Bennett Padraig, Monaghan Mark, 'A Participatory Approach to the Development of a Co-Produced and Co-Delivered Information Programme for Users of Services and Family Members: the EOLAS Programme (Paper 1.)" *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine.* (34: 1, 2016), 1-9. Also, Higgins Agnes., Hevey, David. Gibbons Pat., O'Connor Caroline. Boyd Fiona., Mc Bennett Padraig. Monaghan Mark, "Impact of Co-Facilitated Information Programmes on Outcomes for Service Users and Family Members: the EOLAS programmes (Paper 2.)" *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine* (34:1, 2017), 29-37.

[57] Swinton and Gibson, (2017), 95/6.

[58] Alexander, Bryant Keith, "The Re-Enacting and Inciting of Culture." In: *The Sage Book of Qualitative Research*, Edited by Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln. (London: Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, 2005), 411 – 442.

how the nursing discipline uses Gadamerian hermeneutics in the interpretive practice of research, citing the evidence base for its compatibility with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.[59]

The next section introduces my research decision to use ethnography and Practical Theology. In line with the views of Practical Theologians Zoe Bennett *et al*, ethically, I have a fundamental obligation to my research participants to generate the best possible research. This implies using the most appropriate tools and building accountability into my research design. This emanates from a fundamental obligation of respect for the other, which Bennett *et al* consider both an epistemological and a spiritual stance.[60]

Rationale for research design

Some decades ago, Systematic Theologian David Tracy argued that the nature of theology required radical change to recognize insights from outside its traditional source material.[61] Tracy is an important theological voice underpinning my thesis; hence, I devote a substantial section to his major works in chapter 1.4. My study aims cohere with his insights on pluralism and secularity, as is my approach to theology as *praxis.* The section on Tracy is also a precursor to my qualitative findings chapter where I read interview data theologically through the lens of his classic works. A close relationship exists between ecclesiology and Practical Theology exists in an empirical context, particularly relating to congregational studies where it is normally applied.[62] I consider that including non-congregational contexts and a broad spectrum of worldviews important from an epistemological, ontological and ethical perspective. Ethnographically, my study attempts a theological hermeneutic that explores a single social situation to gather data findings for potential use by

[59] Alsaigh, Rasha, Coyne, Imelda, "Doing a Hermeneutic Phenomenology Research Underpinned by Gadamer's Philosophy: A Framework to Facilitate Data Analysis", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 20 (2021), 2. Also, Ajjawi, Rola, Higgs, Joy. "Using Hermeneutic Phenomenology to Investigate How Experienced Practitioners Learn to Communicate Clinical Reasoning." *The Qualitative Report*, 12:4, (2007), 612-38.
[60] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 51.
[61] Tracy, David, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism.* (SCM Press Ltd. 1981).
[62] See for example: Phillips, Elizabeth, "Charting the Ethnographic Turn": Theologians and the Study of Christian Congregations" In: *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Edited by Pete Ward, (W.B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids: Michigan. 2012), 95-106.

specific target audiences. In this regard, Tracy argued that Christian theology must locate itself in relation to three "publics": Church, academia, society, and address their respective claims to "meaning and truth."[63] Thus, my study attempts to contribute findings for theological reflection on the meaning of religion and spirituality, derived from the social lifeworld perspective of young people living in Ireland. Incorporating social scientific insights *theologically*, my quest is to add empirical hard data and expanded ways of knowing that may be of interest and benefit to these publics. Ethnographer Pete Ward argues that these concerns are not solely the preserve of theologians.[64] My thesis quest could be summarised as an attempt to achieve, what Practical Theologian Terry Veling refers to as 'reading the signs of the times' regarding my topics. Veling sees Practical Theology as a sensibility highlighting the need to see and respond to the signs of the times rather than seeing itself as a branch of the theological discipline.[65] Because my concern is doing theology, I discuss how and why Practical Theology is the most appropriate theological discipline to achieve my research aims in chapter 4.

The next brief section introduces my rationale for choice of Emmanuel Levinas as my ethical framework and Gadamerian hermeneutics as theoretical framework.

Ethical and theoretical frameworks

Central to my decision to employ Levinas' philosophy as ethical framework is his claim that there can be no relationship with God separated from the relationship between persons. In my reading, Levinas' formulation of ethics as ceding place to the other demands more than altruism or concern for the well-being of others. As David Morgan suggests this extreme formulation means we are responsible for all others, all the time, in every way."[66] Their needs override ours, and we have a duty to sacrifice our own to realise those of others. Levinas

[63] Tracy, (1981), 29.
[64] Ward, Pete (Editor). *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography.* (W.B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2012).
[65] Veling, Terry, *Practical Theology: On Earth as it is in Heaven*, (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2005).
[66] Morgan David L, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11.

held that this standard should judge everything that we do.[67] I expand on these ethical claims in chapter 5.1. Regarding theoretical framework, hermeneutics is the act of interpretation – the ways in which humans interpret and make sense of the world. Philosophical hermeneutics is a tradition in continental philosophy concerned with interpreting texts and existence, and, according to Gavin Flood, helps explain not only how we understand texts but also more broadly how we understand life in general, especially as linked to phenomenology.[68] Gadamerian hermeneutics facilitates rich textual descriptions of phenomena where one seeks a deeper understanding (here, perceptions of religion and spirituality). This interpretive paradigm seeks culturally derived and historically driven interpretations of the social lifeworld. In this regard, researchers employ Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology as a theoretical framework and interpretive lens to explore understanding. This process involves a hermeneutical circle of readings, reflective writing and interpretations. The hermeneutic circle is an important metaphor for understanding and interpretation, which are my key research aims. Issues of the hermeneutic circle (background, co-constitution, and pre-understanding) underpin Gadamer's view. The philosophical questions of his primary work *Truth and Method* are "what is understanding, and how is understanding possible?" The formula "Being that can be understood in language" encapsulates this.[69] He saw phenomenological investigation as the means of describing the phenomena themselves. The key to Gadamer's philosophy is that interpretation is engaged in every act of understanding. Thus, it relates to our fundamental mode of being-in-the-world, and understanding is therefore the basic phenomenon in our existence. Gadamer suggested that meanings are unintelligible in an arbitrary way, so we cannot stick blindly to our own fore meanings if we want to understand the meaning of another, without foregoing our own meanings. What is required in Gadamer's view is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text.[70] Aligned with this imperative in Gadamer's view is that the hermeneutical task of itself becomes a questioning of things. Here, it is important

[67] Morgan, (2011), 11.
[68] Flood, Gavin, "Hermeneutics", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. M Stausberg and S. Engler, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 155.
[69] Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method.* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), 432.
[70]Gadamer, (1979), 281.

to emphasise that in advocating the ontological nature of interpretation, Gadamer clearly stated that he was not concerned with proposing a methodological stance for the human sciences.[71] Rather, his quest was to clarify ontologically the underlying conditions in which understanding can occur.[72] There are important epistemological and ontological differences between phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology.[73] Researchers use a variety of philosophical perspectives to inform the process of hermeneutic phenomenology. Swinton and Mowat argue that hermeneutics is an ontological rather than merely epistemological position. They view the task of the researcher as entering into constructive, critical dialogues that potentially lead to a fusion of two horizons. This fusion is a version of the hermeneutical circle where understanding occurs when the horizons of the scholar intersect or fuse with the horizon, context and standpoint of the objective inquiry.[74] This is the essence of Gadamerian hermeneutics and underpins why I use a phenomenologically enhanced/inspired dialogic interview technique to access participant's first-person perceptions, discussed in chapter 6.6.

The next brief section signposts the contents of the thesis chapters.

Chapter outline

Chapter 1 sets the scene and context of the present study. It begins by discussing Tracy's two major works that have a bearing on my entire thesis. Elaborating on my discussion of increasing irreligious trends among young Western people, I distil my discussion to focus on Ireland and bespoke factors that contributed to religious decline. In chapter 2, I discuss, and critique previously conducted interdisciplinary research studies that relate to the phenomena of interest, using this scholarship to inform construction of my bespoke research instruments. My focus is on empirical, ethnographic and cultural anthropological studies of religious and spiritual beliefs/non-beliefs as opposed to traditional cognitive

[71] Gadamer, (1979), xiii.
[72] Gadamer, (1979), xiii.
[73] Laverty, Susann M. "Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 2003), 21-35.
[74] Swinton, John, Mowat, Harriet. "Researching Personal Experience: Depression and Spirituality." In: *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research,* (SCM Press: 2006), 107.

approaches. I discuss a particular ethnography of Catholic beliefs undertaken in Ireland that I consider exemplifies the simple faith that once permeated Irish religion and culture in the context of the anthropological concept of *Credibility Enhancing Displays* (hereafter CREDs). Chapter 3 focuses on ethnography and empirical knowing and the valuable contribution that social scientific insights bring to theology. Here, in 3.10 I underline the importance of autoethnography and reflexivity as distinct concepts in my study, particularly the issue of power dynamics. I also discuss how I frame my research worldview in terms of choice of paradigms,[75] methodologies and methods, expanding on my rationale for using a primarily subjective, interpretivist qualitative paradigm to address my research question. This leads to chapter 4 where I discuss my own methodological position within the discipline of Practical Theology guided by key thinkers and how/ why this theological approach guides subsequent chapters and my methodological approach. Chapter 5 focuses on the ethics of Levinas as my ethical framework and Gadamer as my philosophical framework in the context of the hermeneutic circle and horizons concept. Because Gadamer attributes significant importance to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger as a foundational ontology underpinning his approach, I make a clear case why Heidegger is required in my thesis, emphasising the extent to which he influenced Gadamer. I relate how Ludwig Wittgenstein's socio-linguistic concept of religion as a language game and family resemblance cluster relates to my study. I also allude to the philosophical convergence between Gadamerian philosophy and the phenomenology of Carl Rogers.[76] Chapter 6 discusses the bricolage or practical conduct of the study, where I outline my rationale for the choice of a primarily unstructured, freestyle, dialogic interview approach to elicit phenomenological thick descriptions. I discuss research process issues such as my sampling strategy, ethical considerations, in addition to how I manage the interviewer/interviewee dyad. In this context, I address how I display key qualitative research imperatives such as rigour through an audit trail. Chapter 7 presents and analyses my quantitative findings. In chapter 8, I present and

[75] A paradigm is a basic set of belief that guide action encompassing ethics, epistemology, ontology and methodology.
[76] Rogers, Carl Rodham, *On Becoming a Person: a Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, (Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1961), 115.

discuss the most important qualitative findings derived from thematic analysis of interviewee transcripts providing my own assessment and evaluation of their importance, and relate them to extant literature, including two juxtaposing case studies. I discuss how data derived from my study leads me to reflect on a tale of 'two Irelands', contrasting my past experiences of Catholicism with the contemporary reality. I include a brief section on how my study relates to the Synodal process as a new era for Catholicism embracing the gift of listening and dialogue. I also draw parallels between Tracy and Levinas regarding issues of popular spirituality and ethical transcendence in addition to Tracy's analysis of Heidegger's philosophical views on technology.[77] I include suggestions for postdoctoral research stemming from my data. Chapter 9 presents an overall thesis summary and conclusion that reflects my key discussion points. Appendices present important summary details of my research processes in addition to expansion of some important discussion points.

Section summary

Having introduced my key discussion areas, the next theologically and sociologically focused chapter discusses the overall context within which I conduct my study. It analyses cultural changes regarding Western religion in the context of the structural thesis of secularization that dominated the field for decades since the 1960s before focusing on Ireland's contemporary landscape. In essence, the chapter sets out to contextualise the present study within extant scholarship on the current state of affairs, accompanied by my own analysis and commentary, with a view to informing my argument in the remaining chapters.

[77] I include these insights because of a recurring theme from my data relating to the dangers of contemporary misuse of technology.

Chapter 1: Increasing Irreligious Trends among Young People in Ireland: an Epochal and Dramatic Cultural Turn

1.1 Chapter introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to contribute important sociological perspectives to my study by analysing factors that have led to an apparent cultural turn to irreligion in Ireland. It begins by analysing Western irreligious trends in the context of secularism and pluralism and factors that have contributed to these trends. Here, I include Tracy's rich insights from a Christian theological perspective as a major voice.

1.2 Religious disaffiliation

There is interdisciplinary scholarly consensus that the displacement of organised religion from the centre of human life, coupled with a rise in forms of spirituality is one of the greatest contemporary changes in Western culture. Referring to secularism, sociologist Christian Smith notes, "Something real at the level of macrosocial change … has actually happened in history."[1] While religious disaffiliation is quite marked in the West and Latin America, it is less so in the Middle-East North African region and Sub-Saharan Africa, where the majority identify as Muslim or Christian.[2] What atheist Richard Dawkins terms "The God hypothesis"[3] and the transcendent beyond are apparently not the concern of many young Western people. Philosopher James Smith suggests that this is because of a new option,

> The possibility of exclusive humanism as a viable social imaginary as a way of constructing meaning and significance without any reference to the divine or transcendence.[4]

In Ulrich Beck's terms, this meaning and significance attaches to *A God of One's Own*.[5] This contrasts starkly with Levinas' appropriation of "the God of

[1] Smith, Christian. "Introduction: Rethinking the Secularization of American Public Life." In: *The Secular Revolution*, Edited by Christian Smith. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 5.
[2] McKinney, (2023), 340.
[3] Dawkins, Richard, *Rivers Out of Eden,* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 133.
[4] Smith, James K.A, "Mapping This Present Age.'" In: *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2014), 26.
[5] Beck, Ulrich, *A God of One's Own: Religion's Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence*, Translated by Rodney Livingstone, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

transcendence and otherness."[6] In the context of immanence, Levinas refers to "the magnificent funeral celebrations held in honour of a dead god."[7] Recent published comparative findings in an Irish setting reveal that, with some exceptions, Church affiliation, practice and belief are declining, especially among young adults when compared to previous data. The increasing numbers of mainly young Western people who tick the 'no religion' box on national survey proformas appear to exemplify these trends. In a North American context, based on ARIS and PEW data (see appendix A), this category constitutes the fastest growing demographic, with younger people constituting the most irreligious.[8] Among other data sources, Ryan Burge outlines the dramatic increase in this category from 5% in 1972 to 23.7% in 2018.[9] James Emery White emphasizes that a defining characteristic of this group is that most of them are not atheists. Their disaffiliation, he argues, does not necessarily relate to rejection of God, but rejection of a specific religion where a majority of those who believe in nothing in particular are not actively looking for a specific faith or religion. In the context of youth ministry, Tracey Lamont refers to the number of surveys and polls in the U.S. documenting youth disaffiliation and/or lack of engagement with religious institutions. However, she suggests that these studies fail to describe trends in young adult religiosity and spirituality in local faith communities (affiliated and disaffiliated).[10]

Declining engagement with organized religion is not solely a U.S. phenomenon. For example, British research in the late 1990s suggested that religion was declining and that only a minority held Christian beliefs.[11] A unique feature of the Irish religious landscape is the growing displacement of Catholicism as an ethnic marker. Ganiel sees this situation as an epochal change.[12] She argues

[6] Levinas, Emmanuel, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), X11.
[7] Levinas, Emmanuel, "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition", in *The Levinas Reader,* edited by Sean Hand, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 193.
[8] The ARIS or PEW tools (see glossary) compile these U.S. data periodically.
[9] Burge, (2021). Burge bases these statistics on the U.S. General Social Survey (GSS). (See glossary).
[10] Lamont, Tracey, "From Change to Transformation: Living Synodality in Ministry with Young Adults", *Religions*, 14:314, (2023), 2-13.
[11] See, for example, Gill, Robin, Hadaway, C. Kirk., Marler, Penny Long, "Is Religious Belief Declining in Britain?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 37: 3, (1998), 507-516.
[12] Ganiel, (2016), 4.

that a post-Catholic Ireland involves a "*shift in consciousness*" (her emphasis) where people from a variety of religions, including Catholicism, now define their religion in opposition or contrast to Catholicism.[13] Sociologists often attribute these factors to secularism; thus, it is important to consider Ireland in the larger context of the West. The secularization thesis dominated sociological discourse on religious decline for four decades from the 1960s, when scholars began to consider other contributory variables. In my view, there are relevant contemporaneous factors at play that explain this drift. Among these is the concept of market led rational choice theories of religion (RCTs) in addition to the concept of extra-institutional religion in a growing consumerist culture on which I elaborate in section 1.7.

The next section briefly discusses Charles Taylor's interpretation of secularism in modernity that in my view provides philosophical context to the discussion topics. Taylor's discourse takes a phenomenological, historical account of modern religiosity, analysing what the changes brought about by secularization mean, when faith is but one human possibility among an increasing multitude of other options.

1.3 Taylor's philosophical interpretation of secularism in postmodernity

Arguably, the most comprehensive and analytical philosophical interpretation of Western secularism is Taylor's magnus opus *A Secular Age.* His groundbreaking work, regarded as seminal in the programme of re-engaging with and reformulating secularity,[14] stimulated a wave of interdisciplinary scholarly discourse on secularization. Taylor's concern is understanding belief in a transcendent reality, on one hand, and the connected aspiration to a transformation that goes beyond ordinary human flourishing on the other.[15] Essentially a response to the secularization theory and a commentary on postmodern culture, Taylor's main target is what he calls 'subtraction stories,' the claim that subtracting religion from the modern outlook best describes modernity. He argues that it is impossible to remove religion as a central

[13] Ganiel, (2017), 33.
[14] Lee, Lois, "Non-Religion", In: *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion,* ed. by Michael Stausberg & Steven Engler, (Oxford University Press, 2016), 94.
[15] Taylor, Charles, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 51.

dimension of culture and leave the rest intact. Taylor sets out to address a key question,

> Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God, in say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?[16]

He describes a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.[17] Replacing religion with new forms of exclusive humanism means that people now live without personal connection or aspiration to any form of transcendence. He calls this the "immanent frame" - making sense without reference to God, the divine or transcendent.[18] Taylor sees this as a major cultural and ontological shift from the premodern, socially embedded "porous self" to the meaning constructing "buffered self" that (supposedly) lacks room for the sacred.[19] His view is that, rather than intersected and guided by transcendent forces that open our horizons to dimensions beyond our senses, they have become "immanentized" and "flattened."[20] Increasingly, in Taylor's view, people construe meaning in the human lifeworld as emerging from moral and spiritual resources within the world alone as opposed to transcendence. In his view, religious belief has become a negotiated act in a way that would have been inconceivable just a few centuries ago. Focusing on young people, he suggests that many are looking for a more direct experience of the sacred, for greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth. He suggests that this often springs from a profound dissatisfaction "with a life encased entirely in the immanent order … empty, flat, devoid of higher purpose." The secular world, in Taylor's view is "schizophrenic, or better still, cross-pressured."[21] This particular aspect of Taylor's analysis of religion in modernity is an important perspective, especially relevant to the present study's quest to understand the enormity of the cultural drift from organised religion towards forms of spirituality in Ireland.

[16]Taylor, (2007), 25.
[17] Taylor, (2007), 25.
[18] Taylor, (2007), numerous references.
[19] Taylor, (2007), 19– 21 and 37– 42.
[20] Taylor, (2007), 37– 42.
[21]Taylor, (2007), 727.

In the next section, I introduce Tracy as an important voice, focusing on his two most influential works.

1.4 David Tracy: invoking the analogical imagination in a culture of pluralism

For the analogical imagination, once religiously engaged, can become a clearing wherein we may finally hear each other once again, where we may yet become willing to face the actuality of the not-yet concealed in our present inhumanity in all its darkness – a deepening, encroaching darkness, that, even now, even here, discloses the encompassing light always-already with us.[22]

In my general introduction, I alluded to Tracy's assertion that if one is concerned to show the public status of all theology, it becomes imperative first to study the reference groups - the "publics" of the theologian.[23] Tracy's insights are relevant to many of my discussion points, notably the sociological and theological reality of the Church in the world, his emphasis on praxis, and the disciplinary status of theology in general and Practical Theology in particular because of its emphasis on common human experience as theological sources. His analysis of the need for a pluralism of paradigms on what constitutes theology as a discipline is particularly relevant. In chapter 3, I discuss how the approaches to Practical and empirical theology advocated by Hans Heimbrock and Don Browning cohere with the hermeneutic pattern advocated by Tracy.

1.5 Tracy's revisionist model for theology

In the first of his major works, *Blessed Rage for Order*, consisting of two parts, Tracy's main target is to explain his revisionist model for theology. Examining the pluralist context of contemporary Catholic theology, he deconstructs a fundamental theology whose primary task is "an attempt to determine criteria for theological argument."[24] He begins by outlining the situation/crisis of the postmodern (post-liberal) Christian theologian in cognitive, ethical and existential pluralist realms. Arguing that pluralism enriches the possibilities for theology, his seminal work operates on two principal assumptions.[25] The first is

[22] Tracy, (1981), 455.
[23] Tracy, (1981) 3.
[24] Tracy, David, "The Pluralist Context of Contemporary Theology", in *Blessed Rage for Order: the New Pluralism in Theology*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 250, n 1.
[25] Tracy, David, (1975), 3 – 21

that theological pluralism allows theologians "to learn incomparably more about reality by disclosing really different ways of viewing both our common humanity and Christianity."[26] Appealing to the insights of several theological assumptions, he cautions (with reference to his mentor and like-minded theologian Bernard Lonergan)[27] against a "common-sense eclecticism that can mask intellectual chaos."[28] Tracy's second assumption holds that theologians must attempt to articulate and defend an explicit method of inquiry and use that method to interpret the symbols and texts of our common life and Christianity. He argues that each theologian "must take a stand on both the basic formal methodological and material constructive issues which face us all."[29] Following his analysis of orthodox, liberal, neo-orthodox and radical models, he sets out to formulate and explore the possibilities of his own revisionist model for contemporary fundamental Christian theology in the form of five theses in dialogue with secularity, which he argues will be appropriate to the central meanings represented in that tradition.[30] His first thesis identifies the two principal sources of theology as Christian texts and common human experience and language. His second argues that the theological task will involve a critical correlation of the results of the investigations of these two sources. His following argument is that the principal method of investigating the common human experience and language source is best described as a phenomenology of the religious dimension present in everyday experience and language. His penultimate thesis argues that the principal method of investigating the Christian tradition source is a historical and hermeneutical investigation of classical Christian texts. Finally, he postulates that to determine the truth-status of the results of one's investigation into the meaning of both common human experience and Christian texts, the theologian should employ an explicitly transcendental or metaphysical mode of reflection. Tracy argues against confining experience to sense-experience alone, suggesting that it should include the experience of 'self-as-self', which can be reflectively mediated through art,

[26] Tracy, (1975), 3.
[27] Lonergan, Bernard, Insight*: A Study of Human Understanding*, (London: Longmans Green & Co, 1957), 416 – 21.
[28] Tracy, (1975), 3.
[29] Tracy, (1975), 3.
[30] Tracy, David, "A Revisionist Model for Contemporary Theology," in *Blessed Rage for Order: the New Pluralism in Theology*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 43-63.

history, and cultural analysis, in addition to scientific and philosophical analysis. These are phenomenological modes in his view. When mediations of particular expressions occur, they are only rendered *meaningful* (his emphasis) to various degrees of adequacy dependent upon its disclosive power for our lived experience. The phrase "philosophical reflection" can then be further refined to mean explicitly philosophical reflection upon language and experience.[31] In short, the predominant feature of a revisionist model is the attempt to critically correlate reflections on the Christian tradition and common human experience as theological sources. Tracy argues that orthodox, liberal, neo-orthodox and radical models of theology fail to take account of these sources, while the revisionist models applies appropriate modes of reflection to both.

Part two of *Blessed Rage* consists of six chapters beginning with the religious dimension of common human experience and language. He then discusses religious language in the New Testament, followed by chapters revisiting the metaphysical question of God, the meaning, meaningless and truth of God-language, followed by the re-presentative limit-language of Christology. His final chapter discusses history, theory and praxis, including a section on *Practical Theology: the Praxis of a Revisionist Theory*.[32] His main aim in this section is to indicate what possible light a revisionist fundamental theology might shed on the pressing questions of a theology of *praxis*. Here, Tracy re-emphasises the centrality of the possibilities for critical collaboration for theological self-understanding in a pluralist world, the central aim of his work.

1.6 Contemporary world pluralism through the lens of the analogical imagination

As alluded to, Tracy's core argument is that in a pluralistic society, theologians need to recognize extra-traditional theological insights and source material. The basic question, which Tracy's second major work seeks to address in four principle steps, is how truth and public criteria affirm pluralism responsibly. Divided into two parts – *Publicness in Systematic Theology* and *Interpreting the Christian Classic*, his work takes cognisance of contemporary world pluralism,

[31] Tracy, (1975), 69.
[32] Tracy, (1975), 240-50.

seeing it as a fundamental enrichment of the human condition.[33] Tracy postulates a correlational approach to understanding doctrinal continuity in the midst of historical change and multiple interpretations, where the continuing power of a "classic" practice, text, or person sustains the identity of the tradition.[34] Similar to *Blessed Rage*, his position in this work closely aligns to the views of Lonergan and Karl Rahner. Discussing theology as public discourse, he suggests that a fundamental question relates to the nature of theological self-understanding. He cites Lonergan's view, based on his generalized (as transcendental) empirical method, that one can and should study theological work via intentionality or horizon analysis.[35] Lonergan's development of this paradigm sees theology as a collaborative, field-encompassing enterprise, constituted by several functional specialities. Tracy underlines the need for theological "publicness" across a broad spectrum of different paradigms for theology's diffuse disciplinary status, recognizing the responsibility to produce theological discourse, which meets the highest standards of the contemporary academy.[36] Discussing a search for new theological paradigms, he draws parallels between social science in relation to modern theology, which he argues is not the once perceived "compact" discipline.[37] He attributes a number of reasons for this development including the positive emergence of new paradigms of religious studies in addition to debates regarding the relationship between theology and these studies. Added to this admixture is the emergence of what he terms "new fads" under the cover of the "now leaking umbrella of that once proud discipline - theology."[38] Tracy advocates the use of a correlation model for relating sociological and theological understandings of the reality of the Church in the same way as one uses a correlation model in theology's relationship to philosophy. Theologically, he argues that this model can account for the full spectrum of possible relationships between "Church" and "world" from identity through transformation to confrontation. Sociologically, he cites Peter Berger, Andrew Greeley and Robin Gill as proponents of Max Weber's interaction model that accounts for the

[33] Tracy, (1981).
[34] Tracy, (1981), 231.
[35] Tracy, (1981), 5.
[36] Tracy, (1981), 21.
[37] Tracy, (1981), 19.
[38] Tracy, (1981), 19.

sociological and historical evidence of the complex interrelationship of Church and society.[39] In short, Tracy advocates that understanding of the Church as both a sociological and theological reality is required. Theology, in his view, is a generic name not for a single discipline, but for three: Fundamental, Systematic and Practical. Each of these is concerned with all three publics and a relentless drive to genuine publicness to and for all three.[40] Having outlined points of convergence and divergence between the disciplines, he suggests that if his description is accurate, then it becomes clear that a,

> Radical if not chaotic pluralism of paradigms on what constitutes theology as a discipline and thereby on the public character of theology is likely to occur.[41]

He identifies one common assumption among all theologians, which is the need to provide some analysis of the contemporary situation insofar as that situation expresses a genuinely "religious" question, a fundamental question of the meaning of human existence.[42] This point closely relates to the precise aim of the present study. In the context of theological opinion regarding contemporary praxis and truth claims, Tracy cites discourse between Gadamer's hermeneutical approach and Habermas' praxis orientation as a clear example.[43] Underscoring Gadamer's trust in conversation based on the disclosive power of the classical Platonic Greek tradition, Tracy suggests that if Gadamer is correct, it follows that hermeneutical reflection would suffice not only for questions of aesthetic meaning but also for the question of an adequate strategy for societal praxis. He suggests that Systematic Theologians effectively model Gadamer's retrieval of classical Greek texts in their hermeneutical and literary-critical retrieval of classical Christian texts. However, he suggests that unlike Gadamer, hermeneutic theologians seem content with a,

> Relatively unexamined trust that the rhetorical persuasiveness of those retrieved meanings will prove sufficient to transform individual and societal practice.[44]

[39] Tracy, (1981), 24.
[40] Tracy, (1981), 31.
[41] Tracy, (1981), 58.
[42] Tracy, (1981), 61.
[43] Tracy, (1981), 31.
[44] Tracy, (1981), 31.

In a later work focusing on comparative theology, Tracy argues that the fact that theology itself is now widely considered one discipline within the multidisciplinary field of religious studies impels contemporary theology, in whatever tradition, to become a comparative theology.[45] Tracy's seminal works influence the present study on a number of fronts relating to the pluralist context of contemporary Christian theology. His attempts to offer modes of analysis in clarifying the meaning of common human experience and language are directly relevant. From a methods perspective, it relates to questions of conflict and interpretation regarding theological stances, and the need to articulate and defend an explicit method of inquiry. According to Richard Rice, Tracy's revisionist proposal provides the major elements of a

> Full-fledged philosophical theology, with its carefully formulated arguments for religion and theism substantiating the fundamental presuppositions of Christian faith.[46]

However, Rice poses two questions - firstly, whether the diverse positions which Tracy appeals to makes them into a coherent theological proposal. Secondly, he questions whether Tracy's formulation of the revisionist model is really the only way of meeting the basic theological criteria of appropriateness to the Christian tradition and adequacy to common experience.[47] Tracy's emphasis on the disclosive power of the classical Greek tradition is also important, as Gadamer's hermeneutical approach embodies this aspect in his prioritising of the value of Platonic dialogue. Essentially, Gadamer's argument is that horizons happen naturally in the very structure of dialogue - where we cannot help but fuse two horizons. In another context, Tracy refers to Gadamer's "singular" clarity regarding the reality of praxis (and thereby of ethical and political philosophy) in his appeal to Aristotelian *phronesis* as praxis.[48] In fact, Tracy's chapter on "The Classic" is replete with references to Gadamer (he also references Wittgenstein). He suggests that when one reflects on the meaning of conversation, as Gadamer does in his analysis, one recognizes certain signal

[45] Tracy, David, "Comparative Theology", in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 446-55.
[46] Rice, Richard, "Book Review: Blessed Rage for Order: the New Pluralism in Theology", (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), *Andrew's University Seminary Studies*, 16:2, 1978), 426-7. https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/auss/vol16/iss2/1/. Accessed on 05/08/2024.
[47] Rice, (1978), 427.
[48] Tracy, (1981), 96, n 104.

realities.[49] Real conversation, in Tracy's view, occurs only when the participants allow the question, the subject matter, to assume primacy. In this context, fear dies only because we are carried along, and sometimes away, by the subject matter itself into the rare event or happening named "thinking" and "understanding."[50] In his view, the word "hermeneutical" best describes this realized experience of understanding in conversation – the back-and-forth movement of the conversation itself.[51] Tracy's *Analogical Imagination* is significant to the present study as he wrote it during a period of eroding faith and scepticism about Christianity in the early 1980s. His work has become increasingly relevant in a pluriform context with its emphasis on how classics are important resources for belief systems and interpreting the world. For example, he asserts, "the experience of the classic remains a permanent feature of any human being's cultural experience."[52] For Tracy, classics are,

> Certain expressions of the human spirit (which) so disclose a compelling truth about our lives that we cannot deny them some sort of normative status.[53]

This is where, according to Tracy, whether we name it or not, classics are a normative element in culture, experienced as a realized truth. From a life-meaning perspective, Tracy's work relates to the meaning and perceptions that young people attach to existence, the meaning of self as human in the world, of God and the agapeic love of Jesus in their lives and so forth. Tracy's work was one of the key theological influences on George Lindbeck's development of his postliberal cultural-linguistic theory regarding the nature of Doctrine in 1984. Lindbeck considered Tracy's position as "experiential-expressive" in his (Lindbeck's) religious typology.[54] In the context of his discussion of an intratextual approach to the story of Jesus, Lindbeck contrasts his own approach to that of Tracy's "agapeic way of being in the world."[55] This aspect constitutes the final section of his book, *Christian Analogical Imagination Ordered*

[49] Tracy, (1981), 101.
[50] Tracy, (1981), 101.
[51] Tracy, (1981), 101.
[52] Tracy, (1981), 108.
[53] Tracy, (1981), 108.
[54] Lindbeck, George A, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, (Philadelphia: Westminster), 38.
[55] Lindbeck, (1984), 120.

Relationships, God-Self-World.[56] Here, Tracy suggests that by concentrating attention on the focal meaning of Jesus Christ, theologians develop ordered relationships with the whole of reality.[57] He argues,

> The reality of God as love decisively revealed in the event of Jesus Christ is the central clue to the meaning of the self as a human self both loved and loving.[58]

He argues that in Christian systematics, there is no theology, which is not also an anthropology, and conversely, there is no Christian anthropology, which is not also a theology. According to Tracy, the key is in "the harsh, demanding reality of radical agapeic love."[59] In his view, understanding the realities of God and self, the theologian infers already understanding the reality named world. For the God who as Love affects and is affected by the self affects and is affected by all. He suggests that the self is never an isolated, private, wordless phenomenon. Rather, in his view, the self at every moment is never substance but subject, affected by and affecting both God and world. In short, Tracy sees the self and God as conjoint,

> That God who is Love, and as both self and world in turn, always-already affect Love always-already affect them.[60]

In this regard, Tracy's work constitutes a rich theological prism through which I explore my research questions and subsequent data analysis. Particularly relevant are those aspects that relate to Catholic principles on which I expand in my section on Synodality in chapter 8.

The next section takes a sociological view of how the contested structural secularisation thesis interprets irreligious trends. I incorporate research evidence of religious decline available from a number of religious belief and self-descriptors (see appendix A) in addition to various sources and comparative international studies. Some of these studies concentrate on religious trends, turning points, religious decline and loss of faith in a younger generation in the context of secularism and pluralism.

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[56] Tracy, (1981), 429-38.
[57] Tracy, (1981), 429.
[58] Tracy, (1981), 435.
[59] Tracy, (1981), 435.
[60] Tracy, (1981), 435.

1.7 The secularization thesis

David Voas and Steve Bruce describe how, from the earliest days, two sociological ideas about religion have wrestled for supremacy. One view attributes transformations in modernity to religion losing its societal grip. An opposing view suggests that while the sacred may have to adapt and evolve, faith still remains.[61] Most theorists associate religious decline, especially Christianity with secularization. Outlining how conditions in 1990s North America created a perfect storm for secularization to flourish, Richard Neuhaus describes it as raging through our world like a flash flood.[62] David Martin outlines how historically there were four major waves of Christianization in Europe, each of which brought with it a new tendency to secularization, which in turn facilitated a new wave of religious revival. He argues that because the tide of religion ebbs and flows, it does not follow that the peak wave of every tide will reach equally high up the beach.[63] James White defines secularization as the "cultural current" or process by which something *becomes* (his emphasis) secular.[64] According to José Casanova, modern science and technology increasingly define the cosmic order,[65] which, according to Brad Gregory, have transformed the Western world and continue to exercise an enormous global influence.[66] The main causative factors associated with secularization are issues such as increased societal complexity and differentiation (see appendix A) of contemporary life, modernization, greater economic wealth, mobilisation, the emergence of global communications and the internet. According to Frank Pasquale and Barry Kosmin, these factors cannot help but have erosive transformational effects on religion.[67] The secularization thesis attempts to provide an overarching

[61] Voas, David, Bruce, Steve, "The Spiritual Revolution: Another False Dawn for the Sacred", in: *A Sociology of Spirituality*, Edited by Kieran Flanagan and Peter. C. Jupp. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 43-62.
62 Neuhaus, Richard John, "The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America." (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984).
[63] Martin, David, *On Secularization: Toward a Revised General Theory*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 3-7.
[64] White, James Emery, "A Post-Christian World", In: *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*, (Baker Books, 2014), 46.
[65] Casanova, (2018), 187-198
[66] Gregory, Brad Stephan, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012).
[67] Pasquale, Frank L., Kosmin, Barry A. *Atheism and the Secularization Thesis*. In: The Oxford Handbook of Atheism. Edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 454.

sociological explanation for one of the most significant changes in social structure and culture in modernity. Berger's religious/sociological writings set the tone for the discourse. He viewed secularization as the process that removes sectors of society and culture from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.[68] Theorizing that religious concepts and practices gain their stability from the surrounding plausibility structures shared by the majority, Berger suggested that the growing pluralism of religious options erodes their acceptance.[69] Referencing the (real or imagined) certainty of past traditional Christianity, he suggests rephrasing this proposition in terms of the sociology of knowledge, namely that no plausibility exists without the appropriate plausibility structures needed to sustain an alien faith.[70] Similarly, Bruce argues that in Western monotheistic religions when a single Church spoke *una voce*, it was easy to believe it was God's voice. When there are various alternatives, at least some of them must be false which allows for the possibility that all are false or optional. Later recanting parts of his theory, Berger admitted that he was wrong about secularization but correct about pluralism.[71] His key argument was that if the secularization theory is empirically untenable, a theory of pluralism needed to replace it. He argued that pluralism, as the co-existence of different ethnic, moral, and religious communities in one society, poses a vitally important political problem in that it undermines all taken-for-granted certainties in religion and other spheres of life. Thus, religious pluralism means that people can no longer take for granted the worldview into which they happen to be born. Berger's view is that the presupposition that modernity inevitably accompanies a pluralism of religions and worldviews replaces the view that modernity necessarily leads to secularization. Essentially, he ascribes to a paradigm of differentiation that not only acts on the assumption of religious pluralism, but also assumes religious and secular discourse pluralization resulting from these differences.

[68] Berger, Peter L, The *Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. (Garden City; NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1969), 107.
[69] Berger, (1969).
[70] Berger, (1969).
[71] Berger, Peter L. "Postscript", *In*: Linda Woodhead, Paul Heelas, David. Martin, David. *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion.* (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001), 189 – 199.

There are important ethico-political perspectives associated with secularization and pluralism, viewed as necessary components of a modern democracy, with secularism considered the bedrock of Western liberalism. Maeve Cooke, for example, views Western secularization as a collective historical learning process that has resulted in a basic political right.[72] She argues that freedom of opinion embraces both the positive freedom to live according to one's own religious or non-religious worldview and the negative freedom of protection from disturbance through other worldviews. Erin Wilson develops an important ethical concept, relevant to the present discussion, that while it opens up a plurality of voices, secularism can potentially marginalize the religious voice. Developing the concept, she draws on Mario Blaser's political ontology as part of the recent so-called 'ontological turn' in cultural anthropology.[73] She suggests that the dominance of secularism constitutes a form of ontological injustice, which she suggests is academically under-developed in social sciences/humanities literature.[74] She sees this form of injustice as the subordination and exclusion not just of alternative views of the world, but views of alternative worlds. Wilson makes six basic assumptions that constitute what she terms the 'secular/religious binary', which she sees as the essential defining feature of secular ontologies. She stresses that critics of secularism are not arguing for its dispensation, nor are they unaware of secularism's important achievements. Discarding the binary conception, she considers multiple layers of meaning as a plurality of narratives. Other scholars, for example Craig Calhoun *et al* also contest the traditional religious/secular binary.[75] They outline how political activists have challenged understandings of how secularism and religion function in public life. An aspect of secularization pertinent to the present discussion is 'late' secularization where religion is primarily associated

[72] Cooke, Maeve, "A Secular State for a Postsecular Society? Postmetaphysical Political Theory and the Place of Religion", Constellations. 14:2. (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 233, also Cooke, Maeve. *A Pluralist Model of Democracy*. In *What is Pluralism?* Edited by Volker Kaul and Ingrid Salvatore. Routledge: (Taylor and Francis Group, London and New York, 2020).
[73] Blaser, Mario, "Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Towards a Conversation on Political Ontology", *Cultural Anthropology.* 54: 5, (2013), 547-568.
[74] Wilson, Erin K, *Power Differences' and 'The Power of Difference': The Dominance of Secularism as Ontological Injustice,* (Taylor and Francis Group, 2017), 1076.
[75] Calhoun, Craig, Juergensmeyer, Mark, Van Antwerpen, Jonathan. (Editors)., 'Introduction.' In: *Rethinking Secularism,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

with people who are demographically, ethnically and culturally distinctive.[76] Suggesting the socially patterned nature of cultural consumption, where religion in late secularization societies is concentrated in particular social groups, Bruce argues that this creates a major social gulf between the religious and non-religious. He views religion as no longer a characteristic that is thinly but evenly distributed throughout the population, but concentrated in specific minority populations, which reinforces the sense that "religion is what other people do."[77]

A debate began in 2000 when scholars began to challenge the thesis that a full-blown secularization has occurred.[78] Casanova, for example, suggesting the need for a theory of globalization for secular modernity, challenged Berger's traditional understanding of secularism. He underlines Berger's crucial assertion, necessary for the accommodation of a dual form of religious and secular pluralism that the new paradigm should be able to deal with two pluralisms, "The co-existence of different religions and the co-existence of religious and secular discourses."[79] Other sociologists, notably Bruce, defiantly defend the secularization paradigm.[80] Outlining how the Christian Churches have gained, and lost influence and popular religiosity has ebbed and flowed, Bruce defines differentiation as a crucial aspect of modernization, analysing two related dimensions, social and functional.[81] He argues that these elements are important constituents of a larger package of changes that constitute modernization, historically linked with religious decline. Arguing that modernization, differentiation and secularization are causally related, Bruce's differentiation thesis asserts a,

> Non–accidental and non-tautological link between modernization and a decline in religion's popularity, power and commitment.[82]

[76] Bruce, Steve, "Late Secularization and Religion as Alien," *Open Theology*, (De Gruyter, 2014), 13-23.
[77] Bruce, (2014), 19.
[78] Swatos, William H., Olson, Daniel V.A., Lanham, MD (Editors), *The Secularization Debate*, (Rowan and Littlefield, 2000).
[79] Berger, (2014), ix.
[80] Bruce, Steve, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[81] Bruce, Steve, "Differentiation", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion.* Edited by Michael Stausberg & Steven Engler. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 635 – 645.
[82] Bruce, (2016), 637.

According to Bruce, social differentiation is normally secularizing because the fragmentation of a single overarching Church into a series of competing sects and denominations reinforces the consequences of functional differentiation. He argues that it has a strong independent effect in undermining the plausibility of religion by making clear its human origins. Regarding functional or structural differentiation, his thesis is that, as it loses functions, religion loses power and influence, reducing engagement in acts of religious communication (e.g. prayer and rituals) and the casual everyday contact with religious culture, causing religion to become a discrete subsystem with resultant loss of influence. Citing the Irish Catholic Church as an example, he underlines that where a people shared a single religion, the Church could retain important functions. The upshot of changes brought about by secularization mean that faith is now only one human possibility among a multitude of others. Combining the consequences of social and functional differentiation, Bruce summarizes that the religious freedom of modern Western societies forces us to choose our religion in a context where the reasons for choosing any over none are becoming fewer. In short, Bruce concludes that differentiation is the major causative factor in secularization.

Yves Lambert adds an interesting perspective to the secularization debate. He argues that the overall change in Western European religious trends mask the re-positioning of younger generations.[83] He compared 1999 EVS (see appendix A) data findings to those of 1981 in his 2004 analysis. Lambert identified an established shift to Davie's *Believing without Belonging* concept. He found a growing number of young people (18-29 year olds, approximately similar to the demographic of interest in the present thesis) who never belonged to a Christian religion at any point in their lives.[84] In her analysis of religion in Britain, Davie identifies six factors, applicable to almost all European societies:

1. The role of the historic Churches in shaping British culture.

83 Lambert, Yves, "A Turning Point in Religious Evolution in Europe," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 19 (1), (2004) 29-45.

2. An awareness that these Churches still have a place at particular moments in the lives of British people, though they are no longer able to influence – let alone discipline- the beliefs and behaviours of the majority of the population.
3. The observable change in the actively religious constituencies of Britain, which operate increasingly on a model of choice, rather than a model of obligation or duty.
4. The arrival into Britain of groups of people from many different parts of the world, and with very different religious aspirations from those seen in the host society.
5. The reaction of Britain's secular elites to the increasing salience of religion in public as well as private life.
6. A growing realization that the patterns of religious life in modern Europe are not a global prototype.

In her exploration of Catholic Ireland's religious practices and diversity, Ganiel considers that all six factors could apply to Ireland's religious landscape to varying degrees. Analysing Western European religion, David Voas terms casual loyalty to religious tradition as "fuzzy fidelity."[85] He outlines how religious change in European countries follows a common trajectory whereby religious fidelity rises and then falls over a much-extended period. He bases his argument on the conduct of a major study based on the first wave of European Social Survey (ESS) tool (see appendix A).Voas makes a relevant point with regard to the fuzziness of belief and what counts as religious belief. He argues that if one takes the view that people must accept specific articles of faith and know basic Church doctrine, then only a fraction of the population will qualify as being religious believers. Alternatively, if belief relates to accepting the existence of a higher power or an ultimate moral order, the proportion will be much greater. With regard to the fuzziness of Christian identity, he states that people may call themselves Christian even if they have no religious beliefs.[86] He suggests that many nominal adherents, discussed in the next section, are,

> Lapsed agnostics: they used to have doubts, and now they just do not care … arguably most are secular for all practical purposes.[87]

[85] Voas, David, "The Rise and fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe", *European Sociological Review*, 25 (2). (2008), 155-168.
[86] Voas, (2008), 162.
[87] Voas, (2008), 162.

Developing anthropological and sociological understanding, Abby Day conducted a qualitative empirical ethnography of young people's construction of belief in the U.K. Her research explored how people believe in belonging, choosing religious identifications to complement other social and emotional experiences of belonging. Day argues that nominal religious affiliation is not an empty category, but consists of cultural elements and meanings, where people privately believe in God and other spiritual phenomena despite not attending communal services.[88] Voas paraphrases three important nominalist subgroups from Day's study: 'natal,' 'Christian ethnic' and 'aspirational.' Natal nominalists ascribe their Christianity to familial heritage alone. They are unsure whether God exists, and He does not play a part in their lives. They are unconcerned about issues of life's purpose, the afterlife or religious identity. Christian ethnic nominalists are not convinced about God, do not engage in religious practice and are indifferent to religious matters. Describing themselves as Christian is a way of cultural identification, belonging to a group rather than necessarily having a racial/ethnic identity. Aspirational nomalists describe themselves as Christian, specifically as part of an established Church because they aspire to belong to this group. According to Voas, nominal Christians comprise more than half the population of most European countries. He questions whether it is time to consider how people respond when asked the survey question *What is Your Religion*? In my view, Ganiel makes a noteworthy point in this regard. Outlining how the 2016 Government of Ireland census used this precise wording, she suggests that it likely primed people to choose *a* (my emphasis) religion rather than *no* religion, helping explain why other surveys have found more people identifying as having no religion.[89] These scholarly views form an important basis for developing my understanding of general Western forces at play before I explore the contemporary Irish religious landscape and spiritual marketplace. In any discussion of growing youth irreligious trends, it is important to examine what the literature informs us about

[88] Day, Abby, *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.)
[89] Ganiel, (2023), 12, endnote 3.

the interlinked variables of generational effects and parental/family/significant others on the religious behaviours of young people.

The next section discusses research studies that explored these relationships. These are important perspectives for the present study demographic on which I expand in chapter 2.

1.8 Generational influences on religious practice behaviours

Jay Demerath outlines how a growing cohort of mainly younger people no longer practice their faith as regularly as their parents or adhere to fundamental Church teachings.[90] Many scholars have analysed this trend. Voas, for example, reports an important finding revealing that differences are as much generational as cultural, with each birth cohort somewhat less religious than the previous one. He postulates that, at least in some countries, people do not become more religious with age, a finding reinforced by repeated cross-sectional surveys. He underlines that in Britain for example, explaining differences based on cohort and not age or period effects is preferable.[91] The conclusion, according to Voas, points to the generational nature of religious decline as opposed to the conjecture that people gradually become more religious with age.[92] More recent survey data reinforce the finding that Western younger demographics are less likely than older generations to practice religion. It appears that teenagers demonstrate higher levels of practice than young adults (19-25) do, possibly reflecting the influence of parents. In this context, some research consensus suggests a correlation between parental example and religious engagement in the family home/churchgoing among young people. For example, an empirical study by Leslie Francis *et al* among Australian children (aged 8-14) found that participants were more likely to attend Church frequently if their parents

[90] Demerath. N. Jay., 111, *Crossing of Gods: World Religions and Worldly Politics.* (New Brunswick, NJ. Rutgers University Press), 2001.
[91] See: Crockett, Alasdair. Voas, David, 'Generations of Decline: Religious Change in Twentieth Century Britain', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 45, (2006), 567-584. Also, Voas, David. Crockett, Alasdair, 'Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging*',* *Sociology*, 39, (2005), 11-28.
[92] The Pew Forum report "Religion among the Millennials" reported a steady decline in all the major indices of religious commitment over 40 years in each of the five generations that transitioned into adulthood. See: Pew Research Centre, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. *Religion among the Millennials.* 2010. Retrieved from http://pewforum.org/Age/Religion-among-the-Millenials.aspx. Accessed on 06/12/2022

attended.[93] A study of a similar demographic in England, Scotland and Wales by Francis and Ann Casson reported similar findings.[94] In the Republic of Ireland, Gareth Byrne *et al* conducted a survey on 3,000 13-15 year-old students between 2013 and 2015 on the theme of *Religious Diversity and Young People*. Similar to the research cited above, these scholars found that young Catholics were more likely to attend Church frequently if their parents attend. In Croatia, Damir Milos and Dragan Glavas conducted research on a sample of 18-19 year-old Catholics regarding the role of parents in their adolescent children's religious practice and found that parents remain an important influence on young people's Mass attendance.[95] According to North's research on how to disrupt the 'limbo' of non-belonging conducted among young people in England and Wales alluded to in my general introduction, parents are the most influential factor for the transmission of faith. Identifying a possible generation gap but not a chasm, North reports,

> Faith maturation was augmented by the witness value of other significant adult role mentors, whether extended family or otherwise.[96]

A further finding of her research was that parish life did not provide the same sense of community experienced by young people as university or college, a point that coheres with both Ammerman and Ganiel's suggestion that the university experience can prompt change in religious practices, a point to which my data attests as I discuss in chapter 8.4.

Voas and Alasdair Crockett consider the extent to which supernaturally oriented religious belief permeates everyday life rather than constituting some form of immanent spirituality. They outline how the salience of people's beliefs has waned at the same rate as the decline in religious practices where religious beliefs no longer transmit through generations.[97] Similarly, Michael Levenson

[93] Francis, Leslie J., McKenna, Ursula, Powell, Ruth, '*Ecclesia Domestica* and the Role of the Home in Sustaining Churchgoing Among Catholics in the Church: An Empirical Enquiry Among 8-14 Year Olds in Australia', *Journal of Religious Education,* 3, (2020), 338-59.
[94] Francis, Leslie J., Casson, Ann, "Retaining Young Catholics in the Church: Assessing the Importance of Parental Example", *Journal of Religious Education,* 67:1, (2019), 1-16.
[95] Milos, Damir, Glavas, Dragan, "The Relationship between Religiosity of Parents and Children in Catholics - The Role of Parents in Adolescents Religious Practice", *Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems,* 19 (1), (2021), 64-79.
[96] North, (2018), 2-27.
[97] Voas and Crockett, (2005), 11-28.

et al outline how many traditions, including religious ones, no longer pass largely unaltered generationally in Western cultures.[98] Thus, secular trends in changes in religiousness and spirituality ultimately affect individuals' religious and spiritual experiences, which in turn affect changes at the level of societal structure. However, some scholars debate the influences on religious socialization. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, for example, emphasized the importance of parental religious socialization in sustaining children's religiousness from early adolescence into early adulthood.[99] Jeffrey Arnett reported a contrary view where data suggested that childhood religious socialization by parents had no influence on emerging adults' religiousness.[100] In this context, Tom Beaudoin refers to the irreverent search for meaning of *Generation X*.[101] Beaudoin argued that this generation have fashioned a theology radically different from, but no less potent or valid than that of their elders. He argued that if the institutional Church wants to attract a younger generation it needs to put Jesus central to its practices. In a similar vein, James White argued that many outside the Christian faith think Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind and that the meaning of Christianity in our society is not what He had in mind.[102] David Lyons argued that despite the postmodern move away from institutional religion by young people, they still value their relationship with Jesus, perceived as inclusive of outsiders, minority groups, and the promotion of social justice.[103] According to Lyons, Jesus is popular because "He comes dressed up in the clothes of our own culture."[104]

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[98] Levenson, Michael R., Aldwin, Carolyn M., Igarashi, Heidi, "Religious Development from Adolescence to Middle Adulthood", in *The Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Ed. by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, (The Guildford Press, 2015), 183.

[99] Smith, Christian. Snell, Patricia, *Souls in Transition: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2009.

[100] Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the* Twenties. (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[101] Beaudoin, Tom, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. (California: Jossey-Bass, Inc, Publishers, 1998). Generation X is the Western demographic cohort following the baby boomers and preceding the millennials.

[102] White, James Emery, "Lawyers, Guns, and Money." In: *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*, (Baker Books, 2014), 39.

[103] Lyons, David, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000). Lyons uses the metaphor of Jesus in Disneyland to discuss the commodification of spirituality as opposed to religion.

[104] Lyons, (2000) 136-7.

It is evident that issues associated with religious decline are multifactorial and multivalent. This has led to scholarly critique of the secularization thesis. Voas, for example, outlining a common objection to the thesis is that European countries display no common pattern of religious change. Andrew Greeley concurred that secularization is patently a useless theory because it said too much and hence failed to assume a wide variety of interesting data.[105] Some decades ago, Lindbeck argued,

> Berger failed to make theological use of his methodologically atheistic cultural theory … because it belongs to a way of thinking about religion that has heretofore scarcely ever been employed except atheistically.[106]

In his analysis, Rodney Stark concludes,

> It seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories and there to whisper, *Requiescat in Pace*.[107]

I concur with Stark's conclusion based on my analysis of other forces at play in religious decline in an Irish context to which the next section is devoted. Here, I take a brief historicizing approach to the trajectory of decline in aspects of Catholicism and concomitant major cultural change during the 20th century to more contemporary issues. In my view, analysis of such a dramatic change in Ireland's religious landscape cannot proceed without consideration of its past. However, some research studies that I discuss suggest that Ireland's landscape is a counter-narrative to Europe's secularization trends.

1.9 Irish secularization and Catholicism's dwindling power

Many scholars have studied the predominant presence of the Catholic Church in all aspects of Irish social, political and cultural life, mainly focusing on the first and second half of the twentieth century.[108] Others concentrate their analysis on various aspects of the historical interconnection between Catholicism, national identity and the erosion of Catholicism's influence as Ireland became a more

[105] Greeley, Andrew, *Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millennium.* (New Brunswick: NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003).
[106] Lindbeck, (1984), 20.
[107] Stark, Rodney, "Secularization, R.I.P," *Sociology of Religion*, 60 (3), (1999), 270.
[108] Buckley, David T, *Faithful to Secularism: The Religious Politics of Democracy in Ireland, Senegal and the Philippines*, (Columbia University Press, 2017).

secularised society.[109] This is unsurprising because of the historical normative link between Catholicism and ethno-identity alluded to already, arguably a historical global exemplar of such a nexus. Some scholars have been critical of attempts to apply the secularisation thesis to an Irish context in the first instance.[110] Taking a historicizing approach, Timothy J. White outlines how reinvention of a Gaelic culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, aimed at rallying against Protestant British imperialism, largely depended on Catholicism as the dominant religion underpinning nationalism as a mass movement. White argues that this approach to the secularization debate is more useful in explaining the dwindling power of the Church today than more recent theories of secularisation that emphasise the vitality of religion in more pluralistic and competitive settings.[111] Focusing on the period 1950 - late 1970, Louise Fuller outlined the decline and unravelling of Catholicism from a once powerful social force in Ireland to its current state of self-doubt and decline.[112] A number of important milestones that demonstrated the power wielded by the Catholic hierarchy who occupied a special position in the polity marked this period.[113] The controversial *Mother and Child* affair best exemplified this power. This Irish government initiative proposed free maternity care for mothers and free medical care to children under sixteen years of age in the development of national health-care policy. The Catholic hierarchy intervened and opposed the policy on religious grounds, arguing that it intruded on family autonomy guaranteed in *Bunreacht Na hEireann* (the Irish Constitution). The principles of Catholic social thought as set out in Papal encyclicals rather than an ecumenical approach

109 See for example, Hornsby – Smith, Michael P, "Social and Religious Transformations in Ireland: A Case for Secularization?" in *The Development of Industrial Society in Ireland*, Edited by John Goldthorpe and Christopher Whelan. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 265-90. Also, Inglis, Tom. *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland.* (University College Dublin Press, 1998.) Greeley, Andrew. Ward, Conor, "How Secularised is the Ireland We live in?" *Doctrine and Life*, 50, (2000), 581-603.
110 See: Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, Máire, "The Power of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland", in *Irish Society: Sociological Perspectives.* Edited by S. Clancy, K. Drudy, K. Lynch and L.O' Dowd. (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration. 1989), 593-619. Also, Kissane, Bill, 'The Illusion of State Neutrality in a Secularising Ireland', *West European Politics,* 26: 1, (2003), 73-94.
111 White, Timothy J, "Catholicism and Nationalism in Ireland: From Fusion in the 19th Century to Separation in the 21st Century", *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture,* 4:1, (University of Westminster: London, 2007).
112 Fuller, Louise, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture*. (Gill & Macmillan: Dublin, 2004).
113 The Irish constitution formally and legally discontinued this special position with a view to appeasing Northern Ireland Protestants in 1972.

underpinned their objections, which resulted in the abandonment of the scheme. Using Indian political theorist Rajeev Bhargava's axiom of "benevolent secularism"[114] as theoretical framework and ideal type, David Buckley argues that the affair illustrates the consequences of the tenuous status of "principled distance" in independent Ireland, which he describes as "a kind of even-handedness in state dealings with religious communities."[115] Here, he emphasised Bhargava's rider that principled distance rests on a distinction between "equal treatment and treating everyone as an equal."[116] Buckley argued that the crisis illustrated not the political strength of Irish Catholicism, but rather the cost to the religious majority that would come with a breakdown of benevolent secularism.

Michael Hornsby–Smith was among the first researchers that specifically addressed the secularization thesis in an Irish context and its purported relationship to the processes of industrialization and modernization. He analysed the predominant social and religious transformations that heralded signs of an emerging 'new' Ireland over the course of four decades in terms of Karel Dobbelaere's 1981 three sociological dimensions of secularization and levels of analysis.[117] Among significant milestones were revision of the law that allowed a couple of mixed-religion to adopt a child and the election of a female advocate of a pluralist, modern Ireland to the Irish presidency in 1990. According to Hornsby-Smith and Christopher Whelan, individual level evidence of secularization was most prevalent in a younger Irish demographic who grew up in the period of greatest change in Irish religiosity.[118] Tony Fahey *et al* suggest that this is indicative of behavioural shifts in the late 1990s and early 2000s as opposed to any suggested life-cycle effect.[119] Michael Breen and Amy Erbe Healy conducted research linking insecurity theory to Irish secularization against

[114] Bhargava, Rajeev, *Secularism and Its Critics*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 493-4 and 520.
[115] Buckley, (2017), 23.
[116] Buckley, (2017), 23.
[117] See Casanova, (2018), 187-198.
[118] Hornsby-Smith, Michael P., Whelan, Christopher T. 'Religious and Moral Values', in *Values and Social Change in Ireland*, edited by Christopher Whelan, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), 7-44.
[119] Fahey, Tony, Hayes, Bernadette C., Sinnott, Richard, *Conflict and Consensus: a Study of Values and Attitudes in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland*, (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2005).

the backdrop of the post-boom Irish economic crash of 2008 using the first five rounds of the ESS.[120] They compared the continuing decline in Irish religious practice against European averages, examining religiosity, religious attendance and prayer as variables of interest, exploring these against explanatory variables of gender, age, education, employment status and urbanization. Attesting to the reality of Irish secularization, they found that the demographic variables that distinguished Irish religiosity and practice in the past were still significant at that historical juncture. Their view was that the process of modernization had been ongoing in Ireland for several decades, with the country becoming more urbanized, younger and more educated, with women working more outside the home. Sociologist Micheál Mac Greil reported findings of an *Economic and Social Research Institute* (ESRI) survey undertaken in 2007 and 2008.[121] This was the third wave of longitudinal research conducted over a 35-year period, allowing researchers to monitor changes in Irish religious attitudes, beliefs and practices over a period of three decades. The 2007-08 iteration measured the religious beliefs of a national sample of 1,015 Irish adults, aged over 18. Data revealed a significant drop in Church attendances from 79% in 1988-89 to almost half that figure (42%) in the study period. Despite this, 86% of respondents still reported a closeness to God, while over 70% prayed at least weekly, and 50% daily or more often. As regards faith transmission, 25% of respondents thought that children should decide for themselves. In my view, these data suggest a significant changing Irish mind-set regarding religious beliefs and practices at this particular historical juncture.

The next section moves my discourse to more contemporary study findings that predominantly used survey data to elicit statistical patterns and trends showing a sharp rise in the trajectory of institutional religious decline, and a rise in extra-institutional expressions of religion. Overall, these data revealed that a large numbers of mainly (but not exclusively) young people increasingly distance themselves from Catholicism. While they suggested that a younger generation in Ireland, like their European counterparts, are loosening normative ties with

[120] Breen, Michael. Healy, Amy, *Changing Values, Attitudes and Behaviours in Ireland: An Analysis of European Survey Data in Ireland, 2002-2012*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016).

[121] Mac Greil, Micheál, *The Challenge of Indifference*, (Economic and Social Research Institute. Ireland / Maynooth University, 2008).

the institutional Church, exceptions and antimonies regarding findings are also apparent, with some research findings indicative of revitalization in aspects of Irish Catholicism. The relevance of this finding to my research is that some of my interviews yielded similar data, discussed in chapter 8.4.

1.10 Recent data findings on religious decline in Ireland

Data elicited over the past two decades revealed that while many people in Irish society still regard themselves as belonging to an Irish Catholic heritage or believing in God, they largely do not practice their religion. In this regard, sociologist Tom Inglis suggested that if someone categorises their religion as Pentecostal or Muslim, one could be confident that they attend a place of worship regularly. Survey data from the late 1990s-early 2000s provides evidence of a trajectory of decline regarding belief. Fahey *et al,* for example, cite EVS data from that juncture reporting figures of 98% affirming belief in God. The two most recent Irish Government census reports reveal a trend towards youth irreligion. One undertaken in 2016 revealed that, whereas 86% of the population self-identified with a faith group, there was a surge of 74% from the previous census in the 'no religion' category with almost 45% of those in the urban-dwelling 20-39 age bracket. This category increased by 62% to nearly three-quarters of a million (736,210), which represented 14% of the total population. The 2022 census figures reveal a further 26% increase from 2018 in this category, again largely a younger urban demographic.[122] In contrast to almost 95% of the population who identified as Catholic in 1961 (a trend that persisted until the mid-1990s),[123] Catholic identification fell to 69% between 2016 and 2022. Allied to this were previous high levels of religious practice in terms of Church attendance and prayer. In 1972, for example, 91% of people in the Republic of Ireland attended weekly Mass. This figure has declined from 66% in 1997, to 38% in 2010 and a further decline to 35% in 2016.[124]

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[122] https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/keyfindings/

[123] Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, Máire, 'The Power of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland', in *Irish Society: Sociological Perspective*, edited by Patrick Clancy, Sheelagh Drudy, Kathleen Lynch and Liam O' Dowd, (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration,1995), 137-54.

[124] Breen, Michael J, (Editor). *Values and Identities in Europe: Evidence from The European Social Survey.* (Routledge, 2017). Also, Breen and Healy (2014), 113-125. Cragaun, Ryan T, 'The Declining Significance of Religion in Ireland' in *Values and Identities in Europe:*

Some sociologists of religion who study the Irish landscape use Pierre Bourdieu's anthropological/sociological concept of *habitus*[125] to capture religious change. Bourdieu's concept is the principle that negotiates between objective structures and practices. In essence, it refers to the habituation of values, a movement from belief and ritual to the formation of habits. They appear to concur that religious as well as cultural pluralism replaces a Catholic habitus, with young people especially no longer using the moral compass of Church teachings to guide them in life meaning. Karen Andersen draws on quantitative data from the 2006 *Church and Religion in An Enlarged Europe: A study of the social significance of religion in East and west* (hereafter C&R) to examine the effects of macro-level changes among Republic of Ireland Catholics of all age cohorts.[126] In terms of religious identification, the majority of participants identified as Roman Catholic (*n*=758: 82.6%), while data for the 'atheist/ no religion category' were recorded as (*n*=43: 4.7%).[127] Regarding religious behaviours, 76% of the sample attended Church regularly (monthly or more), with 61% attending weekly or more, and only 7% attending less than yearly or never. Regarding prayer, 84% prayed regularly, with 7% less than yearly or never. Another study conducted by Andersen and Karen Lavan revealed similar findings.[128] The C&R study revealed that 70% of participants believed in a personal God and that religion remained important in their lives. Eighty two per cent of respondents either agreed or somewhat agreed that it was important, as opposed to 18% who disagreed or somewhat disagreed.[129] Relevant to the present study, much of Andersen's analysis focused on how her young sample (18-29) differed from older age groups.[130] Writing in 2010, she argued that these macro-level changes culminated in a change at the individual level of Catholic

Evidence from the European Social Survey. Routledge Advances in Sociology, (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2017), 17-35.

[125] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

[126] This study was conducted in nine European countries in 2006.

[127] Source: "Church and Religion in an Enlarged Europe Survey", cited in Andersen, (2010), 25.

[128] Andersen, Karen, Lavan, A, "Believing in God but Not Obeying the Church: Being a Catholic in Ireland and Poland in the 1990s", in *Changing Ireland in International Comparison,* edited by Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig and B. Hilliard, (Dublin: Liffey Valley Press, 2007), 191-220.

[129] Source: "Church and Religion in an Enlarged Europe Survey", cited in Andersen, (2010), 26.

[130] Andersen, (2010).

habitus, with young Irish people becoming increasingly secular and creative in their religious behaviours. She questioned whether this more individualized attachment to Catholicism would be sufficiently strong to maintain a collective memory. Andersen's use of the phrase 'collective memory' coheres with Hervieu Léger's concept of religion as a chain of memory, which I elaborate in the next chapter. An interesting variable that Andersen reports, directly relevant to the present study, was age group analysis of the extent to which Irish Catholics considered themselves as having a spiritual life. The C&R hypothesis was that, having lower levels of institutional religiosity, young people would consider themselves if not more spiritual, then at least as spiritual as older people. However, her data suggested that older people were more likely to consider themselves spiritual, with 76% considering themselves as having a spiritual life compared with only half of those under 30.[131] Using a Spearman's Rho coefficient[132] to demonstrate no correlation to indicate that young Catholics replaced Catholicism with new expressions of spirituality, Andersen postulated,

> It does not appear, however, that the young have moved to new expressions of spirituality; rather a new Catholic habitus serves as evidence of a new Irish society, where being Catholic entails exercising individual choice and being critical and selective, rather than unquestioningly obeying Catholic teachings.[133]

In chapter 8, I discuss how my data contrast with these findings regarding experiences of spirituality. Similar to some questions I posed in the present study, the C&R research asked respondents about their beliefs in the effects of amulets/spiritualism/astrology/horoscopes.[134] Twenty-seven percent of the 30-44 age group were more likely than any other group to believe in the effects of these practices. For example, almost one third of those aged under 30 believed in astrology/horoscopes. Asked whether amulets, stones or crystals could be helpful in addition to religious objects such as crosses, crucifixes, icons and rosaries, data showed that the younger demographic were more likely to believe

[131] The research did not ask respondents to consider whether having a spiritual life connects to religion. See Andersen, (2010), 31.
[132] This statistical test measures the strength and direction of association between two ranked variables.
[133] Andersen, (2010), 37.
[134] I did not include either magic or occultism in my research instruments.

in the power of these religious objects (29% percent of the youngest group aged 18-29, compared with just 15% of the 60 plus group). In chapter 8.6, I discuss qualitative findings from the holistic milieu aspects of my study that posed similar questions regarding a range of these practices.[135] Tom Inglis, who has written extensively on Irish religious culture, also used Bourdieu's concept to describe the embodied, automatic way that previous generations of Irish school-going children developed a Catholic sense of self and a way of behaving and interpreting the world, which became a fundamental part of their social and personal identity. He reported findings from a large-scale *Contemporary Irish Identities* (hereafter *CII*) study undertaken during 2003-05 that set out to examine the impact of global, regional, and everyday life influences on the way people construct and act upon their identities.[136] Researchers used a qualitative methodology, with a representative sampling frame including Protestants and members of the travelling community in addition to Catholics in a mix of mostly urban locations.[137] Analysing findings, Inglis argued that critical reflection and scientific rationality have ended what he terms "Catholic doxa," or the unquestioning acceptance of Catholic Church teaching in Ireland.[138] With increasing numbers considering themselves Catholic while not accepting many confessional dogmas, often combining Christianity with other traditions, Inglis expressed scepticism about whether a declaration of Irish Catholic faith has any contemporary meaning. He categorised Catholics using a typology relating to three dimensions of modern habitus: 'orthodox', 'cultural', 'creative,' and 'individualist.'[139] This typology replaced one emanating from his earlier publication tracing the rise and fall of the Catholic Church.[140] His revised typology classified Catholics in terms of their level of identification with, loyalty to, and sense of belonging to the institutional Church.[141] Orthodox Catholics tend to believe and practice their faith. Cultural Catholics continue to engage in

[135] I did not base my questions on the C&R study.
[136] Inglis, Tom, "Catholic Identity in Contemporary Ireland: Belief and Belonging to Tradition", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 22:2 (2007), 205-220.
[137] The CII study, conducted within the Identity, Diversity and Citizenship programme of University College Dublin, used a snowball-sampling frame that resulted in 120 semi-structured interviews.
[138] Inglis, (2007), 206.
[139] Inglis, (2007). 214-216.
[140] Inglis, (1998), 24-38.
[141] Inglis, (2007), 214.

Catholic rites of passage despite tending not to have strong beliefs or practices. Creative Catholics tend to assimilate beliefs and practices from other spiritual traditions. The individualist Catholics are the ones of most interest to the present discussion. This category contains a number of groupings. While still self-identifying as Catholics, they have developed,

> A nebulous New Age orientation to religion that revolves around a search for personal authenticity … a rejection of the institutional Church … a this-worldly conception of salvation based on individual self-perfection.[142]

A sub-group of individualist Catholics are those who, while self-identifying as Catholics, do not believe in some of the Church's fundamental teachings such as life after death.[143] In his view, this represented what he terms a new type of smorgasbord Irish Catholic, choosing between different beliefs, teachings and practices, mixing these with non-Catholic beliefs and practices. Inglis saw activities such as the exploration of new forms of meditation, alternative ways of transcendence and wellness activities as a desire to be spiritual and moral. With the assimilation of these beliefs and practices into Catholicism, what ends up on their religious plate is a selection of beliefs and practices that originate in Buddhism, Taoism, Paganism and so forth. The creative category differ from *a la carte* Catholics[144] and has many adherents in contemporary Ireland, who both believe and belong. Overall, Inglis concluded that while Irish identification with being Catholic remained strong, there were very important changes occurring beneath the surface. Patricia Kieran and Aiveen Mullally reported findings from a two-year mixed-methods project investigating the perceptions of religiously unaffiliated pre-service; third level postgraduate student teachers in the Republic of Ireland. They used online questionnaires (n=192) and in-depth one-to-one interviews (N=5) with females to elicit data.[145] Their research focused on the religious or belief affiliation of the sample group in addition to how personal and

[142] Inglis, (2007), 216.
[143] Inglis, (2007), 216.
[144] Inglis used this term to describe how Catholics choose which beliefs, teachings and practices to adhere to and which to ignore.
[145] Kieran, Patricia, Mullally, Aiveen, "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", *Ecclesial Practices*, 9 (1), (2022), 47-68.

religious convictions influenced their lives. Drawing on these data, they explored participants' belief fluidity. Data revealed that participants blended beliefs in Catholicism with belief in crystals, chakras, reincarnation, gods, and magic among others.[146] These scholars viewed these eclectic ranges of beliefs and practices emanating from outside the formal ecclesial institution as characterising young people's contemporary practice of Catholicism.[147]

As stated, some survey data suggested signs of religious revitalisation in Ireland, which sociologists of religion link to the development of religious markets in various national contexts. Drawing on ESS survey data (2014-2016) to inform the 2018 Synod process, Stephen Bullivant found that 16-29 year-olds in the Republic of Ireland ranked as the fourth most religious in Europe (with Poland, Israel and Portugal). Fifty-four percent identified as Catholic and 39% as having no religion.[148] Catholic identification was lower among the 20-24 (69%), 25-29 (69%), 25-29 (66%), and 30-34 (70%) age groups, while about 15% of those aged 15-34 identified as having no religion.[149] Among Catholics, a little more than 10% of 16-29 year-olds attended Church on a weekly basis and 31% prayed weekly. I did not include the under 18-age cohort in my study for ethical reasons.[150] Suggesting signs of religious revitalisation in Northern Ireland, Ganiel reported findings from a 2022 action research project associated with the Catholic chaplaincy of Queen's University, Belfast. Using an online survey of students (n=211), this was the first study to investigate the beliefs, practices and experiences of "highly religious" young Catholics.[151] Similar to the present study, it included opportunities for free-text (write-in) responses, followed by semi-structured interviews with a small sample (N=4: two male; two female). Ganiel outlined that despite belief and practices declining dramatically especially among young people since the 1990s, Ireland was an interesting

[146] Kieran and Mullally, (2022). 47.
[147] Kieran and Mullally, (2022), 54.
[148] Bullivant, Stephen, "Europe's Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-26) to Inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops", St. Mary's University, Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, (2018). https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-mar-europe-young-people-report-eng.pdf. Accessed on 28/02/2024.
[149] Ganiel, (2023), 3.
[150] I originally targeted 19-39 year-olds because the latest Irish government census reports revealed the highest number of those identifying in the 'no religion' were in this age cohort. The Irish Data Protection Commissioner advised me to include 18 year-olds.
[151] Ganiel, (2023).

counter-narrative to Europe's secularization story because it bucked prevailing trends.[152] She suggested that some scholars saw this trend as a social practice that simply maintained opposing ethno-national identities where religion was an ethnic marker reinforced by "abnormal" levels of religious practice.[153] Similar to Bullivant's ESS findings, she presented data for both the Republic and Northern Ireland that suggested they both remain among the most religious parts of Europe.[154] For example, she cited a Pew (see appendix A) study that revealed that the Republic was Western Europe's third most religiously observant country, with 24% showing high levels of religious commitment, according to an index including frequency of attendance, frequency of prayer, importance of religion on one's life, and belief in God.[155] In contrast to international trends suggesting that Christian women are more religious than men are,[156] both sexes in the Republic of Ireland exhibited similar levels of religiosity according to Ganiel's study. Describing this as an unusual trend, she postulated a connection between this finding and perceptions of how the Irish Catholic has treated women "especially badly."[157] As I conducted my research in the Republic of Ireland, I make no claim regarding the applicability of findings to Northern Ireland, as I did not attempt to compare trends across jurisdictions.

In summary, Kieran and Mullally make a salient point regarding the Republic of Ireland's high religiosity findings based on statistics. Suggesting that these data require further scrutiny, they cite a number of authors who enter caveats regarding their veracity. Breda O' Brien, for example, suggested that whereas these percentages are high by European standards, "the faith is being hollowed out from within in a way that the statistics fail to reveal."[158] Vincent Twomey also suggested that the word 'Catholic' may have been interpreted in terms of

[152] Ganiel, (2016), 14.
[153] Ganiel, (2016), 14.
[154] Ganiel, (2023), 2.
[155] Pew Research Center, "Being Christian in Western Europe", (2018), cited in Ganiel, (2023), 2.
[156] For example, Voas, David., Chaves, Mark, "Is The United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?", *American Journal of Sociology,* 121:5, (2016), 1517-56.
[157] Ganiel, (2023), 3. Also, Ganiel, Gladys. "Pulpit to Public: Church Leaders on a Post-Brexit Island", *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 32:2, (2021), 561-87.
[158] O'Brien, Breda, "Young People and the Future of the Irish Church", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review,* (2019), 108: 430, cited in Kieran and Mullally, (2022), 48.

race rather than belief, thus giving primacy to collective or national identity and not to personal conviction.[159]

The next section briefly discusses market-led rational choice theories of religion (hereafter RCTs). Allied to these is the notion of consumerism in the religious/spiritual marketplace, where Christianity is now competing with a plethora of life-meaning options. In this context, I discuss the important sociological concept of extra-institutional religion in Ireland alluded to earlier. These are new, individualised religious spaces, which people occupy in an increasingly diverse society. Additionally, according to Ganiel, the concept can illuminate how religion is changing and evolving,[160] and is thus very relevant to the present discussion.

1.11 Market-led RCTs and extra-institutional religion in Ireland

As a backdrop to this section, James White describes pluralization as one of three moving cultural currents along with secularization and privatization, where a staggering number of ideologies and faith options compete for attention. In his view, this has fostered a syncretic "smorgasbord"[161] mentality regarding personal beliefs, a

> Mix and match mentality of pulling together different threads in various religions to create a personal religion that suits our individual taste.[162]

A number of scholars connote contemporary religious views and affiliations analogous with consumerism. White argues that in this consumerist theme, Christianity becomes one of many competing "boutique worldviews" that have set up shop in society's "mall" for people to sample as a matter of personal preference.[163] According to Ulrich Beck,

> In Europe, a profound change is underway at present from a culture in which people acquire their religious beliefs simply by 'inheriting' it to one in which a religious creed is freely chosen and consumed.[164]

[159] Twomey, Vincent, *The End of Irish Catholicism*? (Dublin: Veritas, 2003), 22.
[160] Ganiel, (2017), 31.
[161] Similar to Inglis' use of the word.
[162] White, (2014) 51.
[163] White, (2014) 51.
[164] Beck, (2010), 19.

Philosopher James Smith argued that simply because worship at the mall does not appear like Church worship, it doesn't mean it's not worship, in that it reflects and shapes what matters to us - consumerism that grabs hold of our *kardia* (Smith emphasis) and wanting nothing less than our love.[165] Ganiel based her view of Ireland's religious landscape as a market to some extent on similarities regarding the availability of options shaping religious consumers' choices in the mixed religious markets of Europe. She outlines how RCTs of religion developed in part to counter the secularization thesis.[166] Ganiel outlines how religious scholars, notably Casanova are critical of these theories. He suggests that a better approach is to,

> look less at levels of modernisation or at persistent monopolies, which explain very little, and more at historical patterns of relations between Church, state, nation, and civil society.[167]

Ganiel concurs that historical patterns are crucial; however, she argues that the term 'market' aptly captures the evolving religious landscape of Ireland. She emphasizes that RCTs provide a wide scope for *individuals* rather than the institutions of religion to *choose* (her emphasis) what they will believe and how they will practice their religion.[168] She makes two other claims in addition to her view that Ireland is now Post-Catholic. She develops the concept of extra-institutional religion to explore religious beliefs and practices, illuminating how religion is changing and evolving.[169] She describes the concept as "new religious spaces that are being created (or discovered) within Ireland's post-Catholic environment."[170] In her view, these religious expressions fit well within a mixed religious economy, providing an option that allows personalized, experiential religious expression, while remaining linked, however tenuously and critically, to traditional religious institutions. She apportions Davie's

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[165] Smith, James K.A, *Who's Afraid of Relativism? Community, Contingency and Creaturehood.* The Church and Postmodern Culture Series. (Baker Academic Publishing Series, 2014). Kardia here refers to heart.
[166] RCT assumes that religious activity increases where there is a large supply of religion with more options to choose from – and decreases where there is not much choice. See Ganiel, (2017), 33.
[167] Casanova, José, 'Exploring the Post-Secular: Three Meanings of "the Secular" and Their Possible Transcendence', in *Habermas and Religion*, edited by Craig Colhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Van Antwerpen, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 27-48.
[168] Ganiel, (2017), 20.
[169] Ganiel, (2017), 31.
[170] Ganiel, (2017), 34.

description of the shift from the "hollowly secular" to the "substantively nonreligious" as applicable to Ireland.[171] Arguing for the possibility of extending religious markets to include faith-based organizations or special interest organizations, she contends that instead of practicing religion through institutions, some people may choose involvement in these groups. In her view, these spaces provide opportunities for people to use various methods and strategies to keep their faith alive, either outside or in addition to the institutional Catholic Church. She makes three arguments about these spaces,

1. Ireland's religious market is increasingly diverse, and within it, extra-institutional religion can theoretically take on a dynamic role by prompting personal transformation and by creating spaces on the margins of the market where people work together for religious, social and political transformation.

2. The concept of extra-institutional religion provides a counter-balance to some prevailing theories in which the 'reflexive' modern religious person is seen as constructing, in Beck's terms a *God of one's own*, quite unmoored from traditional religious institutions-almost free-floating in a sea of religious options.[172] Ganiel argues that while extra-institutional religion in part depends upon the individualization of religion, it also depends on those individuals maintaining some relationship with institutional religion, making it more 'solid' than other forms of religion that are more free-floating.

3. The practice of extra-institutional religion has the potential to contribute to reconciliation on the island of Ireland, more so than other expressions of religion such as Ireland's traditional Christian denominations.[173]

Ganiel concludes that a post-Catholic Ireland is a gift, a celebration of religious diversity rather than a burden.[174] She argues that extra-institutional religious expressions, unburdened by the baggage of the sectarian strife and

[171] Davie, (2015), 18
[172] Beck, (2010).
[173] Ganiel, (2016), 35.
[174] Ganiel, (2016), 37.

violence, have more freedom to critique religious institutions, and have more flexibility to form networks with like-minded religious and secular groups to respond to pressing issues and needs. Ganiel considers that the concept is not just an interesting sociological development on the fringes of Ireland's religious market, but also a development that potentially holds the seeds for a wider religious, social and political transformation.

Although the factors involved in religious decline outlined in this chapter are relevant, I consider the multivalent nature of Irish secularization, particularly relating to young people, involves other bespoke factors. According to Inglis, the increased power of the Irish media was one catalyst for loss of Catholicism's influence.[175] Similarly, Andersen underlines how evolving media influences in Ireland began presenting images of alternative lifestyles, making a consumerist lifestyle appear attainable.[176] This appears to apply to life-meaning ideologies in addition to other lifestyle choices, which my findings will suggest regarding consumerist-driven 'spirituality' marketing targeting young people. Growing economic wealth also appear to influence secularizing trends. Susie Donnelly and Inglis for example, suggest a correlation with the economic growth of the Celtic Tiger era in Ireland in addition to the fallout from the clerical sexual abuse scandals,[177] (hereafter CSA) discussed in later sections.

1.12 Chapter summary

This chapter provides important background and context on significant factors directly related to my research questions. Tracy's theological insights are precisely relevant to my topics. My discourse also discusses how scholars, particularly sociologists, have normatively asserted meta-theories regarding secularization and pluralism to explain Western religious decline. However, challenges to both its empirical and theoretical claims mean that few scholars now claim that secularisation processes are as straightforward as once

[175] Inglis, Tom, "Irish Civil Society: From Church to Media Dominance", in: *Religion and Politics: East-West Contrasts from Contemporary Europe*, edited by Tom Inglis, Zdzislaw Mach and Rafal Mazanek, (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2000), 49-67.
[176] Andersen, (2010), 23.
[177] Donnelly, Susie, Inglis, Tom, "The Media and the Catholic Church in Ireland: Reporting Clerical Sex Abuse", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 25:1, (2010), 1-19.

thought.[178] The chapter underscores how a post-secular society can invoke a cultural interpretation of religion as simply one worldview among many others, undeserving of special treatment, while taking cognisance of the need for ontological justice by not marginalizing the religious voice. The chapter emphasizes how a Catholic habitus historically embedded the attitudes and beliefs of Irish people. I outlined the complex factors contributing to a trajectory of decline in Catholicism over decades, where mostly a younger demographic no longer engage in practice as heretofore, while continuing to identify loosely with the majority religion. They appear to have retreated from the former "Catholic, White and Gaelic" ethno-identity markers described by scholars.[179] Andersen points out that for centuries Catholicism wove tightly into the fabric of Irish culture and identity, bringing a level of complexity to the increasing diverse and rapidly changing landscape.[180] Following Bruce, my view is that the plausibility structures needed to sustain faith have all but eroded in Ireland. Factors such as societal differentiation and advancing technologies have undermined all previously assumed ontological certainties. Although theologians may find the concept repugnant, the sociological reality of contemporary life is that religion is competing in an increasingly market-led spiritual environment. Young people experiment with an array of marketplace alternatives in their quest for meaning and value and choose which options fulfil their needs. Thus, sociologists consider market-led RCTs of religion in a growing consumerist culture as explanations for contemporary extra-institutional trends. I view Ganiel's 'collective memory' and Hervieu Léger's 'chain of memory' as important concepts in explaining religious decline. It appears that a contemporary young demographic increasingly choose rather than inherit which tradition (or none) they wish to identify with.

Whereas this chapter discussed theological, philosophical and sociological views regarding Western institutional religious decline and Irish Catholicism in particular, the next moves my discourse to other interdisciplinary analyses of the

[178] Ganiel, (2017), 33.
[179] Parker, Marie, Masterson, Mary, "Catholic, White and Gaelic': Schools in Ireland Coming to Terms With Cultural Diversity", Irish *Educational Studies*, 32:4, (2013). Also, Kenny, Mary, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*, (New Island Books, 2000), also Inglis, (1998).
[180] Andersen, (2010), 15-39.

factors at play regarding the constructs, contributing understanding of the factors relating to different worldviews pertaining to my precise topics of interest.

Chapter 2: Interdisciplinary Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter incorporates other social scientific perspectives in keeping with my socio-theological orientation. To use a nautical expression, these perspectives are navigational channel-markers for relevant issues to pursue, and to provide a platform on which to construct my study's research instruments. My focus here is on empirical studies of spirituality, specifically the meaning involved in the self-attribution as *Spiritual but not Religious*. There is scholarly consensus that religion and spirituality closely relate to the quest for life meaning.[1] However, scholars suggest the need for empirical investigation of spirituality as a separate construct to religion.[2] As the literature suggests that current social scientific and related conceptions of these constructs are "nothing if not diverse,"[3] the first section attempts to bring conceptual clarity. Following this, I briefly discuss literature on the holistic milieu and contemporary interest in 'New Age' spiritualties. As understanding of apparent irreligious trends in Ireland is my key hermeneutic, I discuss the cultural-anthropological concept of CREDs[4], including a study asserting the concept as an important component in the transmission of empirically unverifiable cultural content such as religious beliefs, together with an ethnography of Irish Catholicism using CREDs. I follow this by discussing sources of influence on religious socialisation and national identity, expanding on points made in chapter 1 from different perspectives. The chapter also discusses spirituality as it relates to wellness, particularly mental health. Kimberley Blessing suggests that for a question as grand and difficult as the search for life meaning, both theistic and atheistic worldviews require consideration.[5] Thus, I briefly include research studies on a range of nonreligious worldviews.

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[1] Blessing, Kimberley A, "Atheism and the Meaningfulness of Life." In: *The Oxford Book of Atheism*, Edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[2] See, for example, Streib, Heinz, Wood, Ralph W Jr. "Spirituality" as Privatized Experience-Oriented Religion: Empirical and Conceptual Perspectives," *Implicit Religion*. 14:4 (2011), 79.
[3] Zinnbauer *et al*, (1997), 549.
[4] Henrich, Joseph. "The Evolution of Costly Displays", *Evolution and Human Behaviour*, 30, (2009), 244-260
[5] Blessing, (2013), 117.

2.2 The spiritual and religious nexus: towards definitional clarity

Despite being part of human experience throughout history, religion and spirituality are topics of increasing interest in Western culture, with the terms carrying multidimensional and sometimes opposed connotations.[6] One view sees them used interchangeably or as associated concepts, while alternative views see them as opposites and competitors. Although most researchers treat the concepts as separate constructs, they continue to debate their overlap. According to Bruce,

> A gulf separates scholars who consider arguments about definitions very important … and those of us who believe that some loosely commonsensical conceptualizations of religion is sufficient to allow us to get on with our primary purpose of exploring its sociologically interesting features.[7]

Some scholars claim that definitional inconsistencies of the constructs have negative effects.[8] Among these is the interdisciplinary impairment in communication (in this case between theology and social science), allied with the difficulty in drawing conclusions from research findings. Swinton and Stephen Pattison argue that it is important that spirituality remains a contested and functional concept rather than becoming consolidated. They concur with the view that varied definitions may not refer to constant essences or objects within people or in the world. However, they argue that properly understood, the vagueness and lack of clarity around the term spirituality is actually a strength that has powerful political and social implications.[9] Ralph Hood *et al* highlight the reality that multiple definitions of religion coexist in a postmodern context without any single definition controlling the narrative or achieving conceptual dominance.[10] There are innumerable attempts at defining the construct, both in

[6] Oman, Doug. "Defining Religion and Spirituality", in: *The Handbook of The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, ed. by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park. (The Guildford Press, 2015), 23-47.
[7] Bruce, Steve. "Defining Religion: a Practical Response." *International Review of Sociology*. 21:1, (2011), 118.
[8] Zinnbauer, Brian J., Pargament, Kenneth I., Cole, Brenda., Rye, Mark S., Butter, Eric M., Belavich, Timothy G., Hipp, Kathleen M., Scott, Allie B., Kadar, Jill L, "Religion and Spirituality: Unfuzzying the Fuzzy", *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36: 4 (1997), 550.
[9] Swinton, John, Pattison, Steven, "Moving Beyond Clarity: Towards a Thin, Vague and Useful Understanding of Spirituality in Nursing Care", *Nursing Philosophy*, 1, (2018), 226-237.
[10] Hood, Ralph W., Spilka, B., Hunsberger, B., Gorush, B, *The Psychology of Religion: an Empirical Approach*. (New York: The Guildford Press), 1996.

various branches of the academy and beyond.[11] Michael Stausberg and Mark Gardiner provide both a classical (Kant, Durkheim, Geertz, and Spiro) and contemporary academic definitions.[12] Finnish researchers Kirsi Tirri *et al* define religion as, "the organisational, the ritual and the ideological," while spirituality refers to "the personal, affective, experiential and thoughtful."[13] Psychologists of religion Tanya Luhrmann and Rachael Morgain posit, "Religion is not just about propositional belief … it is about minds that are trained to experience the world differently."[14] Concurring with the view of social scientist Kenneth Pargament,[15] my definition of spirituality at the outset suggests a more functional, intrinsic dimension than the more substantiate, extrinsic construct that is religion. My approach is consistent with the suggestion of Zinnbauer *et al* regarding not polarizing the constructs, and in fidelity to Gadamerian hermeneutics, I am open to meeting the horizons of research participants who may hold different views. Spirituality, in the view of empirical theologian Wesley Wildman, is a highly contested construct, often used as an umbrella term comprising many attributes with no single authoritative definition and much "semantic vagueness" relating to the term.[16] Laura Hirsto and Tirri postulate that the concept seems difficult to define, with differing views about its contextual nature, with authors using the terms religion and spirituality interchangeably.[17] Australian educational researcher Marian de Souza maintains that a particular problem with international research of spirituality in education is the reluctance of scholars to agree on what contemporary spirituality actually means.[18] She argues that spirituality, traditionally considered an offshoot of religion in Western culture, meant that the synonymous use of the concepts resulted in

[11] Stausberg, Michael. Gardiner, Mark Q. "Definition", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion.* Edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler. (Oxford University Press, 2016), 10.
[12] Stausberg and Gardiner, (2016), 27/8.
[13] Tirri, Kirsi. Nokelainen, Petri. Urbani, M. "Conceptual Definition and Empirical Validation of the Spiritual Sensitivity Scale", *Journal of Empirical Theology,* 19:1, (2006), 39.
[14] Luhrmann, Tanya M., Morgain, Rachael. "Prayer as Inner Sense Cultivation: An Attentional Learning Theory of Spiritual Experience," *Ethos*, 40: 4, (2012), 386.
[15] Pargament, Kenneth, "The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality? Yes and No." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion,* 9:1, (1999), 3-16.
[16] Wildman, Wesley J, "Spiritual Experiences: A Quantitative-Phenomenological Approach," *Journal of Empirical Theology,* 26, (2013), 139.
[17] Hirsto, Laura, Tirri, Kirsi, "Motivational Approaches to the Study of Theology in Relation to Spirituality." *Journal of Empirical Theology,* 22:1, (2009), 88-102.
[18] De Souza, Marian, *Spirituality in Education in a Global Pluralised World*. (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group), 2016.

spirituality not receiving sufficient research attention.[19] This led her to a two-decade quest to understand what students were attempting to convey by the sentence, *I am Spiritual but not Religious.* She identifies that a Google search of the sentence in 2016 yielded 57.2 million hits. De Souza argues that religion is a human construct, generated by a person's spiritual nature. In her view, organised religion emanates from this innate spirituality, by the formation of faith communities that became institutionalised and were "inspired by and driven by a vision of mystical union or oneness, which was given different forms in different times."[20] Researching spiritual experiences, Wildman analyses the argument of three of the four 'horsemen' of the new atheistic movement that spirituality is "A kind of soft-headed capitulation to bizarre but misleading capacities of the human cognitive-emotional apparatus."[21] Wildman approaches the meaning of spirituality from the perspectives of 'usage considerations,' 'the nature of spiritual experiences' and 'mapping spiritual experiences.' He adopts a narrow perspective concerning its meaning and function with recourse to 'usage considerations' as a paradigm for analysis. Theologically, he argues, the importance of this aspect is to ascertain the virtue element of spirituality as a vital aspect of human life. Wildman views the centrality of analysis as ascertaining the extent to which spiritual experiences have an intrinsic nature, which have yielded conflicting scholarly interpretations by phenomenologists of religion.[22] Social scientists Brian Zinnbauer *et al* argue for the retention of what they term the "broadband" use of religion as the term that defines the field. They consider that this avoids the dangers associated with polarizing spirituality and religion into "good" individual spirituality and "bad" organized religion.[23] They view the various phenomena associated with spirituality as the essential parts

[19] De Souza, Marian, "Spirituality, Children and Young People: Perspectives from Research." In: *Spirituality in Education in a Global, Pluralised World.* (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).
[20] De Souza, Marian, "To the Future: The Implications of an Emerging Interspiritual Age". In: *Spirituality in Education in a Global, Pluralised World*. (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 135.
[21] Wildman, (2013), 161. Wildman cites the following works: Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co, 20060, Dennett, Daniel C. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon,* (New York: Viking. 2006), Harris, Sam, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values.* (New York: Free Press, 2010).
[22] Wildman identifies Summer Twiss and Walter Consser as having reviewed the literature on this topic, in Twiss, Summer B., Consser, Walter H. Jr. (Editors). *Experience of the Sacred: Readings in the Phenomenology of Religion*, (Hanover, NH: Brown University Press, 1992).
[23] Zinnbauer *et al*, (1997), 563.

and core of religion. They conclude that without careful consideration of terms associated with religion and spirituality, there is a risk of the constructs becoming the social scientific study of "narrow" religion and "fuzzy" spirituality.[24] From a cultural psychological perspective, Renate Ysseldyk *et al* argue that conceptually, epistemological and ontological characteristics would necessitate introducing and defining spirituality as a separate etic term.[25] They maintain that this would imply opposing and resisting any attempts in the study of religion to use the concept of spirituality interchangeably with religion, or to substitute 'spirituality' for 'religion.'[26]

This section has identified the complex, disputed and nuanced social scientific conceptions associated with the terms religion and spirituality. The next section closely relates to the above discussion. It focuses on the growing interest in the holistic milieu and spiritual experiences among a younger Western demographic. Research evidence points to a subjective turn to spirituality, which people could not find in traditional institutional Churches.[27] This point also relates to Taylor's notion of a subjective centred culture alluded to previously.[28] This turn, associated with New Age spiritualties, is clearly distinguished from theistic spiritualties. As Irish youth culture has witnessed a growing interest in a plethora of holistic practices such as Yoga, Reiki, Shiatsu and so forth that I explore in my interviews, the section provides important theoretical perspectives.

2.3 The holistic milieu and contemporary interest in New Age spiritualties

Interest in holism, characterised by a focus on spiritual well-being through mind-body-spirit (*mente-corpo-spirito*) integration has grown substantially in recent decades. The topic has received significant research attention mainly in Great

[24] Zinnbauer *et al*, (1997), 563.
[25] The term 'Etic' in psychology denotes an approach to the study of human cultures based on concepts and constructs universally held and applicable cross-culturally.
[26] Ysseldyk, Renate. Matheson, Kimberly. Anisman, Hymie, "Religion as Identity: Toward an Understanding of Religion from a Social Identity Perspective," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14, (2010), 60-71.
[27] See: Heelas, Paul. Woodhead, Linda, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
[28] See: Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1989.

Britain but also in other European countries such as Finland.[29] Abercrombie *et al* were the first of many researchers to study whether a spiritual revolution was occurring in Britain. Their small interview study of superstition and religion did not specifically research holistic practices or issues of self-fulfilment related to spirituality. A more significant study by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead researched associational forms of spirituality and the holistic milieu in one North East location in England (Kendal) to assess the evidence suggestive of a perceived spiritual revolution.[30] Located in a wider conversation about Church decline and the rise of spirituality, they assert a subjectivization thesis, what they term "the turn to the subject."[31] This is a categorical distinction between organised religion as a system and subjective new age spirituality, causing a shift in religious practice. The turn refers to a move away from life lived in terms of external or objective roles, duties and obligations towards one lived by reference to one's own subjective experience, relational as well as individualistic. Their interest centres on the idea that the historical bond between Western cultures and a Christianity associated with transcendence is rapidly dissolving, replaced with what Mary McClintock Fulkerson terms a more unregulated experience of the sacred in intimate relationships with subjective lives.[32] They also sought to determine whether religious congregations are changing to accommodate more personal, experiential forms of spirituality but found that distinctive perceptions of the holistic milieu are separate from the congregational domain. Also assessing claims for a spiritual revolution, Tony Glendinning and Bruce researched the presence of alternative spirituality practices and their relationship to institutional religion within the general culture of Scotland.[33] They found that alternative practices divided into two groups of interest, concerns with personal well-being and interest in divination. Their data also revealed that better educated women were more likely to engage with holistic practices associated

[29] See for example: Ketola, Kimmo, "Spiritual Revolution in Finland? Evidence from Surveys and the Rates of Emergence of New Religions and Spiritual Organisations," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 20, (2007), 29-39.
[30] Heelas and Woodhead, (2005).
[31] Heelas and Woodhead, (2005), 2.
[32] Fulkerson, Mary McClintock, "Interpreting a Situation: When is "Empirical", also "Theological"? In: *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Edited by Pete Ward, (W.B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids: Michigan. 2012), 129.
[33] Glendinning and Bruce, (2006), 399-414. These researchers used national survey data collected as part of the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2001).

with well-being, whereas less well educated were more likely to have found horoscopes, astrology, fortune telling and tarot reading important. Churchgoers found divination antithetical to religion, as it was among non-attenders and the secular. They argued that this exemplifies a focus on personal well-being rather than alternative spirituality in the consumption of holistic products and practices. Relating this section to my study, one of my research aims is to determine the religious and/or spiritual significance (if any) of holistic practices for my sample. Alternatively, it seeks to determine if engagement in these practices relates more to a quest for personal wellness. Voas and Bruce, for example, found that many participants of the holistic milieu do not regard their activities as having spiritual significance.[34]

The next section discusses important empirical studies exploring the change in Western European religion and spirituality that relate specifically to self-identification as *Spiritual but not Religious*. The first is a project that sets out specifically to research whether alternative spiritualties are significant within Italian Catholicism. The significance of this research is that, similar to Ireland, Italians have traditionally displayed high levels of orthodox religious belief, unlike French and Spaniards.[35] Following this, I discuss a North American psychological research project that had similar research aims. I then discuss a study of American Protestant's perceptions of the meaning of alternative spiritualties, (sometimes regarded as a largely Protestant phenomenon). These interconnected study findings are conceptually relevant to the precise aims of the present study.

2.4 Empirical research on *Spiritual but not Religious* and Catholicism

American empirical theologian Robert Emmons postulates that spiritual concerns influence human construal of the world, pursuit of objectives and regulation of behaviour.[36] However, scholars debate whether individuals can be

[34] Voas, David. Bruce, Steve, "The Spiritual Revolution: Another False Dawn for the Sacred", in *A Sociology of Spirituality*, Edited by Kieran Flanagan and Peter. C. Jupp. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 43-62.
[35] See: Inglis, (2007), 207. Inglis references findings from the 1999 EVS data that reveal that Irish people have similar beliefs to Italians relating to the items of God, sin and hell.
[36] Emmons, Robert A, *The Psychology of Ultimate Concern: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality*, (New York: Guilford), 1999.

spiritual in the absence of religious affirmation, and, as outlined, the questioning of the actual meaning of the terms in the minds of those who avow either (or both) of them.[37] Robert Wuthnow suggests that religious young people are more likely than those who are not involved in religion to be concerned with spirituality.[38] Kenneth Pargament outlines how a person may be spiritual without being religious or religious without being spiritual. According to Doug Oman, more than one-quarter of the U.S. adult population self-identify as spiritual but not religious, with nonorthodox spiritualties also widespread in some parts of Europe.[39] Nan Dirk De Graf and Ariana Need conducted a social attitudinal study focusing on loss of faith and diversity in Britain.[40] An important outcome of their findings was the development of a research instrument used in the *2018 Religion IV Questionnaire for the International Social Survey Program*.[41] In the U.S, Ammerman qualitatively attempted to isolate the clusters of meanings people attach to the word spiritual.[42] She initially derived eleven basic meaning categories. Following statistical factor analysis, she derived four cultural packages associated with these categorical spirituality orientations. These were 'ethical,' 'theistic' (God, practices, mystery), 'extra-theistic (naturalist)' concerned with meaning, connection, awe, self and belief and 'belonging' (religious tradition, belief). An Italian study, which explored *Spiritual but not Religious* self-attribution is particularly relevant because of similarities between Irish and Italian culture relating to historical normative links to Catholicism as stated. While still the prevailing belief system of most Italians this normative link, as in Ireland, is weakening. As a backdrop to this study, one conducted previously by Garelli *et al* found that Italians were more interested in spirituality

[37] Levenson, Michael R., Aldwin, Carolyn M., Igarashi, Heidi, "Religious Development from Adolescence to Middle Adulthood." In: *The Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, Edited by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, (The Guildford Press, 2015), 184.
[38] Wuthnow, Robert, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty and Thirty-Somethings are shaping the Future of American Religion*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 2007.
[39] Oman, (2015), 28/9, also 40.
[40] De Graf, Nan Dirk. Need, Ariana, "Losing Faith: Is Britain Alone?" In: *British Social Attitudes, 17th Report, Focusing on Diversity*. Edited by R. Jowell, J. Curtis, A. Park, K. Thomson, L. Jarvis, C. Bromley and N. Stratford, (London: Sage), 2000.
[41] See: Smith, Tom W. "A compilation of Documents Used to develop the 2018 Religion IV Questionnaire for the International Social Survey Program. NORC at the University of Chicago." (2018). file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/ZA7570_questionnaire_development_report%20(2).pdf. Accessed on 17/01/2023.
[42] Ammerman, (2013), 258–278.

than religion. [43] Drawing on this project, social scientist Stefania Palmisano empirically and theoretically investigated the distinction between Italian religion and spirituality, eliciting the meanings her sample attributed to the word 'spirituality' or 'spiritual life.' Her research sought to discover whether unconventional spirituality in contemporary Italian Catholicism was a symptom of secularisation or a durable counterforce to it; whether this category were part and parcel of the secularisation process or able to sacralise social and personal life.[44] Palmisano's cross-sectional sampling strategy included a high younger demographic cohort of 73%. Teenagers and young adults (aged 16-35) accounted for 34% of her sample while adults (aged 36-55) accounted for 39%. Similar to Ammerman, she used the two-by-two typology to study the profiles of four groups: (1) 'Neither religious nor spiritual' (2) 'Religious, but not spiritual' (3) 'Spiritual, but not religious' (4) 'Both spiritual and religious.' One of my survey questions sought respondents' self-identification in of one of the four-typology categories, introduced by the question previously used by the Princeton Religious centre: *Which of the following categories comes closest to describing your beliefs?*[45] Palmisano identified three broad spirituality meaning orientation clusters in her findings. These were 'ethical,' 'religious', and 'inner-self.' In general, whereas data suggested that Italians were more interested in spirituality than heretofore, Catholicism was not giving way to unconventional spirituality. She found that for the majority of Italians, spirituality indicated an individual's relationship with God, focused on the personal, intimate and subjective aspects of the relationship. She apportioned this as "intra-religious" (or Catholic) spirituality because it presumes that the religious experience links externally with the sacred (Christian God). However, she acknowledged the growth of an "extra-religious" spirituality, not associated with Church or God but based on personal experience.[46] Discussing another important element regarding spirituality options, Palmisano suggests that Italians may self-identified in the 'only religious' category for the following reason. Although

[43] The Italian Religious and Spiritual Project, (2006), Source: RAMP (1998) data, Italy, cited in Palmisano (2010). See, Garelli *et al*, (2003).
[44] Palmisano, Stefania. "Spirituality and Catholicism: The Italian Experience", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 25: 2 (2010), 238.
[45] Princeton Religious Centre, "Americans Remain Very Religious, but Not Necessarily in Conventional Ways", Emerging *Trends*, 22: 1, (2002), 2-3.
[46] Palmisano, (2010), 238.

now totally or partly disengaged from religion, they were born in a Catholic country, attended Catholic schools, youth groups, went to Mass and the Sacraments and married in a Catholic Church. Belonging to Catholicism was an important way of Italian life, but they were not officially or formally members.[47] For them, belonging to Catholicism was an ethnic and cultural rather than a religious membership. These points resonates with both Andersen's and Inglis' use of Bourdieu's term habitus to describe changes in Irish Catholicism discussed in chapter 1. According to Palmisano, the trend revealed in her data did not necessarily indicate that growing engagement and participation in the holistic milieu or alternative spiritualties meant an increase in a spiritual quest.[48] Methodologically, Palmisano argued that quantitative data requires supplementation with qualitative work to facilitate further examination of what assortment of beliefs, practices and activities fall into the category of alternative spirituality, with analysis of whether people find a spiritual dimension in those activities. The precise object of the present study, it justifies one of the core arguments I make regarding the value of triangulation, where an integrated qualitative component probes deeper understanding of perceptions derived from quantitative data.

Zinnbauer *et al's* large-scale quantitative empirical project is also relevant to my study.[49] Their threefold aim was to measure how individuals defined the terms 'religiousness' and 'spirituality', examine how they defined their own perceptions of the constructs, and analyse whether these definitions were associated with different demographic, religious-spiritual and psychosocial variables. Data analyses set out to compare participant's self-rated religiousness and spirituality, to correlate self-rated religiousness and spirituality with predictor variables, and to use predictor variables to distinguish between participant's who self-identified as spiritual *and* religious and those who self-identified as spiritual *but not* religious. They performed a content analysis of participants' definitions of religiousness and spirituality.[50] Key findings were

[47] Palmisano, (2010), 230.
[48] Palmisano, (2010), 223.
[49] Zinnbauer *et al*, (1997), 549-584. The study, conducted in Pennsylvania and Ohio comprised a sample of 346 individuals, composed of 11 groups of participants drawn from a wide range of religious backgrounds.
[50] Zinnbauer *et al*, (1997), 549.

that the terms partly described different concepts but were nonetheless inter-independent. Additionally, despite a finding that 93% of respondents self-identified as spiritual and 78% as religious, there were group differences in self-rated religiousness and spirituality, and variations in the definitions of the terms.[51] These scholars identified a largely experiential component to the faith of the cohorts who saw themselves as being *both* religious and spiritual. They considered that their findings illustrated the necessity for researchers to elicit the many meanings attributed to the two concepts by different religious and cultural groups, and the different ways in which these groups considered themselves religious and/or spiritual. My survey instruments draw on Zinnbauer *et al*'s study for some questions, as chapter 7 will denote.

A mixed-methods study conducted by Penny Marler and Kirk Hadaway explored the relationship between *being religious* and *being spiritual* in a national sample of American Protestants.[52] They sought to determine whether respondents construed the concepts as definitionally and operationally different, and if so, whether this constituted a "zero-sum dynamic" between them.[53] Their survey comprised one item from Wayne Roof's study of the spiritual journey of the baby-boom generation, which identified this cohort as highly active seekers engaged in a spiritual quest culture.[54] They included another item from the Princeton Religious Centre Gallup survey.[55] Their qualitative element comprised of data from both Zinnbauer *et al* and a follow up study by Roof.[56] They found that participants viewed the relationship between being religious and spiritual as "additive" rather than sum-zero, where they viewed the concepts as distinct and

[51] Zinnbauer *et al* included the following: how individuals define the terms religion and spirituality; to what degree do individuals rate themselves religious and/or spiritual; what beliefs they hold about God; how they view the conceptual relationship between religion and spirituality; and what positive or negative connotations do they attribute to the terms religion and spirituality.
[52] Marler, Penny Long, Hadaway, Kirk C, "Being Religious and Being Spiritual in America: a Zero-Sum Proposition," *Journal for the International Study of Religion*, 41, (2002), 289-300.
[53] Marler and Hadaway, (2002), 289. These authors do not define the 'zero sum' concept. It originates from 'game theory' where there is one winner and one loser in a game.
[54] Roof, Wayne C, *A Generation of Seekers: the Spiritual Journey of the Baby Boom Generation*, (San Francisco, CA. Harper-Collins), 1993.
[55] Princeton Religious Centre, (2002), 2-3.
[56] Roof, Wayne C, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000). Roof's sample included Catholics, Protestants and 'Religious nones.' Baby boomers refers to the demographic born after World War 2.

independent.[57] The main differences between Marler and Hadaway's study and those of Zinnbauer *et al* and the Princeton Religious Centre were the high percentage of participants who self-identified as *both* religious and spiritual. Zinnbauer *et al,* Marler and Hadaway compared both the *spiritual and religious* and *spiritual but not religious* groups. In her study, Palmisano pursued questions posed by these researchers to illuminate some defining features of Italian religious attitudes and practices. She postulated,

> Spiritual seekers explore the world's storehouse of faiths and spiritualties for a variety of meaning systems with which to experiment, in order to find those that meet their needs.[58]

Her analysis concentrated on findings from questions relating to religious beliefs, opinions about religious pluralism, and opinions about spirituality. Important findings were responses to the statement, *Jesus Christ is God's Son* (included in my survey). Remarkably, 40% of participants in the spiritual *but not* religious category did not believe this statement and 44% did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus.[59] In response to the question *what comes after death* (which I also include) 6% of the spiritual *but not* religious category opted for reincarnation, 30% for nothing, death is the end and 28% considered it impossible to know.[60] Chapter 7 presents and discusses my quantitative findings on these specific questions. Marler and Hadaway enter an important caveat regarding the studies cited above. Conducted from the late 1980s through 2000, they had variation in questions, wording and sample; therefore, they argued that no definitive conclusion was possible. Evidence of the value of Palmisano and Ammerman's research was how a group within the Institute for the Biocultural Study of Religion piloted a *Dimensions of Spirituality Inventory* designed to replicate their results and to extend them to a wider range of cultures and religions.

The next section offers a range of interdisciplinary perspectives on the meta-questions of life meaning, the subjectivities of religion and the growth of the

[57] Marler and Hadaway, (2002), 297.
[58] Palmisano, (2010), 227.
[59] Palmisano, (2010), 229. Palmisano outlines how these figures are higher than the 'neither spiritual nor religious' (32% did not believe this statement "Jesus Christ is God's son" while 32% did not believe in His resurrection).
[60] Palmisano, (2010), 229.

holistic milieu. They provide a stimulus for including particular questions in my research instruments. In chapter 1, I discussed Taylor's philosophical analysis of different forms of religion/spirituality and the widening gamut of intermediate contemporary positions moving outside Christian orthodoxy. I referenced his questioning of why many young people search for greater spiritual depth and existential meaning. This section discusses how social science disciplines attempted to illuminate these phenomena empirically.

2.5 The sociological, psychological and anthropological study of life meaning

Crystal Park underlines that, although the natural role of religion in life meaning have long formed psychologist's approaches to these topics, empirical approaches suffered from a lack of clarity regarding meaning. She considered that framing the need for meaning as "the need for a functional meaning system" helps anchor the issues of meaning and religiousness/spirituality in ways that allow delineation of many contexts, processes, and specific types of meaning. This framing facilitates empirical research to become more sophisticated.[61] Hervieu-Léger makes an important scholarly contribution to this endeavour. She addressed the problem of distinguishing religion from other meaning systems in contemporary Western societies.[62] She underlined how the chain of memory makes the believer a member of the community where religion is the ideological, symbolic and social device, which creates and controls individual and collective awareness of belonging to a lineage of believers. According to Hervieu-Léger, modern communities are less capable of maintaining a collective chain of memory as a source of meaning, evidenced by the modern mutation of religious individualism, particularly visible within the ensemble of heterogeneous groups and New Age spiritual networks. Here, 'this-worldly' personal experience, and a search for health, wellness, vitality and beauty takes precedence over religious concerns. Spiritual beliefs centre on personal accomplishment and access to a higher state of being. This involves experimentation to find personal truth,

[61] Park, Crystal, "Religion and Meaning", in *The Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, Edited* by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park. (The Guildford Press, 2015), 357.
[62] Hervieu-Léger, (2000).

rejecting all human-divine or natural-supernatural dualisms.[63] In spiritual matters, no authority defines or imposes an external norm upon the individual. Instead, people seek self-perfection through physical and spiritual practices adapted from the great traditions of mysticism and spirituality. According to Hervieu-Léger, these groups and networks constitute a fine instrument for analysing contemporary religious reality because they bring the tendencies generally present in renewal movements' front and centre. In short, their hallmarks are a search for personal authenticity, the primacy of experience, a this-worldly conception of salvation conceived of as a form of individual self-perfection and the rejection of faith systems. Potential consequences to this mix-and-match spiritual quest approach are that, at the extreme end of the patchwork belief systems, the formation of believing communities, joined together by a shared faith are rendered impossible. She argued that in this extreme hypothesis, the communal realization of any sort of lineage of believers, based upon a continuity with a tradition, which produces the very substance of a religious bond, tends to disappear. Given this point of view, the expansion of a modern individualised spirituality might well signal, in her view, the end of religion.[64] Hervieu-Léger argued that even in the case where individuals associate a religious sense to their spiritual quest, a predisposition to Davie's *Belief without Belonging* was confirmed. In this scenario, membership of a particular religious group is not necessary, one can simply log on to a particular internet site or online outlets to engage in, what Wuthnow described as spiritual tinkering.[65] Other psychologists of religion have addressed the issue of the internet influencing religion and spirituality. Lorne Dawson posits that the advent of a virtual community is leading to religion "coming adrift from its conventional moorings, just as our identity constructing processes are."[66] Michael Levenson *et al* proffered a contrary view.[67] Discussing the social and cultural influences on religious socialization and spiritual experience, they identified the internet as

[63] Hervieu- Léger, Daniele. "Individualism, the Validation of Faith, and the Social Nature of Religion in Modernity", in *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion,* edited by Richard Fenn, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 164.
[64] Hervieu-Léger, (2003), 164.
[65] Wuthnow, (2007).
[66] Dawson, Lorne L, "Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community", in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet,* Edited by L.L. Dawson & Douglas E. Cowan. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 75-89.
[67] Levenson *et al*, (2015).

the most contemporary influencing factor, where, as a virtual meeting place, it holds the key to future religious socialization and promise for the cultivation of spiritual development. They outlined other factors that changed the spiritual lives of younger adults such as the use of entheogens.[68]

The discussion points of this section are beneficial in targeting specific areas of exploration for the present study. Hervieu-Léger's illumination of religion as a chain of memory in addition to new age tendencies towards individual pursuits negating the communal aspects and bonds of religious traditions are important. Her perspectives influenced my questions on the holistic milieu, particularly the perceived "self-referential"[69] aspect from the perspective of participants. As this theme emerged in my data, I discuss the dangers associated with the commodification of spirituality in more detail in my discussion of findings in chapter 8, incorporating philosophical and theological insights Levinas and Tracy among other scholars.

The next section closely resembles the chain of memory and systems of meaning themes discussed above and resonates with my underpinning concept of religious decline. It discusses CREDs as behaviour cues and cultural scaffolding involved in the transmission or not of religious beliefs and as a major predictor of religious decline. It also discusses how a number of scholars have applied the theory anthropologically to Irish Catholicism. These insights facilitate enhanced understanding of how psychological processes mediate perceptions of religion and spirituality.

2.6 The concept of CREDs relating to religious decline

According to Hugh Turpin and Aiyana Willard, cultural evolutionary theory suggests that people are more likely to accept empirically universal beliefs (for instance the belief that there is a God, or that He is Three Divine Persons in One) if they have witnessed other people's behavioural commitment to these same

[68] A number of social scientists outline how the exposure to entheogens (psychedelic substances used in religious, spiritual and/or shamanic contexts) profoundly changed the religious lives of many. See for example: Forte, Robert. (Editor). *Entheogens and the Future of Religion*. (San Franscisco, CA: Council on Spiritual Practices, 1997). Also, Smith, Huston, *Cleansing the Door of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals*, (New York: Tarcher, 2000), Hood and Chen (2005), 348-364.
[69] Hervieu-Léger, (2003), 166.

beliefs.[70] Based on the work of anthropologist Joseph Henrich's cultural bias evolutionary theory of "costly" (or hard to fake) displays, known as CREDs.[71] Henrich's theory asserted particular forms of ritual or ritualized behaviours, closely allied to Justin Barret's conceptualization of reinforcing behaviour.[72] In simple terms, it explores what is involved in believing or not believing in religious representations. Henrich emphasised the importance of what he calls "context biases," suggesting that what makes a religious idea believable is not its content but the *context* (his emphasis) assimilating the idea.[73] Turpin and Willard cite literature suggesting that when religious beliefs failed to transmit across generations in large swathes of society, it may be because social changes precipitated a decline in supporting CREDs. In essence, while people may still believe in religious propositions, they stop participating in the rituals and behavioural practices necessary to instil these beliefs in the next generation.[74] Thus, decreased CREDs are a major predictor of religious decline. However, these scholars acknowledged that because existing research elides religious belief decline with the decreasing importance of religious institutions, it has not yet shown the effect of CREDs as separate from institutional decline. These researchers conducted a quantitative study in 2017, generating data from an online survey via Qualtrics panels (n=247). Their sample comprised Baptised Catholics in Ireland, 18 year-olds and over, nationally representative for age, gender and socio-economic status, representative of an urban/rural divide in a period of widespread CSA scandals. Data revealed that low CREDs exposure predicted leaving Irish Catholicism altogether (Ex-Catholicism) but rejecting the Church while retaining a Catholic identity (Liminal Catholicism) and theistic belief did not. A high-perceived prevalence of clerical paedophiles (what they considered religious hypocrisy) predicted both groups similarly. Additionally, high exposure to CREDs predicted higher orthodox Catholic beliefs and Catholic morality, but with inconsistent and even negative effects among other

[70] Turpin, Hugh P., Willard, Aiyana K, "Credibility Enhancing Displays, Religious Scandal and the Decline of Irish Catholic Orthodoxy", *Evolutionary Human Sciences,* 4:20, (2022), 1.
[71] Henrich, Joseph, "The Evolution of Costly Displays," *Evolution and Human Behaviour,* 30, (2009), 244-260. Costly displays are behaviours such as rituals, taboos, celibacy and so forth.
[72] Barrett, Justin, "Why Santa Claus is Not a God," *Journal of Cognition and Culture,* 8, (2008), 149-161.
[73] Henrich, (2009).
[74] Turpin and Willard, (2022), 1.

groups. High-perceived prevalence of clerical paedophiles predicted the rejection of orthodox Catholic beliefs, but not the rejection of theism or a Catholic identity.[75]

Using CREDs as theoretical background, Spanish anthropologist Carles Salazar sought to occupy a research gap in an Irish context by qualitatively exploring and providing evidence regarding the meaning of religious behaviours and ideas ethnographically.[76] His research related to Henrich's distinction between memorability and believability with regard to belief in God. Attempting to address the topic by turning it into a question of meaning, Salazar argued that only intensive ethnographic observation of concrete lived experiences yields qualitative data required for this type of research.[77] Concentrating his analysis on a single case study, Salazer attempted to demonstrate the limits of traditional cognitive approaches to the study of religious beliefs, which emphasised the memorability as opposed to the meaning of religious beliefs.[78] Conceding that we need to remember religious ideas in order to believe in them, he argued that believing entails more than just remembering.[79] Salazer took up residence on two occasions with a West of Ireland family and juxtaposed two examples that implicated belief and disbelief. The first instance of a CRED in the case study related to an association between the family matriarch ('Máire') and her belief in a supernatural intervention granting a desired outcome for which she had

[75] Turpin and Willard, (2022), 1-19.
[76] Salazar, Carles, "Understanding Belief: Some Qualitative Evidence," *Journal of Empirical Theology,* (2014), 199-213. Salazar explains memorability of religious ideas as their ability to colonize human minds. Underlying the distinction between memorability and believability, Salazer uses the intuitive and counterintuitive properties of the characters of Mickey Mouse, Zeus and Santa Claus to illustrate that they are memorable but not perceived as Gods. That Santa Claus appears inconsistently represented as having all five requisite features Santa has failed to develop a community of true believers and cult. Nevertheless, Santa concepts approximate a successful God concept more closely than other widespread cultural characters such as Mickey Mouse and the Tooth Fairy, in part explaining Santa's relative cultural prominence.
[77] Salazar, (2014), 205.
[78] According to Salazar, viewed through the lens of the cognitive science of religion, successful God concepts must possess a number of features. They must be: (1) counterintuitive, (2) an intentional agent, (3) possessing strategic information, (4) able to act in the human world in detectable ways and (5) capable of motivating behaviours that reinforce belief. See Salazar (2014), 199-213.
[79] Salazar, (2014), 200.

prayed and lit candles.[80] The second related to standard Catholic doctrine concerning afterlife, which does not postulate the feasibility of interaction between the living and dead. The precise second scenario centred on Máire's disbelieving reaction to watching a television programme portraying the grief of a young couple who had recently lost a child, where the couple voiced their confidence that the child's ghost was trying to communicate with them. Salazer considered the mother's confidence in the efficacy of prayer in the first situation and her incredulity regarding communication with the child's ghost in the second against Henrich's cultural bias theory, which postulated that religious commitment as a cognitive, social and cultural phenomenon."[81] In Salazer's view, the fact that the mother was accompanying her belief with the apposite ritual action (first instance) suggested a crucial component of meaning-generating cultural scaffolding. By contrast, there was no cultural scaffolding for belief in the second situation.[82] Relating to my research, I consider that this anthropological scholarship contributes understanding to the forces at play when social groups of young people exert influence on the religious/spiritual behaviours, meaning, commitment and rituals of peers as cultural scaffolding. In addition to the important point regarding cultural scaffolding, Salazer's ethnography also captured Maire's simple unquestioning faith that normatively characterised Catholic Ireland, when the most religious cohort were elderly women.[83]

The next section closely resembles the above theme. It discusses psychological perspectives on the connection between religion, ethno-identity and group membership. It expands on some issues considered in my general introduction regarding the influence of spirituality on mental health and wellness.

2.7 Religious group membership, spirituality and wellness

According to Renate Ysseldyk *et al*, religious identification offers a distinctive sacred worldview and eternal group membership, unmatched by identification

[80] Salazar, (2014), 206. Salazar outlines how two of the mother's children successfully undertook examinations while another had successfully applied for a green card to work in the U.S.
[81] Henrich, (2009), 258.
[82] Salazar, (2014), 206/7.
[83] Henrich, (2009), 210.

with any other social groups. Thus, the marked cognitive and emotional value that religious group membership provides explains religiosity. The uniqueness of a positive social group, grounded in a belief system providing epistemological and ontological certainty promotes general well-being. However, that uniqueness may have equally negative impacts when intergroup conflict threatens religious identity itself.[84] Those who hold atheistic worldviews also concede the benefits of religious group membership. Secular humanist Stephen Law, for example, conceded that religion binds individuals' together as a "necessary social adhesive" into communities.[85] Humanist philosopher Simon Blackburn also conceded that findings from social anthropological studies indicate that societies professing a religion are more stable, and last longer than those that do not.[86] Among many scholars, Glen Elder and Michael Shanahan emphasized the inextricable intertwining of social structure and psychological meaning.[87] Psychologists of religion emphasise how religions provide individuals with knowledge and resources to live purposeful lives, with life goals intertwined in human experience, positively connoted with higher levels of wellbeing.[88] They also emphasize how religion and identity formation are closely related. Crystal Park and Jeanne Slattery, for example, underline the strong social identity that religion offers, going beyond social support, as one potent pathway through which religiousness may influence issues such as mental health.[89] This coheres with Swinton and Gibson's view, alluded to at the outset, that while religion and spirituality differ in significant ways, they each strive to answer four fundamental existential questions that shape human responses to the world. Thus, as alluded to, spirituality manifests itself in a variety of different forms, not simply religion, and forms a central dimension of the recovery model in mental health pertaining particularly to more severe and enduring mental

[84] Ysseldyk *et al*, (2010), 60-71.
[85] Law, Stephen, "Humanism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. Edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 273-4.
[86] Blackburn, Simon. Religion and Respect, (2004), http://www.phil.cam.ac.uk/swb24/PAPERS/religion%20and%respect.pdf
[87] Elder, Glen H. and Shanahan, Michael J, "The Life Course and Human Development", in *Handbook of Child Psychology. Volume 1. Theoretical Models of Human Development*, Sixth Edition. Edited by R.M. Learner and W. Damon. Hoboken, (NJ: Wiley, 2006), 665-715.
[88] See: Emmons, Robert A. and Paloutzian, Raymond F. "The Psychology of Religion", *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54 (2003), 377-402.
[89] Park, Crystal L., Slattery, Jeanne M, "Religion, Spirituality and Mental Health", in *The Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, (2015), 540-559.

health challenges. The idea of recovery from these challenges entered the mental health discourse largely because proponents of mental health survivor movements such as Patricia Deegan and William Anthony began to articulate first-person accounts of their recovery experiences, pushing back against the conceptual anchor of chronicity that normatively dominated mental health discourse. Recovery emphasizes personal existential processes such as re-engaging with purposeful activities that give hope and meaning.[90] Deegan saw the goal of recovery as embracing "The human vocation of becoming more deeply, more fully human."[91] According to Anthony,

> Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one's life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness.[92]

Spirituality can become a driving force for creativity in recovery from mental health challenges that I witnessed in clinical practice. In this regard, Wuthnow studied creative spirituality among artists and reported how participants viewed spirituality as more authentic than organized religion because they had created it themselves.[93] Relevant to my demographic, robust international research evidence demonstrates that while people may experience mental health challenges at any point in their lives, the onset of mental disorders peaks during adolescence and early adulthood.[94] Research demonstrates that young people disproportionately carry the burden of morbidity with mental disorders now the

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[90] Deegan, Patricia, "Recovery as a Self-Directed Process of Healing and Transformation", in *Recovery and Wellness: Models of Hope and Empowerment for People with Mental Illness*, edited by C. Brown. (New York: Haworth Press, (2001), 5-21.

[91] Deegan, Patricia E, "Recovery as a Journey of the Heart," *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 19: 3 (1996), 92.

[92] Anthony, W. A, "Recovery from Mental Illness: the Guiding Vision of the Mental Health System in the 1990's," *Psychosocial Rehabilitation Journal*, 16:4 (1993), 12. In this context, co-authoring a journal article on recovery with a professor of mental health, we used a symbolic flower to depict the "petals" of mental health recovery, identifying spiritual connection, hope and voice among the most significant petals. See: Higgins, Agnes, Mc Bennett, Padraig, "The Petals of Recovery in a Mental Health Context," *British Journal of Nursing*, 16: 14, (2007).

[93] Wuthnow, Robert. *Creative Spirituality: The Way of the Artist.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[94] Kim-Cohen, J., *et al*., "Prior Juvenile Diagnosis in Adults with Mental Disorder: Developmental Follow-Back of a Prospective-Longitudinal Cohort", Archives *of General Psychiatry*, 60:7, (2003), 7. Also, Kessler, R.C., *et al*., "Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM – 1V Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62:6, (2005), 593-602.

leading cause of disability among those aged 10-24 years globally.[95] For example, findings from two Irish studies undertaken by the *Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Across the Lifespan* (PERL) Group found that high numbers of young people were experiencing mental ill health at any given time. Specifically, researchers found that by the age of 13 years, 33% of their sample were likely to have experienced some kind of mental disorder, with the number increasing to 50% by the age of 24. These data suggested that young Irish people endure higher rates of mental disorder than a similar demographic in other countries.[96] Some theological studies undertaken specifically suggested a positive correlation between spiritual wellbeing and mental health. For example, Andrew Village and Leslie Francis examined the relationship between changes in spiritual wellbeing and self-rated physical and mental health in a convenience sample of Church of England Anglicans during the third national Covid-19 lockdown in 2021. Using an online survey delivered through the Qualtrics XM platform, their aim was to test whether those who reported better changes in spiritual wellbeing also reported better mental health during a sudden crisis. They produced a *change in spiritual wellbeing* scale using self-reported changes in the frequency of key spiritual practices (prayer and Bible reading, trust in God, the quality of spiritual life, and spiritual health). They also explored how self-perceived changes in spiritual wellbeing related to self-perceived changes in psychological wellbeing, and whether or not any association in spiritual wellbeing on health could be entirely accounted for by differences in psychological wellbeing.[97] Among their key findings were that spiritual wellbeing was an important factor in promoting mental health during the pandemic, where "spiritual wellbeing has tended to be elided with psychological wellbeing in some conceptualizations."[98] In short, their findings suggested that spiritual wellbeing was important in maintaining overall mental health during a traumatic period. The significance of this section relates to data from my study,

[95] Gore, F.M., *et al*, "Global Burden of Disease in Young People Aged 10-24 Years: A Systematic Analysis", *Lancet*, 377 (9783), (2011), 2093-102.
[96] Cannon, Mary, Coughlan, Helen, Clarke, Mary, Harley, Michelle, Kelleher, Ian, "The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: a Report of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research across the Lifespan", PERL Group Dublin: Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, (2013).
[97] Village, Andrew. Francis, Leslie, "The Effects of Spiritual Wellbeing on Self Perceived Health Changes Among Members of the Church of England During the Covid - 19 Pandemic in England", *Journal of Health and Religion*, 62: 4 (2023), 1-17.
[98] Village and Francis, (2023), 16.

where mental health relating to spirituality was a recurring theme, discussed in chapter 8. The next chapter also discusses theological ethnographic studies that have researched specific mental health issues.

Research on spirituality relating to nonreligious worldviews from a mainly social scientific and psychological perspective is the focus of the next section. The literature identifies the need for more research on the topics of nonreligion and secularity (of which the so-called 'new atheism' is but one part).[99] These worldviews have distinct ontological, epistemological and ethical beliefs. My survey provided three options of nonreligious identification: atheism, agnosticism and secular humanism.[100] Approximately one-quarter of my interview sample self-identified in one of these categories. Thus, to achieve ontological justice, I include this important voice both theoretically here and methodologically in my research design.

2.8 Spirituality, atheism, humanism and nonreligious worldviews

The social scientific tradition consider unreligious positions as the natural and self-explanatory outcome of modernisation processes.[101] The most notable is atheism, which developed historically in the context of Western monotheistic religions and still has its clearest application in this area.[102] It appears that the concept in Western cultures has a distinctive identity. According to Bullivant, its precise definition is both "a vexed and vexatious issue."[103] He succinctly defines atheism as non-belief in a God or gods.[104] Atheism can be associated with traditions like Buddhism or as a component part of religious experience.[105] The relationship between atheism and nonreligion has only recently attracted scholarly interest.[106] Lois Lee underlines how previous scholarship was interested in atheism merely as a measure of the declining pervasiveness and

[99] See, for example, Zenk, Thomas, "New Atheism." In: *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, Edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 258.
[100] There are four main forms of humanism: Secular, Liberal, Socialist and Evolutionary.
[101] Campbell, (2013), 9.
[102] Martin, Michael, "Introduction," In: *The Cambridge Companion of Atheism* (Cambridge Companions to Philosophy, 2007), 1.
[103] Bullivant, Stephen, "Defining Atheism." In: *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism,* (2013), 11.
[104] Bullivant, (2013), 1 – 21.
[105] Lee, (2013), 588 n3.
[106] Bullivant, Stephen. Lee, Lois, "Introduction: Interdisciplinary Studies of Non-Religion and Secularity: The State of the Union," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27:1, (2012), 19-27.

popularity of theism, rather than whether and how atheism shapes individual worldviews. Lee argues that this also applies to contemporary studies of secularism/secularity, where scholars rarely discuss the role of atheism and nonreligion explicitly.[107] In her view, a lack of systematic research attention has led to the problematic understanding of atheism, only just beginning to experience a comparable (to studies of religion) cultural turn.[108] One example is her research recognition of the social and cultural practices of Western European atheists (congregating, ritualizing and developing meaning and life philosophies). This research focus is mainly currently exclusive to the theist population. [109] North American empirical data identified the prevalence of perceived anti-atheist discrimination, elicited by means of the *ARIS* survey tool (see appendix A).[110] Drawing on these data, Ryan Cragun *et al* researched the key dynamics of atheistic life.[111] They found that 25% of those who report no belief in God generally and 41% of self-identified atheists reported experiencing in at least one of the discrimination variables studied.[112] They underscored that morality became a central theme of the polemical, philosophical and social-scientific literature on atheists. Edgell *et al* argue that a socially constructed moral and cultural boundary exists between theists and atheists.[113] This boundary relates to a collective assumption about the relationship and connection between religion and morality as opposed to people's interactions with, or actual experience of atheists.[114] Julian Baggini, emphasising that atheists can be indifferent rather than hostile to religious belief, suggests that there is no

[107] Lee, Lois, "Being Secular: Towards Separate Sociologies of Secularity, Nonreligion and Epistemological Culture." Unpublished PhD Thesis. (University of Cambridge, 2012). See also: Gutkowski, Stacey, "From Multiculturalism to Multifaithism? The Panel Debate", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 10: 2, (2012).
[108] Lee, Lois, "Locating Nonreligion in Mind, Body and Space: New Research Methods for a New Field," *Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion 3.* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 135-57.
[109] Lee, (2013), 597.
[110] The ARIS nationally representative dataset included data of those who self-identify as having 'no religion' (n=1106). A question asked respondents about perceived discrimination based on their lack of religious identification.
[111] Cragaun, Ryan T., Hammer, Joseph H., Smith, Jesse M, "North America", in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, (2013), 601-621.
[112] Cragaun, Ryan T., Kosmin, B.A., Keysar, A., Hammer, Joseph H., and Nielsen, M.E, "On the Receiving End: Discrimination toward the Non-Religious*," Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27: 1, (2012), 102-127.
[113] Edgell, P., Gerteis, J., Hartmann, D, "Atheists as "Other": Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership", *American Sociological Review* 71, (2006), 211-234,
[114] Cragaun *et al*, (2013), 614.

a priori link between being either a positive or a negative person.[115] He argued that atheists can be more sensitive to aesthetic experience, more moral, or more attuned to natural beauty than theists can. Phil Zuckerman addressed how secular individuals (like himself) construct and experience their morality, and what actually constitutes the primary ethics that underpin life without religion.[116] According to Zuckerman, many religious Americans do not like or trust people who do not believe in God, because they assume that atheism is the same as being without morals.[117] He attempted to quantify atheistic numbers and trends worldwide but experienced methodological difficulties in so doing.[118] Among these were low response rates, the problem of non-random samples, and adverse political/cultural climates.[119] This suggests that an important perspective in this discussion is consideration of the psychology of atheism specifically regarding life meaning. Miguel Farias *et al* conducted research to test the hypothesis that atheistic belief in science can replace religion in the provision of meaning and emotional reassurance.[120] They argued that atheist's beliefs, although non-supernatural, are similar to religious ones in their psychological function. They maintained that atheists have distinct ontological, epistemological and ethical beliefs about reality, deserving study in their own right. [121] An individual who does not believe in God will hold other meaningful types of beliefs that provide a basis for making ethical judgements related to the good, providing emotional reassurance similar to what supernatural beliefs accomplish for a believer.[122] Chapter 8 discusses how a number of participants who hold atheist and other nonreligious worldviews embody the discussion points above regarding aesthetics and moral good. Also in a North American context, Pasquale and Komin highlight that even among those who are affirmatively nonreligious;

[115] Baggini, Julian, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction.* (Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press), (2003), 11.
[116] Zuckerman, Phil, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions*, (New York: Penguin Press, (2014), 9.
[117] Zuckerman, (2014), 9.
[118] Zuckerman, Phil, "Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns," In: *The Cambridge Companion of Atheism*, edited by Michael Martin, (2007), 47 – 65.
[119] Zuckerman, (2007), 47.
[120] Farias, Miguel. Newheiser, A., Kahane, G., de Toledo, Z, "Faith in Science: Belief in Science Increases in the Face of Stress and Anxiety", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, (2013).
[121] Farias, Miguel, "The Psychology of Atheism," In: *The Oxford Book of Atheism*, (2013), 468-482.
[122] Farias *et al*, (2013).

atheism typically represents only one aspect of a full worldview.[123] Secular humanism is another variety of atheistic theory concerning life meaning. According to Law, like religion, it focuses on issues of ultimate importance. Secular humanists attempt to answer life meaning questions through the application of science and reason, rather than relying on revelation or scripture.[124] Law argued that this humanist worldview is regularly misunderstood and misrepresented. He enumerated a seven-point characterization of humanism, notably an emphasis on science and reason (as stated), no belief in afterlife or reincarnation, the importance of individual moral autonomy, value and responsibility, a secularist stance, and a neutral stance on religion. According to Law, the line of argument making a causal relationship between declining levels of religiosity and alleged declining levels of moral behaviour is a "post hoc" fallacy.[125]

2.9 Chapter summary

This chapter explored the complex, nuanced, diverse, dynamic, multivalent and contextually specific nature of the religion and spirituality nexus. These remain important, defining existential human constructs in providing a search for ultimate meaning in a postmodern world. Methodologically, the chapter demonstrated the value of including interdisciplinary perspectives to achieve an empirically grounded study, providing scholarly insights that I consider add significant texture to my overall understanding of the complex constructs at play. Anecdotal evidence and available empirical data (including those elicited from the present study) suggest that the demographic of interest are largely indifferent to some of Catholicism's doctrines and regulations. De Souza's commentaries are important in this regard in view of her similar demographic. My findings cohere with her assertions regarding obsession with doctrines and regulations driving religions, and loss of vision that originally inspired them. In De Souza's view, this has led to a drift away from traditional religions because of the

[123] Pasquale and Kosmin, (2013), 458.
[124] Law, (2013), 263-277.
[125] A post-hoc fallacy refers to the observation that two events that happen consecutively or simultaneously does not, in isolation, provide support to the claim that the events are causally related. So, if people view a society as less moral than it used to be, it does not follow that decline in religious belief is the primary cause, See Law, (2013), 271.

perceived irrelevance of the original vision in addition to hurt and damage caused by the rules and regulations that have distorted it.[126] In my view, the role of CREDs in institutional religious decline and the meaning as opposed to memorability of religion are relevant to my study anthropologically in the context of how peer influences act or do not act as cultural scaffolding, thereby influencing the transmission (or not) of religious beliefs. My discussion on religious group membership and its relationship to wellness is important in the context of mental health challenges. Religion and spirituality are powerful forces for shaping understanding of these challenges. Village and Francis' study of spiritual wellbeing is a good example of this, in addition to the undisputed benefits of religious group membership outlined in that section. The section on nonreligious worldviews raises some interesting perspectives, particularly on issues relating to aesthetics and morality. Ethically, it is important to include these perspectives to achieve epistemological and ontological justice, congruent with Wilson's proposition discussed earlier regarding the imperative for critical scholarship of the definition and deployment of religious and secular categories as objects and ways of being-in-the- world.[127]

The next two chapters move my discourse from theory to methodology, particularly critical questions and research parameters. Chapter 3 discusses how I frame my research worldview and provides a rationale for my choice of paradigms, methodologies and methods. Here, I provide my rationale for triangulation and an interpretivist mode of enquiry as these research decisions guide my subsequent chapters. I then develop the argument commenced in my general introduction for applying an ethnographic set of research tools. I emphasise that theology is my primary frame of reference, integral to how I ethnographically research the social and cultural situation under study, while acknowledging tensions and points of convergence and divergence between the disciplines. I include exemplars of how theologians creatively and effectively merged theology with social science in ethnographic work, and how this scholarship influenced my methodological approach. Chapter 4 then extends the

[126] Irish Catholicism's perceived treatment of women is a good example of this damage.
[127] I also use the term 'modes of intentionality' in my methodology chapter to refer to ways of 'being in the world.'

discourse to focus precisely on how I position my research in the discipline of Practical Theology.

Chapter 3: Ways of Empirical Knowing: Critical Questions and Research Parameters

Because the whole created order and the activity that constitute human history are potential disclosures of God to us, then all the human sciences, disciplines of learning, and ways of knowing are potential resources for our theologizing.

Thomas Groome, (1987) [1]

3.1. Introduction

According to Bennett *et al*, a new eagerness to engage with religion and spirituality has arisen in the world of social theory. This springs from belated acknowledgment that religion continues to play a significant role in contemporary culture and will not disappear.[2] Traditionally, religious scholars have focused on the various ways that religion and spirituality are manifest across times, places and cultures. According to Raymond Paloutzian and Crystal Park, the study of religion and understanding human behaviour generally requires interdisciplinary integration in addition to theological expertise.[3] Empirical theologian Hans Schilderman also argues that one of the problems confronting theology concerns the fact that religion is being studied from various interpretive universes that results in a variety of historically rooted interpretations.[4] Advocating phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches, he suggests that these facilitate emphasis on clarifying processes of religious communication and interpretation. They inductively construct reality-informed notions of contemporary beliefs and practices, while simultaneously doing justice to the immense variety of religious expression. Hence, this chapter discusses the key elements of my paradigms, methodologies, methods and research design.

[1] Groome, Thomas H, "Theology on Our Feet: A Revisionist Pedagogy for Healing the Gap between Academia and Ecclesia," in *Formation and Reflection: The Promise of Practical Theology*, edited by L.S. Mudge and J.N. Poling, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 61.
[2] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 148.
[3] Paloutzian, Raymond F., Park, Crystal L, (Editors). *The Handbook of The Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. (The Guildford Press, 2015), 9.
[4] Schilderman, Hans, "Religion as Concept and Measure", *Journal of Empirical Theology*, (27), (2014), 1.

3.2 Research design: paradigms, methodologies and methods

According to Nicole Mockler, the key elements of a research design divide into critical questions and parameters. Critical questions centre on beliefs about reality, about 'knowledge,' how to approach research, where and how to look and interpret, and what strategies to use. These critical questions lead to research parameters: ontology, epistemology(ies), research paradigm(s), methodologies and methods.[5] Using Mockler's approach, I began my study by reflecting on my worldview (ontology), relating my fundamental understanding of existence to how I plan my research. Bennett *et al* suggest that the term 'worldview' helps unify two key aspects that shape ontology. First, it emphasises that our understanding of the world is a matter of deep enacted and embodied conviction (belief) and the related commitments that spring from a sense of belonging to traditions, communities of practice and peoples of faith, in my case Roman Catholicism. Secondly, it reminds us of the importance of reflexivity, discussed in section 3.10, as worldviews or ontologies generate from particular vantage points.[6] The next stage is to identify clear epistemological (ways of knowing) theoretical underpinnings. For my study, my epistemological and ontological stances cohere with the view that the complexity of relevant theological knowledge is diverse, complex and multi-perspectival, and so I use a variety of strategies to apprehend aspects of the reality I am seeking regarding my topics from the perspectives of non-believers as well as believers. Thus, epistemologically, I reflect on the nature of the knowledge that I am attempting to represent through my research to provide convincing accounts of the contemporary religious landscape and spiritual marketplace of a post-modern Ireland, in other words perceptions of a particular "social location"[7] in ethnographic terms. This process of reflection stimulates a research decision regarding which paradigm(s) I will use to provide such accounts, emanating from my ontological and epistemological considerations.

[5] Mockler, Nicole, "Being Me: In Search of Authenticity", in *Creative Spaces for Qualitative Researching*, (Rotterdam and Boston: Sense Publishers, 2011), 159-168.
[6] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 140.
[7] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 141.

3.3 Rationale for mixed-methods

Paradigms are systems of beliefs and practices that influence how researchers select both the questions they study and the methods they use to study them.[8] As a Practical Theological researcher, I needed to decide whether to use a positivist or constructivist paradigm or a combination of these theoretical lenses (once considered the 'incompatibility thesis' in research).[9] In addition to facilitating a multi-perspectival approach to constructing bespoke research instruments, mixed-methods also helped me to triangulate data findings, which I discuss in the context of qualitative findings in chapter 8. Merging quantitative and qualitative data allows the scrutiny of a phenomenon from more than one methodological perspective. According to Jennifer Greene, mixed methods is an orientation toward looking at the social world that actively invites us to participate in dialogue about multiple ways of seeing and hearing, multiple ways of making sense of the social world, and multiple standpoints on what is important and to be valued and cherished.[10] It is an approach advocated by Practical Theology's seminal thinkers, discussed in chapter 4. For example, Johannes van der Ven among other Practical Theological thinkers argued for including some statistical analysis in a rigorous empirical theological study.[11] He suggested that empirical theology includes a prior first step of theological induction in which the researcher dives into the water of the data and emerges with a theological problem or research question (in my case irreligious trends) to guide the next steps. Therefore, a theological horizon frames the whole research trajectory.[12]

Because my orientation is the production of reconstructed understandings of the social world, my study used a constructivist paradigm, adopting a relativist

[8] Morgan David L, "Paradigms Lost and Pragmatism Regained: Methodological Implications of Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Methods", *Journal of Mixed-Methods Research,* 1(1), (2007), 48-76.
[9] See, for example, Teddlie, C, Tashakkori, A (Editors), "Major Issues and Controversies in the Use of Mixed Methods in the Social and Behavioural Sciences", in *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioural Research,* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 3-50.
[10] Greene, J.C, *Mixed-Methods in Social Enquiry,* (San Franscisco, CA: John Wiley), 2007.
[11] van der Ven, Johannes A, *Practical Theology: an Empirical Approach*, (Kampen: Kok, 1993).
[12] van der Ven, (1993).

ontology (relativism), transactional epistemology, and hermeneutic, dialectical methodology, as advocated by Denzin and Lincoln.[13] This approach has a practical-emic based qualitative orientation in its quest to engage in dialogue about multiple ways of making sense of the social world. Qualitative researchers working to a constructivist epistemological paradigm are committed to an emic, case-based position, concerned with the specifics of particular cases.[14] Other Practical Theological thinkers such as Don Browning *et al* suggest compatibility between theological ethnographic interviews in addition to statistical analysis in the study of human cultures and practices, where demographic facts can help determine the causal factors in social behaviour.[15] In the context of Christian theology and ethics, Christian Scharen and Anna Marie Vigen contend that both quantitative methods using deduction and qualitative methods using induction have important roles and are vital to research and understanding. Rather than casting them as necessary competitors that demand an "either/or" allegiance, these scholars see them as complementary methods, but with distinct aims and objectives.[16] In practice, these approaches do not possess clear boundaries and can easily "bleed" into each other.[17] Arguing that the natural or quantitative social sciences are not the appropriate sole methodology for researching religious (and spiritual in my study context) lived experiences, Hans Heimbrock suggests that empirical researchers should retreat from secondary causal explanations and reach for primary "giveness" of experiences, freed from preoccupation with specific filters such as hypotheses.[18] Empirical theologian Wesley Wildman concurs with the theological view that the scientific study of religious experiences cannot either prove or disprove extant theological interpretations. Heimbrock argues that when it comes to the issue of religious

[13] Denzin and Lincoln, (2018), 98.
[14] Emic, a social science term derived from the study of linguistics, refers to specific language or cultural distinctions that have meaning for a cultural group, in essence, an insider's view of reality. See, Gray, David E., *Doing Research in the Real World*. 5th Edition (Sage: London, 2022), 836.
[15] Browning, Don., Miller McLermore, Bonnie J., Couture, Pamela D., Brynold Lyon, K., Franklin, Robert, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*. Second Edition. (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox, 2000).
[16] Scharen, Christian, Vigen, Aana Marie, (Editors) *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 5.
[17] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 142.
[18] Heimbrock, Hans Gunter, "Practical Theology as Empirical Theology", *International Journal of Practical Theology*, (14), (Walter De Gruyter, 2011), 166.

experiences as lived experience, theoretical models can objectify the phenomenon at stake and separate them as objects of empirical reflection without taking the meaning-giving perspective of experience, rooted in lifeworld into account.[19] In essence, according to Heimbrock, it is imperative to maintain the "for-me" perspective of lived experience against any objective experience.[20] In this context, I employ a subjective, hermeneutic phenomenological aspect in my study. Similarly, Paul Atkinson and Martin Hammersley underline a strong emphasis on exploring the nature of a particular social phenomenon, the precise object of the present study, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them. My approach also accords with Salazar's view that ethnographic research is not an alternative, but rather a complement to quantitative methods, one that emphasises the meaningful component of all social relationships. Thus, my research did not set out to compare participant's self-rated religiousness and spirituality, or to correlate self-rated religiousness and spirituality with predictor variables such as gender, socioeconomic status and so forth. Nor did it set out to use predictor variables to distinguish between participant's self-identification in any of the two-by-two categories. In short, I was not concerned with conducting positivist research to the external standards of the social sciences. In this regard, I concur with Heimbrock's view that a purely religious statistics is fundamentally at odds with general principles accepted in the theological academy.[21] Consistent with Wildman's view, my quest is to open a window into human behaviour in natural settings, which does not explain anything by itself but is specifically relevant to the analysis of belief and cultural learning in general.[22] Wildman's fundamental argument is that empirical theology requires a partnership, which respects the importance of distinctively theological questions, and the value of empirically derived constraints is prized.[23] Researchers can only understand perception and behaviour from participant's own perspectives, in their own words, with different interpretations of the same phenomenon.[24] Thus, my thesis, setting out to elicit perceptions, collects and

[19] Heimbrock, (2011), 164.
[20] Heimbrock, (2011), 164.
[21] Heimbrock, (2011), 153-170.
[22] Wildman, (2013), 142.
[23] Wildman, (2013), 142.
[24] Parahoo, Kader, "Qualitative Research", in *Nursing Research Principles, Process and Issues.* 2nd Edition, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 44-47.

analyses data inductively through interpretivist[25] methods that may potentially bring new insights for theological reflection on one important aspect of religious and social change in Ireland. Qualitative research as a set of interpretive activities privileges no single methodological practice over another.[26] In short, just as praxis it is never just one thing, qualitative research does not belong to a single discipline. Researchers using this paradigm are concerned with developing new understanding (*Verstehen*)[27] with participants through flexible inductive and reflexive methods to cultivate the essence and meaning of human experience.[28] According to Flick, qualitative research is of specific relevance to the study of social relations, stating,

> Diversifications of life worlds …(are) increasingly confronting social researchers with new social contexts and perspectives …thus research is increasingly forced to make use of inductive strategies instead of starting from theories and testing them (…) knowledge and practice are studied as *local* knowledge and practice.[29]

This pluralization, he suggests, requires a new sensitivity to the empirical study of issues, in my case the perceptions regarding spirituality and religion. Whereas I did not set out to identify a single particular case (a research design focusing on one person), my design targets "a sample from which one case may potentially be drawn."[30] Heimbrock argues that the type of research appropriate to grasp lived religious experience (and spiritual experience in my study) will be more like case studies, developed in qualitative empirical research. He underlines that the case is the product of interpretive research, not the basis. The intention is hermeneutical reconstruction where a particular case will lead to theoretical constructions of an ideal case leading to fuller understanding of the phenomenon, based on description and interpretation. As an exemplar, Barbara Keller and Heinz Streib conducted a triangulated study exploring contemporary religious lives/autobiographic narrative case studies of spirituality. They

[25] Interpretivist approaches include phenomenology, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism and naturalistic inquiry, See: Gray, (2022), 838.
[26] Denzin and Lincoln, (2018), 12.
[27] I use the German word '*Verstehen'* because interpretivist and hermeneutic approaches are generally characterised as the '*Geisteswissenschalftlichte'* or '*Verstehen'* traditions in the human sciences.
[28] Creswell, John W, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches.* 3rd Edition: (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 56.
[29] Flick, (1998), 2.
[30] Gray, (2022), 834. A good example of this is Salazer's ethnography of Irish Catholicism discussed in Chapter 2 where he focused on one particular case study.

developed the *Faith Development Interview* (FDI), based on James Fowler's normative conception of faith.[31] Pete Ward underlines how Fowler constructs the category of faith as something that is not necessarily dependent on religion or belief.[32] Fowler developed a stepwise theoretical construct/ framework of faith generated from the experience of individual believers.[33] His theoretical framework stemmed from clinical practice, tested empirically by longitudinal research based on interviews (N=359) conducted over a nine-year period. Keller and Streib's research interest was on participant's use of the *word* (my emphasis) spirituality, not to the scientific concept. They also based their case studies on a set of quantitative measures and demographic information from an online questionnaire. They based their sampling strategy on analysis of the self-identification as being *more spiritual* as opposed to *more religious* in their questionnaire.[34] Whereas I conduct my study on a smaller scale for logistical reasons, it utilises a similar triangulated design. Additionally, similar to Keller and Streib, my focus is on participant's use of the *word* spirituality.

Methodologies, then, lead from research paradigms. They are the "research home" which sustain the concrete practices of the researcher.[35] A particular challenge to the present study is that the social research literature employs the term 'methodology' in different ways with different philosophical and theoretical assumptions. In other words, a homogeneity of consensus among disciplines regarding the most appropriate methodologies to use does not exist. Thus, as a Practical Theological researcher, I draw on more than one, sometimes revised or recanted methodological traditions, as suggested, for example by leading researchers Lincoln and Guba.[36] In the context of the "spiritual turn",

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[31] Keller, Barbara, Streib, Heinz, "Faith Development, Religious Styles and Biographical Narratives: Methodological Perspectives", *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 26, 2013), 1-21.
[32] Ward, Pete, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry and the Life of the Church.* (Michigan: Baker Academic, Grand Rapids:, 2017), 106-7.
[33] Fowler, James, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, (San Franscisco: Harper San Francisco, 1981). Both quantitative and qualitative data emerged from Fowler's interviews. Quantitative analysis allowed the description of sample. Qualitatively, the interviews provided description of the faith stages and the transitions between stages.
[34] Keller and Streib, (2013), 13.
35 Bennett *et al*, (2018), 143.
36 Lincoln, Yvonna S, and Guba, Egon G, "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences," in The *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd Edition, edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage 2005), 163-188.

they are among other scholars reconsidering their previous reticence towards naming spiritual concerns in research.[37] They concede,

> If we had to do it all over again we would make values, or more correctly axiology (the branch of philosophy dealing with ethics, aesthetics, and religion) a part of the basic foundational philosophical dimensions of paradigm proposal. Doing so would enable us to see the embeddedness of ethics within, not external to, paradigms … and would contribute to the consideration of and dialogue about the role of spirituality in human enquiry … defining "religion" broadly to encompass spirituality would move constructivists closer to participative inquirers and would move critical theorists closer to both (owing to their concerns with liberation from oppression and freeing of the human spirit, both profoundly spiritual concerns).[38]

As my basic assumption relates to the socially constructed nature of knowledge, where people make meanings that create their world, I used a predominantly constructivist/interpretivist, qualitative methodology to explore how young people assign meaning to the ontology of their daily lives. Ontologically, interpretivist traditions view subjective realities as constructed internally. According to Michael Crotty, an interpretivist researcher is someone who attempts to clarify the meaning of a phenomenon.[39] He underlines that the interpretivist paradigm views human meanings as unique constructions that result from the context and personal frames of reference from engagement with the worlds that people are interpreting. Thus, in Crotty's view there are multiple constructed realities.[40] Applied to the present study, these constructed realities are the broad spectrum of religious and nonreligious worldviews.

Leading from methodologies, methods are ways of collecting, organizing, and analysing data.[41] Because methods are the tools used to generate data, Practical Theological researchers require some proficiency in social science methods to undertake work they consider to be of profound theological significance. It is important to state here my reasons for including hermeneutic phenomenology, bearing in mind that, while ethnography and hermeneutic phenomenology share some similarities, they have distinct foci and approaches. Essentially, I use

37 Bennett *et al*, (2018), 149.
38 Lincoln and Guba, (2005), 169.
39 Crotty, Michael, *Phenomenology and Nursing Research*, (Elsevier Health Sciences, 2000).
40 Crotty, Michael, *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*, (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Churchill Livingstone, 1996).
41 Stausberg and Engler, (2016), 31.

Gadamerian hermeneutics to elicit qualitative thick description and to cohere with my theoretical framework, with a view to meeting or fusing horizons. Scholars such as ethnographer Robert Orsi have questioned the normative view that religion is primarily a cognitive phenomenon structured around propositional belief.[42] It is a complex world constituted by the practices of the '3 B's' of religion alluded to in my general introduction. Hence, the turn to practice reconstructs religion as a form of lived experience. Bennett *et al* emphasise the increasing importance of hermeneutical (focused upon interpretation rather than explanation) and phenomenological (stressing the importance of the lifeworld and embodied location) methodologies which have paved the way for acceptance of hybrid modes of enquiry such as autoethnography, discussed in chapter 3.10. These Practical Theologians cite literature suggesting that that these concepts cannot be confined within traditional social science forms.[43] Hence, while acknowledging that ethnography and hermeneutic phenomenology emanate from different philosophical assumptions and have distinct foci and approaches, they have a precise function within the present study. I use a self-constructive model of engagement rather than distance to bring the lived experiences of young people into dialogue with theology in a quest to gather solid data regarding both ecclesial and non-ecclesial situations. Scharen and Vigen, moreover, question the undervaluing of qualitative methods, suggesting that they merit more respect and serious consideration than they receive from both scientists and theologians.[44] As a Practical Theological researcher, I 'borrow' interdisciplinary insights to explore and privilege people's experience, without reducing theology to psychology and sociology. These disciplines are meaning seeking but they are not theology, so there is a need to avert the danger of my study having a sociological approach. The important point at stake is that my choice of methodologies are 'fit for purpose' and fulfil the criteria of rigour, as I will argue in chapter 6.9. Common to any qualitative approach is the quest to unpick how people construct the world around them and explore how they construct their own reality within a social

[42] See: Orsi, Robert. *Between Heaven and Hell: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[43] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 152.
[44] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 5.

context.[45] We understand the world as we engage with it, so truth emerges through observation and engagement in human lives.[46] This suggests the need for an ethnographic/autoethnographic approach in the present study where a close relationship exists with ecclesiology, discussed in the next sections on theological ethnography. It is important to note that I use ethnography for the background and context, while I employ hermeneutic phenomenology, discussed later, for gathering data.

3.4 Ethnography as Christian theology

Defying a single definition, ethnography was traditionally associated with the study of small, homogenous cultures by means of participant observation. Rooted in 19th century anthropology, its contemporary understanding as a qualitative research approach is sometimes blurred between the terms 'fieldwork,' 'interpretative method' and 'case study.'[47] Elizabeth Phillips outlines how anthropologists consider ethnography as a comprehensive and holistic study of cultural immersion. Conversely, theologians use the term to describe anything from a brief historical vignette to a theological case study.[48] John Brewer delineates two types of ethnography: '*big*' and '*little.'*[49] Julie Scott Jones and Sal Watt reference Chicago sociologist Robert Park's idea of ethnography as a willingness on the researcher's part "to get the seat of his or her pants dirty."[50] Ethnographic innovator James Spradley describes the approach as an attempt to document the existence of alternative realities and to describe those realities in terms of the people studied.[51] In simple terms, ethnography combines culture (*ethno*) with writing (*graphy*). For ethnographers, this description provides a rich and varied landscape of human interaction. Spradley argues that coming to understand perspectives other than professional

[45] Gray, (2022), 838.
[46] Gray, (2022), 838.
[47] Hammersley, Martyn, Atkinson, Paul, *Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. 3rd Edition. (London: Routledge, 2007), 1.
[48] Phillips, Elizabeth, "Charting the Ethnographic Turn": Theologians and the Study of Christian Congregations", in: *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography,* edited by Pete Ward (W.B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2012), 102.
[49] Brewer, John. *Ethnography*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), 10.
[50] Scott Jones and Watt, (2010), 7.
[51] Spradley, James P, *Participant Observation*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980), 14.

scientific cultures will lead to a sense of "epistemological humility."[52] Some theologians, notably John Millbank and Paul Tillich contested the view that social science methods are compatible with theology.[53] I am not exploring the religious and/or spiritual perceptions of young people in a broader, macro context in an extended longitudinal study. I am not immersing in the field for long periods, living with communities, or engaging in deep participant observation. This is logistically impossible within the scope of my study. In any event, full ethnographic immersion is not always possible.[54] My design is more in line with previous theological ethnographic studies that researched issues such as 'depression and spirituality,'[55] 'exploring an emergent Church,'[56] 'religious communities and suicide,'[57] and 'researching marginalized people.'[58] These studies all had the objective of narrowing the gap between empirical and theological analysis of the Church by exploring substantive issues that arise from practices and social reality. They sought to provoke theological reflection and rethinking of categories. Sharing some similarities to a study of Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions conducted by Clare Watkins *et al,*[59]my study attempts to ethnographically capture a sense of contemporary life meaning for young people, in some cases apparently, as my literature review suggests, without recourse to God or organised religion.

3.5 Ethnography and ecclesiology

Wesley Kort, among many scholars has characterized dominant approaches to theological research as texts-about-texts.[60] Some decades ago, Wayne Meeks was one of the first theologians to argue that the disciplines needed to consider

[52] Spradley, (1980), 15.
[53] See Millbank, John, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason,* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, also Tillich, Paul, "The Problem of Theological Method", *Journal of Religion,* (27), (1947). For counter-arguments, see Swinton and Mowat, (2006), Ward, (2012) among other works.
[54] Scott Jones, Julie. Watt, Sal, (Editors) *Ethnography in Social Science* Practice, (London: Routledge, 2010).
[55] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), 101-132.
[56] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), 133-155.
[57] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), 192-226.
[58] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), 227-253.
[59] Watkins, Clare, "Practical Ecclesiology: What Counts as Theology in Studying the Church?" In: *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*. Edited by Pete Ward. (W.B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2012), 177.
[60] Kort, Wesley A, *Bound to Differ: The Dynamics of Theological Discourse*, (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1992).

methodologies such as ethnography in Practical Theology.[61] Phillips suggests that despite the view of ethnography as a theological necessity, most theologians are talking about, rather than actually doing ethnography.[62] She emphasises,

> We are not scientists … we are theologians, and we enter into the lives and struggles of fellow human beings because we need to hold them before God and for God to hold them before us so that we can see them as they are and allow them to see ourselves anew for what we are.[63]

Fulkerson contends that theological obsession with texts is now being challenged and corrected in religious studies by a focus on lived religions and the appropriation of ethnography.[64] In this context, theologian Pete Ward references a reflective experience by Orsi during a novena in a working class area of South Chicago that he attended while carrying out fieldwork.[65] Orsi fumes at the non-attendance of theologians "with all their talk of postmodernism and narrativity" and ponders when the study of religion will take an empirical and so more realistic humane direction.[66] Ward underlines that whether through inclination, disciplinary convention or methodological prejudice, theologians have tended to avoid fieldwork. This results in empirical research sometimes being divorced from any real engagement with actual communities. Advocating a plausible ecclesiology, Ward refers to a basic concern, methodological laziness in ecclesiology. He suggests that it has been customary in theological circles to talk about social realities in ways that lack credibility. He uses the example of the academic rigour that applies when studying the history of philosophy. When the subject is the contemporary Church, completely different rules apply, with a

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[61] Meeks, Wayne, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First two Centuries*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).
[62] Phillips, (2012), 100. Similarly, Scharen discusses David Ford's book on Sacramental Theology '*Self and Salvation*' concerning formation of self through the Eucharist. He comments on the fact that important discussions are made in the abstract, without particular communities in mind. Scharen states: "His turn in the chapter disappointingly is to biblical interpretation rather than what his finely tuned argument would suggest: attending closely to formation in particular communities and communion rituals … yet as he ends the chapter, the all-too-common demurral emerges regarding the claims made without any fieldwork to show them … in practice."
[63] Phillips, (2012), 106.
[64] Fulkerson, (2012), 124-144 and 136-144.
[65] Ward, Pete. "Introduction." In: *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Edited by Pete Ward (W.B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2012), 1.
[66] Orsi, Robert, *Between Heaven and Hell: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, (Princeton University Press, 2005), 147.

"sleight of hand" used to make arguments based on anecdote and the selective treatment of experience.[67] Swinton also cautions against methodological laziness wherein researchers choose methods based on partiality to them, for example not choosing quantitative methods because of a dislike or misunderstanding of statistics. In his view, this leads to uncritical naiveté about what methods reveal to us and how they influence our approach. Ethnography, he argues, challenges these conventions by acknowledging that the lived experiences of the Church require a discipline and rigour similar to those that pertain in other areas of theological writing, incorporating the use of academic conventions and disciplines customary to researching social issues. Ward also emphasizes how conversation in ethnographic research is highly significant for ecclesiology.[68] He argues that it conditions all qualitative research and is relevant to all conversation partners. The issues with which theologians are concerned - such as those of Church, spiritual experience as it informs and influences theological understanding - are not solely their preserve. He asserts that the practice of theology is itself cultural and socially situated. His argument is that understanding of the Church requires simultaneous theological and social/cultural viewpoints and must embrace research methods arising from our situatedness as Church.[69] Ward's view accords with Susan Hekman's assertion that "our situatedness in history and time – is the precondition of truth, not an obstacle to it."[70] Citing the poem in Colossians, Ward expresses his proposal in Christological terms:

> (Christ is) the image of the father, the firstborn of creation, in whom all things have their origin and in whom all things have their reconciliation. In Him all things hold together.

Here, Ward emphasized how the Christological starting point does not support a distinction between social/cultural description and theology constructed in correlational method, and that theology does not have any kind of innate disciplinary superiority over social science. In his view, understanding as an

[67] Ward, "Attention and Conversation," in, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, (2012).
[68] Ward, (2012), 48.
[69] Ward, (2012), 2.
[70] Hekman, Susan J, *Hermeneutics and the Sociology of Knowledge*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 117.

ecclesial act is both theological and social/cultural because of Christ.[71] Similarly, James Woodward and Stephen Pattison identify that the methodological position within an empirical approach is that theoretical truth is emergent and dialectical and as such requires collaborating with other knowledge sources that will enable clarity and lead to revised ecclesial practices.[72] In this context, issues of disciplinary correlation may emerge to which I devote the next section.

3.6 Correlating theology and ethnography

Psychologist Brent Slife argues,

> Natural science methods never require that investigators pray (or generally consult God or revelation) before designing or conducting a study. This requirement is omitted because God's current activities are presumed to be irrelevant to designing and conducting an effective investigation (though God's created order might be considered relevant to the results of the investigation).[73]

Because of the tendency of natural sciences to remove theology from research procedures, the issue of theology as first or second-order stance (see definition in appendix A) is important. Essentially, the issue centres on whether or not theology is an overt or a covert aspect of the ethnographic method. Here, Swinton enters an important caveat regarding the temptation for Christian ethnographers drifting into some kind of methodological deism, where God's action is not considered. This leads to a methodological clash where the works of the Spirit can implicitly and explicitly be reduced to psychology and behaviour.[74] Swinton suggests a respectful two-way, hospitable conversation between ethnography and theology that allows ethnographic provision of empirical data about the Church (and, I suggest, spiritual) community, which then becomes the locus of theological reflection.[75] In this regard, Swinton sees the need for the "sanctification of ethnography" in theology in the sense that "it

[71] Ward, (2012), 3.
[72] Woodward, James, Pattison, Stephen, (editors) *The Blackwell Reader in Practical Theology and Pastoral Studies,* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
[73] Slife, Brent D, "Are the Natural Science Methods of Psychology Compatible with Theism?" In: *Why Psychology Needs Theology: A Radical Reformation Perspective.* Edited by Alvin Dueck and Cameron Lee, (WB. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005), 172-84.
[74] Swinton, John, "Where is Your Church? Moving toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography." in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, (2012), 79.
[75] Swinton, (2012), 87.

must be blessed and set aside for a special purpose."[76] He identifies problems with correlating ethnography and theology, the desire to correlate the disciplines, and the mutuality of their conversations. He suggests that the need for correlation comes primarily from theologians rather than ethnographers, so theology should be the primary frame of reference and methodological underpinnings of the research process. He suggests that if theology can work towards developing an approach to the social sciences (and vice-versa) and move fluently from one role to the other, as Jesus did in his ministry, then "even the contentious issues may become avenues that reach towards creative friendships."[77] He applies his metaphor of hospitality to ministry with reference to Holy Scripture (Luke 24),

> Sometimes Jesus was guest, sometimes He was host.

In his analysis of why integration of the disciplines might be contentious, Paul Fiddes addresses issues such as different emphases on induction and deduction, different opinions regarding a focus for combining the tools of theology and the human sciences, and different theological understandings of God's relationship to the world, which he sees as a fundamental requirement for empirical theological research. He contends that it is not solely the theological question of God's action that might be a contentious issue, but the bringing of the very attempt to discern God's action at all into the bounds of an academic discipline.[78] In this regard, my theological convictions are that God's grace is everywhere and in everyone, that we encounter divine revelation in a multitude of mysterious ways, and that the Holy Spirit is at work in the quotidian of life, in the sacred and the secular.[79]

3.7 Ethnography, understanding and theological reflection

According to Swinton and Mowat, ethnography can apply faithfully to Christian practice by providing data for theological reflection. Fulkerson posits that theological reflection does not solely begin with the application of a doctrine or theme (Biblical or otherwise), but also with other issues not limited to Christian

[76] Swinton, (2012), 89.
[77] Swinton, (2012), 78.
[78] Fiddes, Paul S, "Ecclesiology and Ethnography: Two Disciplines, Two Worlds?" in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography,* (2012).
[79] Karl Rahner's *Anonymous Christian* theological hypothesis influences my thinking in his regard.

discourse. For example, in her empirical ethnography of an interracial Church, Fulkerson discusses how her study generated the need for her to rethink some theological categories.[80] In her view, creative thinking originates at the site of a wound.[81] Self-reflecting on how her case study was theological, she maintains that her tracing of stigmatising community practices was through a "logic of transformation" or simply a situation of harm that demanded redress.[82] Scharen also turns to contemporary ethnographic portrayals of religious practice as opposed to textual biblical portrayals, focusing on a number of case studies that have Sacramental Theology, particularly the Eucharist as their central theme.[83] Siobhan Garrigan's ethnography of whether embodied worship practices contributed to sectarianism and violence in an Irish context is one example.[84] Focusing on the non-reception by Mass-going Catholics of the consecrated bread and wine under both species during Holy Communion, Garrigan's argument is not that patterns of Christian worship are the primary cause of sectarianism, rather an assertion that what human beings do with their bodies sometimes betrays what they do with their thoughts. She argues that how Christians ritualize together embodies aspects of our basic beliefs about the world in general and therefore worship can embody and enact sectarianism.[85] Heather Walton suggests that this dialogical process is what makes good research - a truly attentive listening to the other, a willingness to let the research process change me as the vulnerable research instrument employed.[86] In a similar vein, Uwe Flick outlines how qualitative methods take the researcher's communication with the field as an explicit part of knowledge production instead of excluding it as an intervening variable.[87] Thus, the subjectivities of the researcher and those under study are part of the research process.

Catholic theological ethnographers Todd David Whitmore and Emily Reimer-Barry provide theologically rich exemplars of ethnography, which I discuss in

[80] Fulkerson, (2012), 136-144.
[81] Fulkerson, (2012), 136-144.
[82] Fulkerson, (2012), 137.
[83] Scharen, (2012).
[84] Garrigan, Siobhan, *The Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics, and the End of Sectarianism*, (London: Equinox, 2010), 185.
[85] Garrigan, (2010), 25.
[86] Walton, Heather, "Locating Ourselves", in *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection,* (London: SCM Press, 2014), 27.
[87] Flick, Uwe, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research.* 3rd Edition, (London: Sage, 2006).

the next section. Whitmore's research relates to two contexts - *Modus Vivendi* justice and religious conflict resolution that uses ethnography as a tool for interreligious dialogue, and an ethnographic contribution to Christian ethics. Both have the concept of Christ like mimesis in the context of the contemporary world as their key focus. Reimer-Barry's ethnography focused on gender and HIV/AIDS in an African context.

3.8 Whitmore's anthropological theological ethnographies

In *Imitating Christ in Magwi: An Anthropological Theology,*[88] Whitmore focuses on how anthropological ethnography using semi-structured interviews can add to scholarly knowledge on interreligious dialogue, in this case dialogue between the Anglican Acholi tribe and indigenous Roman Catholics in northern Uganda and South Sudan. Structured in four parts, Attention, Discernment, Commitment and Return, Whitmore follows his journey prior to, during and post-fieldwork, providing a detailed ethnography of how a community sustains hope in the midst of one of the most brutal wars in recent memory - that between the Ugandan government and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army. He details the genocide and atrocities committed over a ten-year period in internally displaced person's camps, killing over 300,000 people. Arguing that theology has become very abstract, Whitmore's anthropological theology does not call upon abstract concepts but instead is consonant with the fact that God did indeed become human. He argues that Christianity has to do more than facilitate the good. Ethnography in his view is not merely an add-on to theological concepts, but rather a new way of doing theology to achieve thick description of lives of faith. Whitmore consequently found that the belief in the spirit of Jesus Christ entering a person through such devotions as the Adoration of the Eucharist, gave people the wherewithal to carry out striking works of mercy during the conflict, and, like Jesus, to risk their lives in the process. Whitmore's ethnography extends a call for theology itself to be a practice of imitating Christ. Such practice requires both living among marginalized, indigenous people of society and articulating a theology that honours the extraordinary daily lives of people in solidarity. Reviewing Whitmore's work, theologian Peter Admirand apportions it as an

[88] Whitmore, Todd D, Imitating *Christ in Magwi: An Anthropological Theology*, (T & T Clark, 2019).

"elegantly structured" work having potential to transform the way we "perform, envision and embody theology…spurring uncomfortable, disarming questions."[89] Admirand found himself theologically reflecting on his original calling, suggesting how immersion in the various facets of academic theological work can sometimes lead to self-absorption, wondering if one can claim imitation of the Christ of the poor and oppressed by simply engaging in theological speaking and writing. In his view, Whitmore's combination of ethnography with biblical and theological analysis invites Christ-like mimesis, invitation and transformation.[90] In another work, Whitmore discusses how a Christian ethics informed by risk-taking is a counterthrust to the blindness that prevents academics from attending in their writings to the horrors of human existence.[91] Whitmore also contributes an account of whiteness as a marker requiring reflexive attention in the reaction of Acoli Northern Ugandan populations to him as a Caucasian theologian/ethnographer.[92] He suggests that given the history of colonialism and Christianity, there are few topics calling more urgently for what he terms "theo-critical ethnography," which draws upon theological analysis for "liberative purposes both narrowly and broadly construed."[93] In this regard, Whitmore underlines that speaking out against the status quo carries with it great personal cost. He cites two Acoli members who would not risk this cost until they knew precisely where he was located in the social structure and what he intended to do with the prerogatives given in his act of helping.[94] In my view, this encapsulates the essence of positioning oneself in the field. Whitmore is a vocal proponent of sociological methodology in ethics. Reimer-Barry outlines how he uses a strongly worded critique of Christian ethicists who practice what he calls "*veranda ethics*."[95] This reference is to

[89] Admirand, Peter, "Book Review", Imitating *Christ in Magwi: An Anthropological Theology*, Todd D. Whitmore, (UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 228.
[90] Admirand, (2019), 229.
[91] Whitmore, Todd D, "Crossing the Road: The Case for Ethnographic Fieldwork in Christian Ethics", Journal *of the Society of Christian Ethics* 27:2 (2007), 275.
[92] Whitmore, Todd D, "Whiteness Made Visible: A Theo-Critical Ethnography in Acoliland", in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*,' edited by Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, (Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 2011), 184-206.
[93] Whitmore, (2011), 185/6.
[94] Whitmore, (2011), 206.
[95] Whitmore, (2007), 274, cited in Reimer-Barry, Emily, "The Listening Church: How Ethnography Can Transform Catholic Ethics", in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*,' (2011), 115.

ethicists who write about issues such as poverty or war with no lived experience of these issues. Similar to *Imitating Christ*, in his argument for ethnographic fieldwork in Christian ethics, Whitmore challenges ethicists to reflect anew on Jesus as moral exemplar, to take real bodily risks (as he did) on behalf of solidarity and love of neighbour. Whitmore's works contribute greatly to the theological richness of ethnographic fieldwork. Encouraging his colleagues to pursue this methodology, Whitmore acknowledges that qualitative fieldwork is time consuming, unwieldly and risky.[96] He took significant risks to his personal wellbeing to undertake work modelled on the witness of Christ. These works are exemplars of the assertion that theology cannot continue to rely solely on texts-about-texts.[97] In this regard, however, I do not subscribe to the over-stated critique of normative methods. For example, one South African theologian writes, "Theology done at arm's length from the reality of the context in which we seek to speak theological words is not worth the paper it is written on."[98] I also concur with Reimer-Barry's footnote that some Christian ethicists who do ethnographic fieldwork are unlikely to accept Whitmore's "*veranda ethics*" critique.[99]

3.9 Ethnography as empathetic listening and self-reflection in Catholic ethics: Emily Reimer-Barry

In her research projects on gender and HIV/AIDS, Reimer-Barry focuses on two important elements of ethnography, empathetic listening and self-reflection. Key to her work is the importance afforded to women's voices ethnographically. Underscoring methodology as a hot topic in her Roman Catholic faith tradition, she argues that ethnography is a valuable and underutilized methodology that can potentially transform Catholic ethics precisely because it can bring new voices, especially marginalized voices, into conversation.[100] Reimer-Barry describes two essential methodological commitments in ethnographic research: empathetic listening and self-reflection, arguing that empathetic listening is

[96] Whitmore, (2007), 275, 284.
[97] Kort, Wesley A, *Bound to Differ: The Dynamics of Theological Discourse*. (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1992).
[98] Cited in Reimer-Barry, (2011), 116.
[99] Reimer-Barry, (2011), 115, n 26.
[100] Reimer-Barry, (2011), 98.

crucial in ethnographic research because it communicates to participants that experiences matter in a spirit of collaborative partnership. One of her working assumptions is that this type of theological scholarship can contribute to ongoing discernment within the Catholic Church, and that participant voices contribute to this endeavour.[101] The starting point of empathetic listening, according to Reimer-Barry, challenges other methodologies in Catholic ethics, where thick description precedes normative reflection. By starting with the lived experiences of particular people, instead of magisterial teachings or divine revelation, ethnography can situate Catholic ethics in the complex contexts of the everyday person's struggles of Christian discipleship.[102] In my view, one of the important features of Reimer-Barry's research projects on coping with HIV infection is that it attends to the experiences of women's daily struggles, descriptions of their faith commitments, and the influence of religious communities on their lives. This approach chimes with the beating heart of Practical Theological research on which I expand in my next chapter. She concludes that the Church should be a listening as often as she is a preaching Church; indeed the praxis of listening should be prior. For this listening to occur, women require safe spaces in which to discuss their experiences and process their moral reflections. Ethnography is not the only way to create such space for women's voices, but it is at least one potentially helpful method.[103] She sees the importance of empathetic listening as a shift in the locus of authority in the research setting where an opportunity presents itself to honour the uniqueness of each participant's story. In terms of self-reflection, Reimer-Barry sees it as essential to ethnography because it acknowledges that the researcher is an embodied subject whose experiences arise out of a specific context, a point I will emphasise in the next section.

In summary, Fulkerson contends that ethnographic Christian theology challenges us "to receive from the many wisdoms and challenges that are in (non-academic) places.[104] She posits that understanding how ethnography can be construed as *theological* (her emphasis) in that it,

[101] Reimer-Barry, (2011), 99, n 3.
[102] Reimer-Barry, (2011), 99.
[103] Reimer-Barry, (2011), 117.
[104] Fulkerson, Mary Mc Clintock, "Foreword", in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*,' (2011), xi – xv. Fulkerson footnotes that she is not suggesting that the academy is not a

> Provides a way to take seriously a thicker description of the realities of marginalized groups and to do so without the constraints of the false opposition of the (ostensibly "secular") empirical research of social science and the normative theological.[105]

Relating these points to the present study, I framed my research questions primarily in theological terms to mitigate the danger of reducing works of the Spirit to psychology and behaviour. My approach attempted to capitalise and integrate social-scientific, psychological, or behaviourist elements from a primarily theological standpoint when exploring participant perceptions of God's influence or action on their human experiences. Thus, a theological horizon framed my entire research trajectory from the formulation of research questions to presentation of findings. Social-scientifically oriented questions focused on areas of contemporary culture such as media and peer influences, technology, spirituality apps, internet sources and so forth as they relate to my theological questions. This approach coheres with the ethnographic task of bringing cultural situations into dialectical conversation by combining sources of knowledge. In summary, awareness of the cultural screens at play in my research, where my lived experience and personal history are cultural sites, are important variables. My pre-understanding and ways of knowing formed an important part of the Gadamerian hermeneutic circle before any engagement with research participants could occur. My research starting point was that understanding is the first condition of hermeneutics, requiring fundamental suspension of my own prejudices. My research approach countered the argument that theology is essentially normative but not empirical.

It is evident from the above discussion that autoethnography and reflexivity are fundamental requirements of my study. The next two sections focus on how I apply the concepts, particularly the dynamics of power or privilege as a researcher. It is important not to conflate both concepts and to clarify the distinctive nature of each and their specific roles within my research. Here, I take an organic approach, whereas in my findings section I take a more granular

"real" place, or that it is not worth writing about, but that workers who make academic life possible and contribute important wisdoms extend beyond administrators or professors (n 6, xv).

[105] Fulkerson, (2011), xi – xvii.

approach to sharing my own experiences with participants as an autoethnographic choice. Reflexivity in this section is concerned with self-scrutiny as a gendered, positioned, and traditional subject. In chapter 6.6, I discuss methodological reflexivity in the context of how I achieve rigour and credibility in my role as bricoleur.

3.10 Autoethnography and reflexivity

Privileged people need not attend to an imperializing aesthetic, as their words are framed by power. It is ethically imperative then, that the auto ethnographer, who may certainly carry privilege into the research context, be acutely aware of the power dynamics involved in the aesthetics of performative autoethnography … Aesthetics are not ideologically benign.[106]

- Tami Spri, (2011).

Although her work is in the performing and cultural arts, where it is widely used, in my view Spry aptly captures the ethical and aesthetic essence of *doing* autoethnography. It also captures autoethnography's potential to resist master narratives, a point emphasised by Bernadette Calafell.[107] Autoethnography as a qualitative method bears similarities to Practical Theology because of its emphasis on *doing* and writing research and for translating theory into practice. It offers nuanced, complex and specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences, and relationships rather than general information about groups of people.[108] Tony Adams *et al* argue that it is impossible to separate *doing* ethnography and *writing* (their emphasis) autoethnography.[109] As discussed earlier, ethnography as *ethno* (culture) and *graphy* (writing) are dynamic process of meaning making, inherently intertwined with power dynamics.[110] The term autoethnography also invokes (*auto*) - the prism of the self when studying culture - opening up a wider lens through which the researcher views the world.[111]

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[106] Spry, Tami, *Body, Power, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography*, (Walnut Creek: CA: Left Coast Press, 2011), 6. Professor Spri's work focuses on issues of gender violence, mental health, and race through performative autoethnography.
[107] Calafell, Bernadette Marie, "(I)dentities: Considering Accountability, Reflexivity, and Intersectionality in the I and the We", *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies,* 9: 2, (2013), 11.
[108] Adams, Tony E., Holman Jones, Stacy, Ellis, Caroline, Autoethnography*: Understanding Qualitative Research*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 21.
[109] Adams *et al*, (2015), 67.
[110] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 16.
[111] Adams *et al*, (2015), 83.

Through this lens, we use our experience to engage ourselves, others, culture(s), politics and social research.[112] The concept emerged in response to colonialism, the need to recognize social difference and identity politics, an insistence on respecting research participants, and an acknowledgement of different ways of learning about culture.[113]

My definition of autoethnography for the present study is,

> A process through which I use personal, embodied life experiences as a data source to engage with a sample of youth culture in a socio theological study of their values and beliefs regarding religion and spirituality, in a quest for social justice by making things better through sharing and writing their stories. Valuing my research relationship with them involves acknowledgment of potential power dynamics, a willingness to share my own stories as a choice, while acknowledging that their social lifeworld's are likely to be different to mine because of the different eras in which we embrace and inhabit the life stage that is 'youth.'

Similar to ethnographers, autoethnographers study culture through the empirical method of fieldwork, often focusing on common values and group beliefs (in this case of a younger demographic) with the purpose of better understanding the group and, by extension, themselves. According to Walton, this understanding of culture, as a continuing process, has become increasingly important in recent social research.[114] Researchers undertake this type of research in a manner that acknowledges the dialogical and transformative nature of a research process and the researcher's own place in it.[115] Walton suggests that autoethnography facilitates a focus on the analysis and communication of the experiences of the researcher themselves,

> Personal experience becomes a data source … this recognition of the significance of particular, located and embodied experience has been possible by the postmodern reflexive turn in epistemology.[116]

According to Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock autoethnographic researchers,

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[112] Didion, Joan, *The White Album*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 11.
[113] Adams *et al*, (2015), 21.
[114] Walton, Heather, "Poetics," In: *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 173-182.
[115] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 27.
[116] Walton, Heather, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection,* (London: SCM Press, 2014), 3.

> Attempt to heal the split between public and private realms by connecting the autobiographical impulse (the gaze inward) and the ethnographic impulse (the gaze outward).[117]

She views autoethnography as the transcendence of self-referentiality by engaging with forms that are directly involved in creating culture. Its underpinnings lie in the theoretical domains of critical, feminist, post cultural and postmodern philosophies.[118] It reflects a process of internalized ethnographic practice where lived experience and personal history are cultural sites.[119] It attempts to come to terms with sustaining questions of self and culture.[120]Autoethnographers cultivate an "epistemology of insiderness."[121] In my case, this epistemology refers to theological assumptions derived from life experiences regarding the drift from normative acceptance of Catholicism as a form of life in Ireland over the trajectory of my life. Hence, I use this insider knowledge to call attention to what Adams *et al* describe as "the complexities of commonly held, taken-for-granted assumptions."[122] These assumptions derived from cultural immersion in a prevailing unchallenged Irish Catholic *habitus*, prior to the emergence of a cultural change that led to a 'Post-Catholic' Ireland, discussed in chapter 1. The cultural screens at play in my research comprise of culture, age, gender, class, status, education, family, political praxis, language and values. I use these experiences intentionally to attempt to both create and contribute "nuanced, complex and comprehensive"[123] accounts of changing cultural norms, experiences and practices through research bricolage and writing findings. Personal experiences often take the form of "epiphanies" – transformative moments and realizations that significantly shape or alter the

[117] Tedlock, Barbara, "The Observation of Participation and the Emergence of Public Ethnography," in *The Sage Book of Qualitative Research*, (2005), 467.
[118] Tedlock, (2005), 468.
[119] Alexander, (2005), 411 – 442. Also, Ellis, Caroline. Adams Tony E., Bochner, Arthur P, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject", in *Handbook of Qualitative Research.* 2nd Edition, edited by Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 733 – 768.
[120] Neumann, Mark, "Collecting Ourselves at the End of the Century." In: *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing*, edited by Arthur P Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 1996), 193.
[121] Reinharz, Shulamit, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 260.
[122] Adams *et al*, (2015), 31.
[123] Adams *et al*, (2015), 33.

(perceived) course of our lives.[124] Autoethnography also involves self-care, as engaging the process can create personal and professional risks and vulnerabilities. For example, Adams *et al* suggest that some autoethnographic projects may prompt us to revisit unsettling traumatic events or experiences.[125] Carla Willig suggests that autoethnography also involves thinking about how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and researchers.[126]

As my definition suggests, writing is a crucial element of autoethnography. This stage has the potential to strive for social justice or to create knowledge (*poiesis*) that may benefit particular communities. Bud Goodall describes this process as a search for clues in the "research literature story."[127] Goodall also makes a relevant point regarding having meaningful "sharing and learning" conversations with others outside the research interview context.[128] He considers these conversations as among the first and richest moments of autoethnographic fieldwork.[129] In this context, conversations with academic colleagues, conference networking, and membership of various Catholic organisations and other offshoots of the direct research process influence my research. In short, as a researcher, I use elements of autobiography to describe critique and write about the cultural beliefs and practices of young people regarding life meaning, acknowledging and valuing my research relationships with them, cognisant of the potential power or privilege dynamics involved. Wayne Fife asserts that these factors may unwittingly shape the contours of the research partnership in problematic ways.[130] Whereas the context of Fife's point relates to ethnographic research in developing countries, it applies, in my view, to all research contexts. Scharen and Vigen, however, caution against the process becoming glorified "navel-gazing," suggesting that it must be done with care and restraint. It then

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[124] Denzin, Norman K, "Interpretive Autoethnography", in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, edited by Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E Adams and Caroline Ellis, (Walnut Creek: CA: Left Coast Press, 2013),123-42.
[125] Adams *et al*, (2015), 63.
[126] Willig, Carla, Qualitative *Research in Psychology: A Practical Guide to Theory and Method*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001).
[127] Goodall, H. L. (Bud), *Writing the New Ethnography*, (Walnut Creek: CA: AltaMira Press, 2000) 51.
[128] Goodall, (2000), 51.
[129] Goodall, (2000), 51.
[130] Fife, Wayne, Doing Fieldwork: *Ethnographic Methods for Research in Developing Countries and Beyond*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 149.

becomes one possible way to enact self-disclosure for the sake of intellectual honesty and authenticity.[131] In the present study, this involves judicious use of self-disclosure during interviews as an autoethnographic choice.

The next section discusses reflexivity as applied to the present study, clearly demarcating the concepts of 'reflection' and 'reflexivity.'

Reflexivity

To be reflective does not demand an 'other' while to be reflexive demands both an 'other' and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny.

- Chiseri-Strater, (2010)[132]

Both reflection and reflexivity, although different, are important concepts in the present study. In my view, Chiseri-Strater's sentence aptly captures their demarcation. Guba and Lincoln define reflexivity as the process of reflecting internally on the self as researcher, or "the human as instrument."[133] Based on the conduct of this study I define reflexivity as,

> A process of focused, self-critical awareness and accountability that acknowledges a researchers limits and subjectivity. It involves a willingness to bring one's biases, prejudices and assumptions to awareness honestly and in a spirit of humility, facilitating a commitment to learning from research collaborators and participants, before, during and beyond the duration of the research process itself. It requires holding a mirror to the secluded and uncomfortable aspects of the self in full view in a theological quest. [134]

Reflexivity, a stance associated with postmodernism, is fundamentally important when the issue at stake is qualitative exploration of non-propositional religious and spiritual beliefs. Because researchers are actively engaged in issues of participation and power in relation to participants, the requirement to be reflexively concerned with the impact and monitoring of the interactions between the study situation and the self requires cognisance of the self as a gendered, positioned, and traditional subject. Sharing similarities with autoethnography, reflexivity also focuses awareness on the power dynamics and

[131] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 69.
[132] Chiseri-Strater cited in Roulston, Kathryn, *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, (London: Sage, 2010), 116.
[133] Cited in Denzin and Lincoln, (2003), 283.
[134] Auto ethnographers cited in the present study, notably Scharen, Fulkerson, Vigen, Spradley and Bennett *et al* among others, influence my definition.

vulnerability of self and others involved in the co-production of ethical research. Previously, I alluded to the importance of reflexivity generating ontologies from particular vantage points within Practical Theology. As a practical researcher conducting ethnography, I need to bring to surface an awareness of how different experiences and responsibilities have shaped my views, and how have they helped to curate the current research project in terms of organisation and presentation. This entails a process of self-questioning and self-understanding, in essence an ongoing examination of *what I know, and how I know it*. In their *Theological Justification for Ethnography*, Scharen and Vigen emphasise the importance of critical reflexivity. They contend that researchers acknowledge the filters of their worldview and own up to their inherent limits and subjectivity. In this regard, Ronald Michener refers to the rich tradition of Christian history (in my case Catholicism) as the meta-narrative in which Christians immerse themselves to learn how to see the world. He refers to a "deep embeddedness in our particular cultures and traditions which shape our worldviews."[135] Therefore, as a researcher conducting an ethnographic study theologically, I needed to be conscious of my theological assumptions derived from Christianity about the personal meaning of the constructs of religion and spirituality in addition to how other heuristic influences from scholarly and personal belief systems shape my worldview. An important point raised by Michener is that respect and recognition of general religious particulars in the course of dialogue does not mean that dialogue partners accept all beliefs as true.[136] Mutual respect in the course of dialogue does not imply mutual belief and commitment. Thus, I am open, sensitive and respectful of the religious/nonreligious or spiritual worldviews of participants, recognising the legitimacy of their beliefs without forfeiting my own. Positioning myself in the research, I posed a number of self-reflective questions relating to my pre-understandings and the hermeneutic circle. This is a crucial element of a practical research design. I posed the critical questions: *What are my beliefs about reality*?, and *What is the nature of the knowledge I attempting to gain and represent through this research*?" as

[135] Michener, Ronald T, "Theological Exponents of Postliberal Theology", in Postliberal *Theology: a Guide for the Perplexed.* (Bloomsbury: T. & T. Clark, 2013), 5.
[136] Michener, (2013).

advocated by Bennett *et al*.[137] Practice is the locus from which reflection and reflexivity emerge and in which they find their context and end.[138] Fulkerson refers to the "mandatory" nature of ethnographic self-reflexivity.[139] Her ethnographic congregational study of Good Samaritan interracial Church, North Carolina, referred to in 3.7 is an exemplar of what reflexivity can achieve, where her study generated the need for her to rethink some theological categories. Bennett *et al* suggest that being provoked into new encounters with what is unfamiliar and strange using reflexive approaches can be a profoundly enriching experience. They also suggest that it might even be described in some ways like a spiritual journey if we are willing to embrace "the discomforting aspects of reflexive approach to the self, to others and to the Other"[140] in Levinas' terms (discussed in more detail in 5.1). Bennett *et al* suggest that when this occurs, it becomes a theological quest, not resting upon the foundations of established traditions. Rather, it is because it desires and seeks that deep engagement with the other for which theological traditions provoke a longing and to which they point.[141] In the context of reflexivity, Tedlock discusses how ethnography has developed its traditional participant observation method to include the "observation of participation."[142] She outlines how, during this activity, ethnographers reflect on and critically engage with their own participation within the ethnographic frame.[143] She maintains that public ethnography is both a theory and practice, straddling the domains of lived experience and recollected memory of time spent interacting in the field, on one hand, with time spent alone in reflection, interpretation and analysis on the other.[144] My field notes (see appendix D) attempt to capture how I incorporated these insights to the present study. Applied to qualitative interviewing, using the symbolism of squeezing an orange, Fontana and Frey suggest that new empathetic approaches differ from conventional approaches in *not* squeezing the juice (answers) from

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[137] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 140.
[138] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 54.
[139] Fulkerson, (2011), xiii.
[140] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 53.
[141] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 53.
142 Tedlock, Barbara, "From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: the Emergence of Narrative Ethnography", *Journal of Anthropological Research,* 47, (2005), 69-94.
143 Tedlock, (2005), 467.
[144] Tedlock, (2005), 472.

interviewees.[145] This required me to probe issues empathetically rather than superimpose any elements my world of academia. According to Patton, "sounding academic and highfalutin" can elicit negative responses.[146] Hence, during fieldwork I was careful not to use academic jargon, certain to off-put participants, or present myself as an academic. This would have incurred certain dangers, for example participants giving answers they thought I might wish to hear. Presenting myself as a student researcher without reference to academia was an attempt to mitigate any perceived power dynamics. Additionally, the impression formed by participants greatly influences the success of the study (or lack thereof).[147] As a researcher, I assumed the posture of a learner "who wants to be taught rather than an expert who possesses the crucial theory for analysing what is going on or what is real."[148] In short, I viewed each participant as an autonomous human being with agency and not merely a data source. Reflexively, I attempt to see the situation from their viewpoint rather than superimpose any preconceptions or theological constructions. Jacqueline Schneider enters an ethical caveat here of which I am reflexively aware. Because of the rapport built in ethnographic research, researcher bias can seriously skew results.[149] Bias refers to factors, other than those investigated, which may influence the study findings. Abraham Oppenheim suggests other reasons for bias including careless prompting, biased probes, asking questions out of sequence and biased recording of verbatim answers.[150] Gray underlines why bias is one reason why reflexivity is used to make the researcher's views (biased or otherwise) as transparent as possible.[151] Michelle Fine *et al* suggest a reflective framework for use as researchers move through the recursive stages of social analysis.[152] These scholars advocate asking certain questions self-reflectively to push the issues,

[145] Fontana and Frey, (2005), 696.
[146] Patton, (2015), 70.
[147] Fontana and Frey, (2005), 707.
[148] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 17.
[149] Schneider, Jacqueline L, "Professional Codes of Ethics: Their Role and Implications for International Research", *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 22: 2, (2006), 173-92.
[150] Oppenheim, Abraham, *Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement*, 2nd Edition. (London: Pinter, 1992).
[151] Gray, (2022), 491.
[152] Fine, Michelle, Weis, Lois. Wessen, Susan. Wong, Loonmun, "For Whom? Qualitative Research, Representations, and Social Responsibilities" , in *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*, edited by Norman K Denzin & Yvonna S Lincoln, (Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks: CA, 2003), 199-201.

forcing the researcher to deal with crucial research dilemmas (appendix C presents these self-reflective questions, which I use in conjunction with Valandra's reflective framework). Reflexive awareness that there is a fundamental political aspect to ethnographic interviewing is also important. In their analysis of this aspect, Fontana and Frey assert that empathetic involves taking a stance, contrary to the scientific image and goals of neutral interviewing which they consider are largely mythical. Interviewing is not merely the neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers.[153] A collaborative enterprise, it leads to a contextually bound and mutually created story. As James Scheurich emphasises, the interviewer is a person, historically and contextually located, carrying unavoidable conscious and unconscious motives, desires, feelings and biases. He asserts that the conventional, positivist view of interviewing vastly underestimates the complexity, uniqueness, and indeterminateness of each one-to-one human interaction.[154] Reflexivity is also a requirement of data analysis and presentation, which I address in my findings chapter, and in the context of quality and rigour in chapter 9.

3.11 Chapter summary

This chapter develops my argument for an empirical approach, requiring collaborating with other sources of knowledge, based on the premise that any theological research on lived religion (or irreligion in the case of this study) is implicitly empirical. The salient point of this discussion is that social scientific, ethnographic insights are not peripheral to theological discourse but are central to the discipline of theology in its quest to research real world issues for empirical ways of knowing. Fiddes outlines that there may be higher or lower degrees of nervousness about bringing talk about discerning the renewing action of God into an academic environment.[155] However, he suggests that in its very tensions and conflicts, there lie the interest and adventure of the subject.[156] Thus, practical research requires engagement and fieldwork with communities of interest (in this case a sample youth culture) to enable the voices of important

[153]Fontana and Frey, (2005), 696.
[154] Scheurich, James J, "A Postmodernist Critique of Research Interviewing", *Qualitative Studies in Education.* 8, 1996), 241.
[155] Fiddes, (2012), 35.
[156] Fiddes, (2012), 35.

constituencies to be heard theologically for the provision of empirical raw data. Ward's view of the Church as both a theological and social/cultural construct, and his emphasis on conversations for theological reflection are highly relevant to the research issues at play in my study. The most important applied aspect of autoethnography and reflexivity are bringing to awareness how my own perspectives originate and influence data co-production. Self-awareness of my role within the interview process is key to constructing reciprocal phenomenologically inspired understanding of the topics under study. Simon Hoffding and Kristian Martiny postulate that in a phenomenologically inspired interview setting, "reciprocity" means that the interviewee is encountered as an autonomous "you" and that the interviewer is also encountered as a "you" such that these two "you"s develop each other's understanding and perspectives."[157] They suggest that this reciprocity is much more constitutive of the knowledge generation process.[158] In the final analysis, this is what the present study sets out to achieve, cohering with Gadamer's theory.

The next chapter provides my rationale for choice of Practical Theology *qua* empirical theology. Here, I discuss my own understanding of the discipline, additionally how my study contributes to its quest in an Irish context. Following my own definition, I trace the discipline's development from its inception as a distinct theological branch to contemporary exemplars of how it bridges the theory-practice gap, contributing my own understanding of how it achieves this. Key to the chapter is analysis of opposing perspectives regarding the contentious issue of human experience as a source of theological truth claims. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion envisioning new, creative possibilities for theological thinking, social engagement and ecclesial practice using the discipline.

[157] Hoffding, Simon, Martiny, Kristian, "Framing a Phenomenological Interview: What, Why and How," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 15, (2015), 541.
[158] Hoffding and Martiny, (2015), 542.

Chapter 4: Practical Theology's Methodological Position within the Ethnographic Approach

4.1 Introduction

In theology generally, and in Practical Theology in particular, there are many ways of pursuing research enquiry. This depends on what kind of knowledge one seeks, mindful of the fact that every way of seeing is a way of not seeing. The conduct of research involves pragmatic, common sense considerations; however, I am cognisant of the fact that there are different understandings of the Practical Theological project other than prosaic concerns. There are differing perceptions among theologians regarding if, how and where the discipline sits in the academy. Debates within the Practical Theological community itself suggest that a number of important issues are at stake in making a decision to both employ and ensure appropriate application of the discipline. Thus, I needed to address some key questions, primarily whether my topic and research design fit the disciplinary space of Practical Theology.

As suggested by Bonnie Miller-McLermore, Practical Theology is not one single thing.[1] In this regard, Katie Cross and Elizabeth Jordan offer opinions regarding curating its disciplinary space, exploring their assumptions from their respective perspectives of academia and chaplaincy.[2] According to Katie Cross, the discipline spans a wide breath of perspectives, denominations and religions. It uses a diverse set of approaches and methodologies to engage with lived experiences and practice. Similarly, Elizabeth Jordan argues for its distinctive nature as "doing" theology.[3] She understands the discipline as a branch of the theological enterprise that attends to the practice of individuals and communities, not necessarily restricted to Christian or even faith-based practice. Central to her view is the unique nature of theology as a human quest to understand God and life meaning in a way that sociology and psychology,

[1] Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J. "Practical Theology", in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion in America*, edited by Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2010), 1735-1743.
[2] Cross, Katie, Jordan, Elizabeth, "Curating Practical Theological Space: What is it and Who is if For?" *Practical Theology*, 15 (6), 2022, 581-89.
[3] Cross & Jordan, (2022), 2.

although meaning seeking systems do not. In this interdisciplinary context, Katie Cross refers to the "disinheritance" regarding the discipline, where Practical Theologians are cautioned not to lose sight of their theological grounding in favour of becoming sociologically driven.[4] Swinton argues that diversity is a strength of the discipline, asserting the need for the discipline to develop its identity as a prophetic witness called to the vocation of truth-telling and critical thinking, public theology, hospitality, and interdisciplinary friendship.[5] Based on analysis of the Practical Theology literature and fieldwork exemplars, my own definition of the discipline is an,

> Academically robust, analytically rigorous, research-based, inclusive, diverse and often contested set of approaches and methodologies within the general umbrella of theology that focuses on human praxis. A communicable theology, it seeks to engage in dialogue with a wide spectrum of worldviews, lived experiences and practices as legitimate theological sources, not restricted to but including research on ecclesial and Christian faith-based communities and congregations. The discipline prizes *doing* theology, sometimes borrowing empirical, social-scientific research designs and conventions in its quest to understand contemporary human responses to a range of life meaning-making systems. Its quest is to listen to all the voices of the People of God in its theological discernment, especially those who feel marginalised from Church life or experience disabilities of various kinds.

In essence, my study attempts to embody the core aspects of this definition in its quest to understand experiences of young people through dialogue as legitimate theological sources in its theological discernment, not restricted to particular faith-based communities. According to Bennett *et al*, in the context of the spiritual turn, there is an acknowledgment that if qualitative research is fundamentally concerned with meaning making processes it is academically unjustifiable to maintain silence about the spiritual meanings people place upon experiences.[6] They argue that theology also needs the inductive study of the contemporary pluriform, heterogeneous, chaotic religious (and I argue, spiritual) field.[7] Following Scharen and Vigen, my aim is to understand what God, human relationships, and the world look like from the perspective of youth culture, "to

[4] Cross & Jordan, (2022), 3.
[5] Swinton, John, "What Comes Next? Practical Theology, Faithful Presence, and Prophetic Witness", *Practical Theology*, 13: 1-2, (2020).
[6] Bennett *et al*, (2018).
[7] Bennett *et al*, (2018).

take them seriously as a source of wisdom and to de-centre assumptions and evaluations"[8] Rather than applying a broad principle, my study inductively seeks to discover valuable insights found within individual stories, practices, and experiences. Locating self within the method, I am guided by key texts and thinkers, notably the works of three of Practical Theology's innovators, van der Ven,[9] Browning,[10] in addition to Heimbrock's work on empirical theology,[11] particularly how his model coheres with Gadamerian hermeneutics as my philosophical framework. Additionally, the experiences and perspectives of contemporary Practical Theologians currently engaged in research helped shape my decision to employ the genre.

4.2 Practical Theology's origin, development and key thinkers

As a subject area, the discipline has grown and become more sophisticated in its methods in recent decades from its genesis mainly as a subject taught to Protestant students as an arm of Systematic Theology and biblical studies, rather than an area of postgraduate research and active enquiry. The discipline is concerned with human experience and its desire to reflect theologically on that experience with a focus on the exploration of the complex dynamics of particular situations in order to enable the development of a transformative and illuminating understanding of what is going on within these situations.[12] Practical Theologian Ray Anderson coins the term 'Christopraxis' referring to the enterprise of Practical Theology as the ongoing work of Christ in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.[13] Elaine Graham states that in the context of the self-understanding of the Christian community in pluralist and secular societies, it has reviewed its own intellectual and epistemological status, seeking a new standing as a theological discipline, rather than an applied or practical offshoot of these systematic or philosophical branches.[14] Becoming more

[8] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 16.
[9] van der Ven, Johannes A, "Practical Theology: from Applied to Empirical Theology", *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 1 (1), 1988, 7-27.
[10] Browning, Don, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1991), also Browning, Don, *Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).
[11] Heimbrock, (2011), 153-170.
[12] Swinton and Mowat, (2006).
[13] See: Anderson, Ray S. *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis*, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2001).
[14] Graham, (1996), 5.

theoretically aware in the religious and academic environment, it has its own coherence and integrity, willing to engage heavily with other disciplines, borrowing insights especially from the social sciences, a stance with which my study accords.

A number of scholars trace the development of Practical Theology from its inception as a distinct theological branch. van der Ven outlines how inauguration of the discipline from a Catholic perspective began in 1777 in Vienna and from a Protestant perspective in 1794 in Tubingen. Using a spiral model, he reconstructs its history from the perspective of the relation between theory and praxis, considered the main principle of all theology. Acknowledging that the discipline does not have a monopoly on praxis, the key question that he confronts is whether Practical Theology is more than applied theology. Initially, he discusses its academic status, interpreted as applied theology.[15] He follows this with a proposal towards its reinterpretation in terms of empirical theology. He then describes methodological aspects regarding the material and formal object of the discipline. van der Ven outlines how its practical character dates back to Thomas Aquinas in the 4th article of the *Summa Theologiae*, where Thomas argued that theology is concerned with both practical and speculative things. He argued that theology is more speculative than practical, since its concern is more with God than human actions, thus, all theology is one. Duns Scotus, who argued that theology is a "Scientia Practica", expressed a contrary view.[16] van der Ven outlines how mainly Catholic theologians have followed Thomas's view, while Protestant theologians incline towards the view expressed by Duns Scotus, outlining how Luther, for example, argued that all theology is practical theology. He then introduces his spiral model of "theory – practice – theory," before developing this model in terms of "theory – *empirical research of praxis* (my emphasis) – theory." He argues that the latter avoids a two-sided danger - that the dominance of theory results in a one-way relationship of the applied-science model; and the dominance of the empirical research of praxis component, which normatively formed the basis of objections to forms of empirical theology. van der Ven argues that applying his spiral model to empirical research of present

[15] van der Ven, (1988), 7-27.
[16] Cited in van der Ven, (1988), 8.

religious praxis prevents any domination and does not overshadow the relevance of factors such as the bible and tradition. Thus, because the object of Practical Theology is not biblical or historical, but present religious praxis, empirical methods are at stake and, from this perspective Practical Theology is empirical theology. In van der Ven's model, the relationship between theory and empirical research is dialectical as they are never on the same level. This dialectical approach implies the richness of the empirical-theological approach, which, according to van der Ven, is a fascinating way of doing theology.[17] He considers that any theological research on lived religion is implicitly empirical and conceptualised within theological frames (briefly discussed later in this chapter).[18] He formulated empirical theology as religious action that considered the perceptions, attitudes, motivations and behaviour driving human action. He suggests that there is no blue print for ways in which to apply theological insights, because there is no single religious praxis.[19] Writing in 1988, a key point made by van der Ven is that contemporary religious praxis is "heterogeneous, divergent, pluriform, confused and sometimes even chaotic."[20]

Browning contributes significantly to the work on the discipline's rebirth, helping to establish the '*practice – theory – practical*' model as its standard design. His work addresses theology's relationship to non-theological disciplines such as the social sciences, asserting the view that theology not only can, but also must employ these disciplines. Describing the genre as the most beleaguered and despised of the theological disciplines, he suggests that it is sometimes regarded with deep scepticism. With the rebirth of practical philosophy (*phronesis* in Aristotelian terms), he argues that Practical Theology itself has been reborn.[21] This opposes the view of many theologians who define theology as systematic reflection on the historical self-understanding of a particular religious tradition.[22] Browning bases his model of *doing* (my emphasis) theology on the premise that all theology is fundamentally practical

[17] van der Ven, (1988), 24.
[18] van der Ven, (1988), 7-27.
[19] van der Ven, (1988), 11.
[20] van der Ven, (1988), 11.
[21] Browning, (1991), 3.
[22] Browning, (1991), 5.

and must follow a 'practice – theory – practice' design. In contrast to the usual 'theory-to-practice' models of theology, his model develops,

> From practice to theory and back to practice, or more accurately, it goes from present theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices.[23]

Browning argues that all Christian leaders are in fact constantly doing Practical Theology through dialogue or conversation.[24] He argues that theology begins with thick descriptions (in Clifford Geertz's terms) of present theory-laden practices, which raise questions for theological analysis. His model advocates a hermeneutical approach to theological reflection, allowing these descriptions to emerge. This implies that we recognize our pre-understandings and accept that all our conclusions are tentative interpretations. This is where the relevance of Gadamer becomes apparent in Browning's model. He references Gadamer's belief that all human understanding is achieved through dialogue or conversation, underscoring Gadamer' assertion that it is both impossible and unhelpful to hold neutral or objective stances. In Gadamer's approach, practical concerns that emerge from the current situation shape the entire conversation. According to Browning,

> (Gadamer) has helped us understand how all human (social and cultural) sciences and many if not all natural sciences can best be understood as dialectical movements from traditions of theory-laden practice to theory and back to new theory-laden practices.[25]

Browning advocated correlation of descriptive and historical theology where Systematic Theology seeks a fresh interpretation of the Christian faith that is contemporaneously relevant. In this regard, strategic Practical Theology analyses concrete situations to establish the norms and practices of concrete practices. Heimbrock also argues for the discipline as empirical theology. He sees Practical Theology as an engaged and reflective enterprise derived from the programmatic enterprise of empirical study.[26] He outlines its threefold quest, which the present study attempts to incorporate. Firstly, it is essential for it to

[23] Browning, (1991), 7.
[24] Browning, (1991), 36.
[25] Browning, (1991), 40.
[26] Heimbrock, (2011).

relate to practice and religious life, although it does not simply affirm what is going on within congregations. Secondly, for the purpose of research it makes use of scientific models, concepts and methods developed to study religion. Crucially, it has its own academic research interest that simultaneously relates to and differs from social science. Thirdly, it takes a 'bottom-up' approach to participating in overall theological reflection on faith, culture and life and contributes to responsible religious (and, I argue, spiritual) practice in everyday life.[27] This approach is especially relevant to my quest to elicit perceptions of young people who may not necessarily subscribe to the normative interpretation of 'religion', and may practice different forms of spirituality, equally deserving of theological reflection. Heimbrock sees this task as explicitly resonant with Tracy's correlational model, concerned with moving iteratively between Christian texts and common human experience and language.[28] Tracy's experiential model alluded to earlier differentiated personal and communal religious experiences. Heimbrock refers to this as "*My* religious experience and *our* religious experiences (his emphasis)."[29] Thus, Heimbrock's approach to empirical theology generally closely aligns with the hermeneutic pattern advocated by Tracy and Browning. He traces two major branches of the origin of empirical theology – one that originated in Chicago by Douglas Mackintosh,[30] and the second developed in Europe by Werner Gruehn, the aim of which was to bridge the gap between theology and modern reality. He posits that within the frame of post-Christian culture we find widely differing interest in ordinary people concerning a particular religious quality of their life experiences. Some people attribute these experiences in religious language while others do not distinguish these experiences as being either religious or non-religious.[31] A contemporary life world oriented theology neither restricts its perspective to belief and faith traditions nor to 'religious' objects. Rather it opens up towards an analysis of the culturally shaped forms and symbolic representations of life in order to describe religious experience as rooted in 'lived experience' - a fundamental category for a refreshed understanding of human behaviour.

[27] Heimbrock, (2011), 154.
[28] Tracy, (1975).
[29] Heimbrock, (2011), 157.
[30] Mackintosh, Douglas C, *Theology as an Empirical Science,* (New York: Macmillan, 1919).
[31] Heimbrock, (2011), 153.

Heimbrock argues that the formal object of Practical as empirical theology is Christian praxis as action and as aesthetic praxis, centred in the first-person perspective. He argues that the awareness of a human being interwoven with the active and re-active structure of life, with otherness, could serve as an understanding of reality in accordance with the dynamic and mysterious structure of life in theological interpretation inspired by the theology of Christ's cross. According to Heimbrock, the contribution of empirical theology to the discipline in general might be to keep attentive and reflected contact with religious life in congregations and in the culture that Christians are part of.[32]

The next section relates to these discussion points by focusing on the important but contentious issue of human experience as a source of theological truth. This issue is fundamental to my methodological approach and my thesis argumentation.

4.3 The disputed issue of human experience as a source of theological truth claims

As Christian theology is devoted to reflection on religion, life and faith, the empirical interest of theology and of research in religion since the 20th century refers in manifold ways to the focal issue of experience. The present study sought inductively to discover insights found within individual stories, practices, and human experiences of young people living in contemporary Ireland. As discussed in chapter 1.3, many Christian theologians, notably Tracy, discuss the issue of human experience as a valid source of theological truth claims. Anecdotally, during the lifetime of the present study, some members of the academic research community argued that a focus on peoples' experience and interpretations is problematic if one is to do 'theology.' Their argument appears to centre on how one understands divine revelation. They argue that privileging people's experience, whether as individuals or as groups as a theological source is inevitably to destabilise the faith and unity of the Church. They concede that there is need for development of empirical research, but not if that research takes present experiences, opinions and values as equally or superiorly normative to Scripture/Tradition/Magisterium as they serve to pass on and defend divine

[32] Heimbrock, (2011), 153-170.

revelation and sound philosophy in the light of divine revelation/faith. To this end, I turn to Scharen and Vigen's consideration of how Practical Theology using ethnography is properly theological in its source, substance and self-critique in the context of Christian theology and ethics.[33] These scholars identify the role of human experience as a focal point of contention between Christian scholars, institutions, clergy, and laypersons for centuries. While most theologians and ethicists acknowledge it as a vital source, they identify that it is also viewed with suspicion and dismissed as overly subjective, personal, and emotional. Concisely, the persistent fear is relativism - in belief and in ethics.[34] Scharen and Vigen summarise the argument against human experience as a theological source in this way,

> If experience is given too much weight in the analysis, claims to transcendent or universally normative truth will degenerate into biased or at least problematically limited visions, based on one's own preferences and encounters. Experience cannot be given too much authority in efforts to know the divine or the good because it is not rooted in an objective or transcendent ground – it is too vulnerable to individual dispositions, filters, interpretations, and blind spots. Consequently, taking experience as a central source will lead to "anything goes" in theology and ethics, meaning that there will be a lack of objective criteria by which to measure more or less adequate description of God, God's relation to humanity, or of human responsibility in the world in light of this relationship.[35]

As a counter argument, discussing four theological sources (reason, scripture, tradition, and experience) Scharen contends,

> Experience infuses all the other (sources). So, for example, Holy Scripture records people's experience and reception of God and God's revelation in Jesus Christ: the Church's traditions represent the collective experiences of God's pilgrim people over time: and it is now common to assume scholarly work to be influenced by the experiences of the scholar her-or-himself. In addition, our experiences deeply influence how we interpret the data drawn from sources: how and what we draw from Scripture, tradition, and the secular disciplines.[36]

[33] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 61-74.
[34] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 61.
[35] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 61.
[36] Scharen, Christian, "Experiencing the Body: Sexuality and Conflict in American Lutheranism," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 57: 1-2 (2003), 101.

In my view, it is important to take scripture, tradition and magisterium into account as equally (but not superiorly) normative to other disciplinary insights. As emphasised, my intention in this study is not to reduce theology and philosophy as meaning systems to psychological or sociological factors. As emphasised in chapter 3, I value the fact that Practical Theologians and ethnographers are willing to work with these disciplines and incorporate their insights in the service of Church and society. However, I concur with the view that theology needs to avoid reduction to the secular and to the merely natural. I regard the general umbrella term 'theology' as having a unique identity as a discipline, and Practical Theology its own distinct focus within that general umbrella. It is willing to engage with the social sciences as conversation partners in a spirit of mutual respect and hospitality as exemplified in chapter 3. In the context of human nature, gender and sexual identity, Vigen elaborates on the multidimensional sources of experience, apart from anthropology, sociology or personal narrative.[37] Scharen and Vigen also cast the net of sources wider to include literature, storytelling, the arts, history, sacred scriptures, autobiography, ethnography, ecclesial doctrines, and theological accounts.[38] They suggest that when wider disciplines and sources of human experience are included, Christian scholars are more amenable to this worldview because it triangulates the category and is not delimited to a "my experience tells me" way of thinking, thus keeping theology relevant and real.[39] These scholars make a further, more controversial claim regarding experience, shared by several Womanist and Feminist theologians and ethicists who argue that experience, which functions as a "type of truth claim," is the primary lens through which human beings access moral or theological knowledge.[40] A good example of this approach is Reimer-Barry's ethnography on gender and HIV/AIDS, discussed in chapter 3. Her research brought the marginalized voices of women into theological conversation, attending to the experiences of their daily struggles, descriptions of their faith commitments, and the influence of religious communities on their

[37] Vigen, Anna Marie, "Conclusion: Descriptive and Normative Ways of Understanding Human. Nature," in *God Science Sex Gender: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Christian Ethics*, edited by Anna Marie Vigen and Patricia Beattie Jung, (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, (2010), 241-58.
[38] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 62.
[39] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 62.
[40] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 62.

lives. In this context, Katie Cross suggests that Practical Theologians tend to favour liberal or radical modes of theology such as Liberation, Black, Anti-Racist, Feminist, Womanist, and Disability pedagogies, as opposed to more conservative approaches, which promote straightforward application of tradition.[41] In my view, Vigen and other Womanist and Feminist Theologians such as Fulkerson and Sheila Briggs are exemplars of a more circumspect approach to incorporating human experience as vital theological sources. Fulkerson and Briggs outline how the Feminist Theology movement was one of several new theologies that began in the 1960s through participation in movements seeking radical social change. Among these were Black Theology in the US and Liberation Theology in Latin America. Fulkerson outlines how amid complaints about the racial and class homogeneity of Feminist theology, women of colour in the U.S. founded Womanist and mujerista theological movements. The awareness that feminists were working in other religious traditions challenged the monopoly of Christianity in feminist thinking and led to Christian Feminist theology's embrace of inter-religious dialogue and recognition of women of other faiths and post-traditional forms of feminist spirituality.[42] Melissa Raphael, for example, outlines how in the context of Jewish and Christian women's activism, Jewish Feminist Theology made a decisive contribution to the post-Holocaust renewal of Jewish thought.[43] In this context, Practical Theology has a distinct political as well as axiological dimension. Tracy, for example, references this political dimension in his emphasis on the need to understand the Church as both a sociological and theological reality.[44] This is a point that Practical Theologians, for example Ward, Swinton, Bennett *et al*, Mowat *et al* among other scholars emphasise. Bennett *et al* underline that a perspective that might shape the epistemology of the Practical Theologian is that our current knowledge of the world is itself produced through the operations of power within our society. These scholars suggest that only when we attempt to address the distortions to our

[41] Cross & Jordan, (2022), 4.
[42] Fulkerson, Mary Mc Clintock., Briggs, Sheila (Editors), *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, edited by Mary Mc Clintock Fulkerson and Sheila Briggs, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[43] Raphael, Melissa, "Feminist Theology and the Jewish Tradition," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, (2012), 51.
[44] Tracy, (1981), 96 n104 is an example.

understandings of reality caused by oppressive forces will we gain a better understanding of our situation. In this context, contemporary Political Theology is fundamental Practical Theology and Liberation Theology includes praxis. In my section on synodality in chapter 8.10, I cite exemplars of how Womanist and Feminist Practical theologians assert an important voice against areas of discrimination against women that continue to prevail. In the context of feminist qualitative research, Marjorie DeVault hopes that disability perspectives studies will occupy a more central role in future research. She views emerging Feminist methodologies as applicable to those facing the deepening humanitarian crises of climate change, migration, and global inequality.[45] In this context, Watkins discusses her practical research on people with learning or intellectual disabilities.[46] She outlines how many participants felt marginalised by a normative ecclesial theology that positively insisted on their inclusion, but which, in practice, only understood inclusion in ableist terms. Watkins asserts that this kind of marginalisation is important for a Church seeking to be synodal, calling us to a critical and radical re-examination of "even our most benign-sounding theologies with those who feel reduced by them."[47] She further argues that this is a contributory factor to the ways in which many women feel marginalised for all the normative valorisation of 'woman' and 'motherhood' by successive Popes. Watkins suspects that it is more a form of theological marginalisation that will become more and more evident as we seek to include diverse voices and experiences in our discernment of Christian life, faith, and practice.

4.4 Practical Theology's key theses and sub-theses

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that Practical Theology's major quest is to tease out ways in which research emerges from and returns to practice for the benefit of communities. It incorporates reflexivity and autoethnography,

[45] DeVault, Marjorie L, "Feminist Qualitative Research: Emerging Lines of Enquiry", in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th edition. (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications, 2018), 189.
[46] Watkins, Clare, "Witness from the Church's Wounds: the Authority of Those Experiencing Marginalisation in the Church" in *Synodality and the Recovery of Vatican11: A New Way for Catholics*, edited by Stephen J. McKinney, Thomas O'Loughlin, and Beáta Tóth, (Dublin, Messenger Publications 2024), 69-84.
[47] Watkins, (2024), 76.

already discussed, to generate both practical wisdom (the Aristotelian notions of *praxis* guided by *phronesis*). Bennett *et al* discuss the nature of researching religious practice and practices, arguing that these are constitutive of our spiritual, theoretical and material worlds, whether understood overtly theologically or not.[48] These scholars suggest that 'practice' as a complex and "culturally freighted" term[49] is fundamental to thinking creatively about how it is we know what we know, and how we make sense of living. Added to this is creative imaginative possibilities or *poiesis,* where a person brings something into being that did not exist before. Hence, Practical Theology argues that knowledge arises within the reality and diversity of creative research practice. This is where the subjective nature of the discipline comes into play, because observation cannot be divorced from participation (fundamental tenets of ethnography). Practical Theologians consider that research must start with the here and now, affording priority to the 'texts' of contemporary experience and practice (in my case 'texts' are participant narratives that potentially yield new understanding of how a younger demographic perceive contemporary religion and spirituality in Ireland). Again, this chimes with the Gadamerian notion of the hermeneutical circle. Practical Theological research postulates that "nothing is sacred; everything is sacred."[50] This is where as researcher; I embrace the secular 'what is of this age' (a predominantly secular youth culture) as inseparable from the sacred. This means that all taken-for-granted religious beliefs, practices, and theological constructions are subject to scrutiny. Dialectically, however, Practical Theological researchers apportion everything as sacred. They are open to the theologically disclosive found in the created and in the Ignatian concept of *Quotidian* (In Karl Rahner's term)[51] - in the secular as well as the sacred, where Divine grace permeates everyday experiences.[52] Bennett *et al* employ five sub-theses to develop the centrality of practice in theological activity and research. They argue that the *theology* (their emphasis) of Practical Theology is instantiated within action, praxis, performance and practice, where practices

[48] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 57-80.
[49] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 61.
[50] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 30.
[51] Rahner, Karl, *Theological Investigations Vol X1V, Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian'* 17, (1961), 280-294.
[52] Bennett *et al*, (2018).

build worlds, both symbolic and material in a context where religion is more than belief. They postulate that practices are value-laden and revelatory – as practices build worlds, so they (and we) perform our truths. One of their sub-theses is that researching practice requires particular skills.[53] They articulate an important point here to which my thesis relates in relation to a wide spectrum of worldviews; that while Christian theology is the "lake from which practice flows, the critical points and arguments can be applied to any action-guiding worldviews and ideologies."[54] Relating their sub-thesis that Practical Theological research is about moving and making, not mirroring to my study, I explore epiphany or revelatory moments, intuitive insights into the essence of something. This is where as a researcher, as Bennett *et al* suggest, I am someone who "sees, but also starts a self-direction of travel to clearer visions of these epiphany moments."[55] Hence, I explore participant experiences of these in both the special moments and mundane idiom of everyday life. I also incorporate Bennett *et al*'s assertion that process is as important as *telos* in Practical Theological research.[56] The Aristotelian notions of *praxis* in addition to *phronesis* discussed above capture process, with action/understanding leading to new theological iterations (*poiesis*) of the concepts under study. This point also relates to my reference to the diversity of creative practice, where the subjective nature of Practical Theology comes into sharp relief in my study.

The next brief section considers how knowledge generated by autobiographical narratives in Practical Theology can provide meaningful understanding of the particular in its singularity and concreteness. It demonstrates how two Practical Theologians have employed Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology to study spiritual distress.

4.5 Gadamerian hermeneutic studies in Practical Theology

Swinton and Mowat consider hermeneutic phenomenology as a border concept incorporating both a research methodology and method. It is a methodology

[53] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 57/8.
[54] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 60.
[55] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 31.
[56] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 29-32.

insofar as hermeneutics and phenomenology provide an epistemological and ontological framework within which the process of qualitative research is undertaken. It is a method insofar as the concepts they supply provide specific tools of qualitative engagement that are crucial to hermeneutic phenomenology. These scholars outline how the intention of this approach is to allow the researcher to access the inner experiences of research subjects. They identify how Practical Theology is concerned with reflecting theologically on human experience, providing accurate data for theological reflection. A good example of this approach is their study of the lived experiences of depression using hermeneutic phenomenology.[57] Swinton and Mowat cite previous research that explored lived experiences of spiritual distress, but methodologically did not use hermeneutic phenomenology. Similar to my research design, they gathered data using unstructured interviews that enabled free expressions of personal narratives, uninhibited by the researcher's personal agenda or the boundaries of fixed questions. I commenced all interviews with the question *what gives meaning to your life*?[58] Key themes emerged regarding the lived experiences of depression, enabling the capture of thick descriptions of the essence of their experiences. Although I did not conduct my study specifically in a mental health context, Swinton and Mowat's precise opening question captures the essence of what my research set out to achieve.

It is important to reiterate my point that my practical approach to qualitative data collection is phenomenologically *enhanced/inspired*. Using pure phenomenology would introduce epistemological tensions and conflict with ethnography's philosophical underpinnings. Swinton and Mowat, for example, identify tensions and differences between the perspectives of hermeneutics and phenomenology in addition to important similarities. Tensions relate to the lived experiences of people studied objectively versus the subjective interpretation, bias and prejudice crucial to the study of how humans interact with the world, the latter of which I am an advocate, based on my view that objectivity in theological qualitative research is a chimera. There are also subtle similarities and distinguishing features between descriptive phenomenological and

[57] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), 101-132.
[58] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), 120.

qualitative descriptive research.[59] Using examples from the research literature to illustrate salient points of difference, Willis *et al* address the underlying philosophical tenets, sampling, data collection and analysis in the two approaches Acknowledging that the two approaches can be difficult to differentiate, they assert, " these approaches are different."[60]

The next section discusses a particular example of how Practical Theologians incorporated the discussion points above to reimagine theological research practices using ethnography, developing the creative potential advocated by its key thinkers. Their research influenced my decision to conduct a socio-theological study in expanded ways of empirical knowing in the first instance, attempting to infuse it with an intrinsic theological and spiritual character.

4.6 Reimaging theological research using ethnography

Advancing the enterprise of Practical Theology, Eileen Campbell-Reed and Scharen identify key aspects of the descriptive and empirical turns in the genre. Outlining that since the early 1990s empirical or descriptive theology represents an indispensable "moment" in Practical Theology; they argue that it has remained dependent on social science models.[61] They suggest that even when Practical Theologians expanded ways of knowing, the theological character of lived research practice remained largely unexamined.[62] They argued that the discipline needs theologically reimagined research practices that go beyond mere description. Engaging methodological insights from five innovative practical theologians beginning in the 1990s with Browning,[63] they both build on and advance these approaches. They outline how, similar to Browning, van

[59] Willis, Danny G., Sullivan-Bolyai, Susan, Knafl, Kathleen, Cohen, Marlene S. "Distinguishing Features and Similarities between Descriptive Phenomenological and Qualitative Description Research", *Western Journal of Nursing Research.* 38: 9 (2016), 1185-1204.
[60] Willis *et al*, (2016), 1186.
[61] Campbell-Reed, Eileen R. Scharen, Christian, "Ethnography on Holy Ground: How Qualitative Interviewing is Practical Theological Work", *International Journal of Practical Theology,* 17 (2), (Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 232.
[62] Campbell-Reed and Scharen, (2013), 232.
[63] Browning (1991).

der Ven,[64] Heimbrock,[65] Graham[66] and Miller-McLemore innovated new ways to conceive how Practical Theology relates to empirical research. Locating their *Learning Pastoral Imagination* (LPI) project and its emerging research methods in this wider context, and borrowing wisdom from ethnographic methods, Campbell-Reed and Scharen employ standard social science practices. They present their case in the first longitudinal study of ministry involving qualitative interviews with a diverse group of pastors and seminarians transitioning into ministry careers, seeking insights derived from narratives of how pastors cultivate a capacity for pastoral imagination. Their project imbued a sense of holiness and sacredness in participants, leading these scholars to apportion their research as doing ethnography on "Holy ground."[67] They argued that because of its explicitly spiritual character, their development of a revised method of qualitative interviewing offered a more practical mode of ethnographic interviewing than typically exists in the social sciences. This facilitated a deeply moving spiritual practice. They further argued that data gathering became a space of substantive conceptual and theological work rather than merely a functional move within a larger theological framing. I attempted to adopt their spiritual mode of ethnographic theological interviewing as an exemplar to emulate, despite conducting the present study in an extra-ecclesial context and not necessarily in "settled institutional formations"[68] and on a more restricted scale. Whereas Campbell-Reed and Scharen conducted their ethnography during daylong retreats, my study was logistically limited to in-depth qualitative interviews. However, their contention that, as the process of ethnographic interviewing becomes theological it simultaneously becomes a deeply moving spiritual practice was borne out in many of my interviews.

As alluded to, Practical Theologians often incorporate sociological frames theory empirically as heuristic devices for understanding theological

[64] van der Ven, Johannes A, "An Empirical Approach in Practical Theology." In: *Practical Theology – International Perspectives*, edited by Friedrich Schweitzer and Johannes van der Ven, (Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 1999), 323-39.
[65] Heimbrock, (2011).
[66] Graham, (1996).
[67] Campbell-Reed and Scharen, (2013), 233.
[68] Bivins, Jason C. "Belief," in *The Oxford Handbook of the study of Religion*, Edited by John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrance, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 502.

expression.[69] Essentially, they are frameworks for the theological interpretation of social life, utilised for further comparative and explanatory research on lived religion.[70] Erving Goffman popularised the use of sociological tools based on frames theory in the study of subjective experiences.[71] His theory relates to the concept of a primary framework as a "schema of interpretation." This is where events are "identified, understood and acted upon to make them meaningful in the context of the values, social structures and belief systems in this way."[72] Sociologist/social psychologist Jeff Astley suggests an important use of theological frames is that they can study "ordinary theology."[73] By this, he means the theology and theologising of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind, as was potentially the case in the present study when I used a random sampling strategy. Astley argues that the study of ordinary theology should involve both empirical research and theological reflection to analyse the problems and possibilities of research and reflection in this area. Applied to the present study is the issue of whether the interest in spirituality among young people constitutes a contemporary 'ordinary theology' (to use Astley's term). Frames theory has its most notable contemporary academic articulation within the U.K. *Theological Action Research* (TAR) project developed by the U.K. *Action Research Church and Society* (ARCS) project team. Practical theologian Clare Watkins is co-originator of the TAR project and director of the *Theology and Action Research Network* (TARN).[74] This important theological development borrows heavily from the social sciences, bringing four theological voices into conversation.[75] Its over-riding aim is to improve the effectiveness of Church organisations and

[69] Smith, Michael, "Theological Frames for Social Research," *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 31, (2018), 74.
[70] Smith, (2018), 71-92.
[71] Goffman, Erving, *Frame Analysis: an Essay on the Organisation of Experience*, (Harvard University Press, 1974). Also based on the work of Bateson (1972) and Snow *et al* (1986).
[72] Goffman, (1974), 27.
[73] Astley, Jeff, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology,* (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2002).
[74] www.theologyandactionresearch.net. Watkins also directs the Catholic Theology in Practice (CTiP) project in the UK whose remit addresses the issue of marginalisation, and whose voices I include in my section on Synodality.
[75] Cameron, Helen. Bhatti, Deborah, Sweeney, James, Watkins, Clare, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research in Practical Theology*, (London, SCM Press, 2010).

faith-based agencies to foster theological renewal and relationships.[76] According to Helen Cameron, their use of social sciences is not merely a "nod" to theology but rather "theology all the way through."[77] As a late-career theology student, inspiring research conducted within the TAR and TARN projects often presented through the *European and North American Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (EENA) networks influenced both my topic and research approach incorporating a PAR ethos aimed at data co-production/generation. These networks promote and provide exemplars of the transformative and analytically rigorous nature of Practical Theology reflected in my definition of the genre.

4.7 Chapter summary

The present chapter locates my study in its empirical quest to assist Christian theology within the paradigm of Practical Theology. Its aim is to contribute a distinctive element of knowledge regarding spirituality, life and faith, engagement and disengagement with organised religion as interwoven with youth culture and everyday life in contemporary Ireland. In this context, I discussed key factors that shape my epistemology as a Practical Theological researcher in my quest to add my voice to its hermeneutic endeavour in an Irish context. The disputed issue of human experiences as legitimate sources of theological reflection is key to both the present chapter and my entire thesis. In this regard, I am swayed by the persuasive arguments made by the key thinkers cited in this chapter, and those scholars currently engaged in contemporary practical research. Campbell-Reed and Scharen's *LPI* is an excellent example of Swinton's assertion regarding the need for the sanctification of ethnography when used theologically. According to Swinton, the decision to choose particular methods reflects the way in which the researcher understands the world to be.[78] My ultimate objective is to use a research design capable of producing what David Fetterman terms "a credible, rigorous and authentic story."[79] Influenced by the epistemological and hermeneutical turn and the

[76] Cameron *et al*, (2010), 63. The framework developed from the ARCS project that worked with twelve ecclesial organizations to enable them to ask theological questions about their work using an action research process.
[77] Cameron *et al*, (2010), 145.
[78] Swinton, (2012), 78.
[79] Fetterman, David M, *Ethnography: Step by Step*, 3rd Edition, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2010), 1.

creative, subjective nature and ethos of Practical Theological research, I am attempting to employ the practical theological character of qualitative research to present hard data for reflection on a topic of growing social importance in Ireland. It explores how the various questions raised by the fusion of abstract and concrete approaches (ethnographic and theological) to Church can inform the present study and help fulfil its research objectives. In that sense, it coheres with the overall nature of my study, undertaken in the context of the need for a refreshed research approach to religious/spiritual phenomena. Undertaking practical research on religion and spirituality, I am making a commitment to exploring lived experiences in the here and now in an Irish context. This is where one finds theological and other kinds of insight and truth, at least in significant part. My approach coheres with van Der Ven's 'intradisciplinary' suggestion (the use of the methodology of some disciplines in others). These approaches and methods have their own ontologies, epistemologies and anthropologies. These affect the understanding and analysis of reality. This means there is already an epistemological commitment to the empirical and the contextual by using insights and methods from disciplines and approaches that will facilitate better understanding. Browning, Swinton, and Mowat concur that all practices and approaches are theory and theology laden, implicitly or explicitly. Hence, it is important for Practical Theological researchers to think about the authority and value of the evidence that their disciplinary approach produces. The chapter also emphasizes the importance of conversations in Practical Theology, provoking theological reflection and rethinking of categories. The primary tool for capturing meanings is the researcher.[80]

The next chapter moves my discourse to ethical and philosophical frameworks underpinning my study. In my section on reflexivity, I alluded to research as a spiritual journey towards the 'other' becoming a theological quest. To this end, I turn to Levinas' call to the ethical regarding respect for the otherness of others. I then provide a rationale for including Heidegger's ontology as a foundational metaphysic for Gadamerian hermeneutics.

[80] Swinton, (2012), 81.

Chapter 5: Ethical and Philosophical Frameworks

5.1 Introduction: Levinas' call to the ethical

One must yield to the other first place in everything. From the "après vous" before the open door right up to the disposition – hardly possible, but holiness demands it – to die for the other. In this attitude of holiness, there is a reversal of the normal order of things, the natural order of things, the persistence in being.

- Emmanuel Levinas, Interview with Francois Poireé, (2011).[1]

In my view, Levinas' statement embodies the essence of ethics – ceding place to the other. In truth, one could include any statement from Levinas' works, which profoundly capture a sense of moral good; however, the above statement is "paradigmatic of the kind of gesture that Levinas terms ethical."[2] Contra Heidegger, discussed in the next section, Levinas prioritizes ethics over ontology, of Being as "*exteriority*" as the essence of being where man's exteriority is his truth as opposed to Heidegger's *Dasein* metaphysic. Levinas saw ethics as first-philosophy, so philosophy in his view is a call to the ethical. His is not a traditional theological stance and does not allow overly theological encroachment in his thinking. It is an ethical stance - a starting point for a caring worldview. Levinas scholars Peter Atterton *et al* underline how, like Buber, discussed briefly below, Levinas repudiates theology, and for similar reasons. Levinas insists that ethics, which he sometimes calls "metaphysics," is not a theology – not even a negative one – and even resorts, according to these scholars, to the term "atheism" to stress the fact that it is not even based on traditional theism.[3] Levinas argues,

> The atheism of the metaphysician means, positively, our relationship with the metaphysical is an ethical behaviour and not theology be it knowledge by analogy, of the attributes of God. God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered under men.[4]

[1] Cited in Robbins, Jill, (editor) "Interview with Francois Poireé", in *Is it Righteous to Be*? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas, (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2001), 23-83.
[2] Robbins, (2001), 23.
[3] Atterton, *et al*, (2004), 15.
[4] Levinas, (1985), 78.

His concern is analysis of encounters with human 'others' and with the divine 'Other.' For Levinas, the 'other' is in the first place the other human being who calls forth ethical responsibility, yet the Other is also the "Most High."[5] He argued that a proper relationship with the world involves accepting and respecting the ethical claims inherent in the otherness of other people, which he calls "*alterity*." His radical humanism of the other have influenced many following philosophers, Jewish and Christian leaders and Popes, notably Pope John Paul 11. Levinas was influenced to some extent by his friend and associate Martin Buber's classic *I and Thou* ontology regarding existential priority in a relationship between man and God.[6] In this work, Buber apportions God as,

> The Being that is directly, most nearly, and lastingly, over against us, that may properly only be addressed and not expressed.[7]

According to Buber, the eternal Thou is met by every person who addresses God by whatever name, and even by that person who does not believe in God yet addresses "the *Thou* of his life, as a *Thou* that cannot be limited by another."[8] Stephen Strasser summarises differences between Levinas and Buber in one sentence; "*Levinas thinks that Buber does not hold the transcendence of God to be sufficiently radical*" (his emphasis).[9] Important in Levinas' thinking is the idea of oppressive conceptual frameworks leading to events such as the Holocaust.[10] In his classic work *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas deconstructs human meeting and communication with the human 'other' and the divine 'Other.'[11] He begins this major work with the statement: "The true life is absent."[12] He deals with two contrasts, totality seeking power and control, infinity seeking higher ideals and quality of life. Underpinning Levinas' alterity is a hermeneutical violence, where the person is

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[5] Veling, Terry, "In the Name of Who? Levinas and the Other Side of Theology," *Pacifica*, 12, (1999), 275, n 1.
[6] Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*, Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937).
[7] Buber, (1937), 80.
[8] Buber, cited in Atterton, Peter, Calarco, Matthew, Friedman, Maurice, "Introduction" in *Levinas & Buber: Dialogue and Difference*, (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 17. Buber's appropriation of the eternal *Thou* being met by every person is an important motif for the present study.
[9] Strasser, Stephan, "Buber and Levinas: Philosophical Reflections on the Opposition", in *Levinas & Buber: Dialogue and Difference*, (2004), 44.
[10] I use the word Holocaust instead of *Shoah.*
[11] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Translated by Alphonsus Lingus, (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers and Duquesne University Press, 2003).
[12] Levinas, (2003) 33.

a servant to others. Levinas argues that the human condition, intrinsically social, is a situation where we live together and interact with other persons, and within it is something that is irreducibly 'other,' which he takes to be "the utterly particular other person with whom I stand face to face."[13] Face is an important metaphor in his work - Levinas' other is not an abstract concept but has a 'face' (not literally in the physical sense). This central notion of the otherness of the other, expressed in the face, is what Levinas scholar John Wild terms "*the phenomenology of the other*."[14] As Wild suggests,

> The other person as he comes before me in a face-to-face encounter is not an *alter ego*, another self with different properties and accidents, but in all essential respects like me.[15]

The other may inhabit a world essentially different from mine but s/he is not a mere object, subsumed under one of my categories and given a place in my world. Wild underlines how outwardly but self-centred totalistic thinking organizes men and things into power systems, giving control over other people. He suggests that this form of thinking has dominated the course of human history. According to Levinas, a crack breaks all totalities. Thus, with totality as a closed system, he describes the permanent returning from the 'I' to me, where the other is taken in and over. The other, he argues, is no longer the other, but an extension of the 'I.' Totality – the 'I', that always returns back home, is contrasted by the idea of Infinity in us. To have the idea of Infinity it is necessary to exist as separated. It is not the insufficiency of the 'I' that prevents totalization, but the infinity of the Other. Infinity is the inexpressible - trace that shines through poetry, through music, through art – a trace that expresses itself especially in the face of the Other, more exactly *as* the face of the Other. According to Practical Theologian Stephen Pattison, Levinas offers an arresting image of how an awareness of 'the face of the other' calls forth not only a feeling of solidarity, but a recognition of difference, becoming the basis of an ethics that take us beyond moral convention into a realm of responsibility and integral

[13] Morgan David L, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.
[14] Wild, (1979), 13.
[15] Wild, (1979), 13.

relation.[16] Practical Theologian Terry Veling and Levinas scholars such as Atterton *et al* argue that few claims in Levinas' philosophy come across more forcefully than the claim that there can be no relationship with God separated from the relationship between persons.[17] Applying Levinas' philosophy to Practical Theology, Bennett *et al* describe how, drawing upon Judaic roots, Levinas characterises the otherness of the other in prophetic terms. The encounter with the widow, stranger and orphan is simultaneously a human ethical relation and an intrusion of a hidden/revealed other who always/only comes through this sacred, proximate encounter,

> The Justice rendered to the Other, to my neighbour, gives me an unsurpassable proximity to God … One follows the Most High God, above all by drawing near to one's neighbour, and concern for 'the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the beggar.'[18]

In "Theology's about Face" Veling suggests that Levinas captures a sense of both readings of Genesis 18 regarding God's revelation to Abraham in the above passage. According to Feminist Theologian Sheila Briggs, the basis of theological anthropology lies in the Genesis description of humankind as created in the image of God.[19] Briggs outlines how there has been a shift in the interpretation of the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* away from the divine image residing in the human cognitive abilities to the divine image as the foundation and guarantor of human dignity.[20] Veling makes a tentative and initial link between theology and the ethical concerns of Levinas' writing, particularly around the notion of responsibility for the face of the other. He explores the metaphor of "being faced" echoing themes from Levinas' second major work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.[21] Veling contrasts the obligation that being faced "forces" upon us in contrast to our more familiar and usual stance of "facing being" with the sense of anxiety and questioning this produces.[22] Levinas' work, in my view, poses challenges to ensure that we do not totalize

[16] Pattison, Stephen, *Saving Face: Enfacement, Shame, Theology*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 79-84.
[17] Atterton *et al*, (2004), 16, also Veling (1999).
[18] Levinas, (1990), cited in Veling, (1999), 291-292.
[19] Briggs, Sheila, "What is Feminist Theology?" in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theology*, (2012), 75.
[20] Briggs, (2012), 75.
[21] Levinas, Emmanuel, *Otherwise Than Being Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991).
[22] Veling, (1999), 275 and 276.

the other in a context where a religious tradition has normatively dominated discourse and behaviour. In short, humans need to recognize the *Imago Dei* in the face of every human being and interactions with them. In this regard, interreligious dialogue, for example Jewish-Christian engagement/dialogue,[23] is itself, in my view, a significant ethical act, as are the works of Practical Theologians who favour the more radical forms of theological work with marginalized communities discussed in chapter 4. In my view, contemporary embodiments of the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the beggar are immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. Practical Theologians such as Veiling address these specific issues.[24] I return to my discussion of Levinas in the context of "popular spirituality"[25] in my discussion of findings (chapter 8.9). There, I discuss Tracy's theologically rich views of how Levinas' work on transcendence and immanence relates to the conversion required of theology. In appendix B, I expand on elements of this discussion in the context of the Holocaust and face as an opening to the infinity of the Other.

The next section briefly discusses Heidegger's role in my study. Among many scholars, Lincoln and Guba state that Heidegger's works inspired the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer.[26] This, my view is that it is important to include Heidegger in the present discussion from this particular viewpoint, despite ethical concern. I argue that critique of Heidegger on *ad hominem* grounds does not warrant exclusion of his voice.

[23] For example, the second Vatican council document Nostra Aetate 1965 and other Jewish-Christian engagement developments. See: Rosenthal, Gilbert S (Editor), *A Jubilee for all Time: the Copernican Revolution in Jewish-Christian Relations*, (The Lutterworth Press, 2017).
[24] Veling, Terry, *Practical Theology: On Earth as it is in Heaven*, (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2005).
[25] Veling, (1999), 31.
[26] Lincoln and Guba, (2003), 300.

5.2 Heidegger and Being

Strife among thinkers is the "lover's quarrel" concerning the matter itself

- Martin Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism'"[27]

According to Heideggerian scholar Joanne Hodge, Heidegger and ethics is often viewed as a "contentious conjunction of terms."[28] His endorsement of Nazism is widely seen as unethical."[29] However, my focus here is on a particular aspect of his philosophy at a historical juncture (1919-1927), when he wrote *Being and Time* (German *Sein und Zeit*)[30] which preceded the rise of Nazism and became an important foundation for Gadamer's work. A close reading of Gadamer suggests that Heidegger's theorizing of the character of human facticity and Dasein ('being-there') is a foundational metaphysic for Gadamer's own work, which are replete with references to Heideggerian thought in various contexts.[31] One could argue that Gadamer appears as Heidegger's amanuensis in some respects. Despite a lifelong struggle with Heidegger's involvement in Nazism, Levinas also concedes that Heidegger formed the background of his philosophical work.[32] In his view, Heidegger's major work argued one sole thesis,

> Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being (which unfolds as time); Being is already an appeal to subjectivity.[33]

Levinas suggests that one of Heidegger's major contributions is a new way of reading philosophy, although his later work appeared to disappoint Levinas because of the "disappearance from it of phenomenology properly speaking."[34]

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[27] Cited in: Bernasconi, Robert, "Failure of Communication as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Levinas", in *Levinas & Buber: Dialogue and Difference*, (2004), 65.
[28] Hodge, Joanna, *Heidegger and Ethics*, (Routledge, London and New York, 1995).
[29] Hodge, (1995).
[30] Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). Original work *Seit und Zein* published 1927.
[31] Almost all Gadamer's essays reference Heidegger. He devotes three specific essays of *Philosophical Hermeneutics* to Heidegger: '*Martin Heidegger and Marburg Theology,'* '*Heidegger's Later Philosophy'* and *'Heidegger and the Language of Metaphysics.'*
[32] Judaic scholar Martin Goodman underlines how Levinas' major philosophical works were influenced by studying the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger in the late 1920s. See, Goodman, Martin, "Reform", in *A History of Judaism.* (Penguin Random House: UK, 2017), 477.
[33] Levinas, (1969), 43.
[34] Levinas, (1985), 42.

He postulates that *Being and Time*, which he apportions as "one of the finest books in the history of philosophy,"[35] has remained the model of ontology, and that the Heideggerian notions of finitude, being there, being-toward-death remain fundamental. Levinas compares Heidegger's *Being and Time* to Plato's *Phaedrus* and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* among others. He underlines that a new way of reading philosophy is one of Heidegger's major contributions, suggesting that in Heidegger there is a new, direct way of conversing with philosophers and asking for absolute current teachings from the great classics. Heidegger argued that we are involved with the world as traditioned actors, arguing that care, a crucial technical word in his lexicon, is the primordial way that we "intend" the world.[36] Dasein, a technical term, essentially means 'Being (there).' It is the standard word for existence. Ontologically, Heidegger's concept influenced Gadamer regarding the significance of understanding, who argued that Dasein transformed the nature of the task of metaphysics. Heidegger made a crucial distinction between *Being* and particular '*Ontic'* Beings. Ontic in this context refers to what a particular being (Dasein) does as opposed to the particular ontological being *as* a particular being. Therefore Dasein is a Heideggerian technical term for one kind of 'being-disclosing' 'existence' or 'being-in-the-world,' referring to the manner in which human individuals exist - the human condition. The central distinguishing characteristic of existence of this kind is that it belongs only to those entities whose being is an issue for them.[37] Relevant to the present study, Heidegger's Dasein addresses particular affective (mood) aspects of human living and relationships whereby particular affections/moods, and temporal powers (such as angst and being-toward-death) create the world itself. As Heidegger saw it, humans, not primarily cognitive or rational creatures, are motivated by these basic moods.[38] He terms these

[35] Levinas, Emmanuel, "Heidegger", In *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo.* Translated by Richard A. Cohen, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 37.
[36] Heidegger, (1962), 41-42.
[37] Mautner, Thomas. *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, (Penguin Books, 2000).
[38] This resonates with cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz's definition of religion emphasizing the 'moods and motivations' (emotional) component. Geertz asserted that religions require 'thick description,' which he applies to culture, but with the understanding that it also holds for religion. Geertz's definition of symbol concerned: 'any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception is the symbol's meaning. See Geertz, Clifford, "Religion as a Cultural System", in *The Interpretation of Culture,* (Basic Books: 1973), 91.

'*Befindlichkeit'* ('mood' or 'state of mind.)' These moods offer up various means to relate to the world. Thus, an existential crisis is not a crisis of rational reflection or a particular train of thought we discern through careful deliberation. Rather, it is an all-consuming primal shift in mood or feeling. This affects one's attunement to the world where angst is anxiety about being in the world in general. Relating mode of being to my research instruments, I pose a number of existential life meaning questions relating to affectivity and emotion, including asking respondents why they think they are in the world.[39]

Major Christian theological thinkers of the 20th century, notably Paul Tillich and David Tracy also attest to Heidegger's contribution to the development of Western philosophy, in addition to other scholars.[40] Tillich gave central place to Heidegger, while avoiding the topic of Heidegger's politics and Nazism, not knowing the extent of Heidegger's commitment to fascism. Heidegger's account of the choice between authentic and inauthentic existence impressed Tillich as a powerful, modern, existential way of expressing the truths of Pauline theology. Following Heidegger, Tillich claimed that it is human beings alone who can raise the question of being and therefore of being-itself. This is because human beings "infinite self-transcendence is an experience of belonging, so that which is nonbeing, namely, to being-itself."[41] Tracy's *Analogical Imagination* refers frequently to Gadamer, and to a lesser extent Heidegger,[42] frequently referring to the "Heidegger- Gadamer" position.[43] Central to Tracy's work is the concept of truth, cohering with one of Gadamer's philosophical ideals, arguing that theologians and scholars of religion must bear the obligation of rendering explicit the question of truth, which he considers paramount.[44] Despite entering caveats, Tracy further argued that Heidegger's "classic" contributions could not be gainsaid by easy misinterpretations of his thought as existentialist. Hodge argues for a form of ethics in Heidegger's thinking which elucidates his

[39] I included this question in both my survey instrument and interviews.
[40] See, for example, O' Meara, Thomas F, "Tillich and Heidegger, a Structural Relationship", Harvard Theological Review, 61 (2), 1968, 249-261.
[41] Tillich, Paul, *Systematic Theology* Volume 1, (Chicago, the University of Chicago Press, 1973.
[42] For example, in *The Analogical Imagination*, there are 33 specific references in either the text or footnotes to Heidegger, Gadamer or both.
[43] See for example, Tracy, (1981),103, 137 n 15, 219 n 1,
[44] Tracy, (1981), 61.

important distinction between metaphysics and philosophy. Against many contemporary views, Hodge proposes that ethics can be retrieved and questions the relationship between ethics and metaphysics that Heidegger had made so persuasive, particularly relating to Dasein.[45] She articulates a view that there has been a reluctance to take seriously the relation between Heidegger's thinking in *Being and Time* and the Christian tradition. This is one of six arguments made by Hodge for ethics in Heidegger. In the view of philosopher James Smith, Heidegger made a critical move in shifting the centre of gravity from the cognitive to the noncognitive, from the head to the heart, from *thinking* a way through the world to *feeling* a way through it – what Heidegger called our 'attunement' to the world.[46] Smith considers that with this shift, Heidegger both signalled the influence of Augustine and began to articulate an anthropology that was an alternative to the previously dominant cognitivist paradigms. He posits that Augustine – to whom Heidegger owed no small debt in his phenomenology of care – would articulate this slightly differently, and in so doing would challenge Heidegger in a way analogous to Heidegger's critique of Husserl.[47] Augustine would argue that the most fundamental way that we intend the world is love.[48] In his *Homilies on 1 John 4.6,* Augustine saw the whole life of the good Christian as a holy longing. In summary of this section, Heidegger's role in my study is twofold. Firstly, his ontology influenced Gadamer's hermeneutics. Secondly, his Dasein concept is philosophically relevant, in my view, to issues relating to affectivity, existential angst and humans attunement to the world and is thus relevant to the present study.

In determining the significance of research findings, it is important to underline the relationship between choice of concepts and philosophical frameworks underpinning a chosen paradigm. Hence, the next section justifies why and how I use Gadamerian hermeneutics as my theoretical framework. It takes a circular rather than linear approach to include influences and commentaries on his conceptual scheme thesis, rather than solely abstracting Gadamerian thinking

[45] Hodge, (1995).
[46] Smith, (2009), 50.
[47] Smith, (2009), 50.
[48] Hill, Edmund (trans), *Teaching Christianity, A translation of St. Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana,* (*A Translation for the 21st Century*) , 1 (11), (New York: New City Press,1996), 1.26.27-1.29.30.

from its usual context. Additionally, as Gadamer attributes importance to Wittgenstein's views on language for the phenomenological tradition, I include a brief section on Wittgenstein's socio-linguistic vision of religion as a "language game" and a "form of life that has to be accepted." [49] These concepts bear similarities to Gadamer's concept of prejudice structures. Thus, I briefly explore parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and Gadamer and Wittgenstein organically in terms of areas of metaphysical convergence and divergence. The section also addresses epistemological challenges to my research design, notably Gadamer's suspicion of method. I discuss how I reconcile these challenges while maintaining fidelity to Gadamer's philosophy in the conduct of phenomenologically inspired interviews and subsequent qualitative data analysis, mindful of his view that hermeneutics is not simply a matter of endorsing a method. The imperative of being open to the contemporary dynamics of my participants' experience may entail points of departure from Gadamer, cognisant of his point that if anything is to transform the horizons of my participants and me as researcher, it must already belong to our horizons within the limits of our comprehension. I will suggest that a 'meeting' as opposed to a 'fusion' of horizons is a more realistic research aim in the present study. In this context, it is important to state at the outset that my use of Gadamer is a heuristic guide to assist in the interpretation of data (embodied as lived experience) in a clear and helpful manner. My argument for Gadamerian hermeneutics is based on a critical analysis of his major works *Truth and Method* and *Philosophical Hermeneutics* among others.

5.3 Gadamer's hermeneutic theory

According to Gadamer,

> Only when our entire culture for the first time saw itself threatened by radical doubt and critique did hermeneutics become a matter of universal significance.[50]

[49] Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations*, edited by G.E. Anscombe and R. Rhees, Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe. (Blackwell: Oxford, 1953), 226.
[50] Gadamer, Hans-Georg, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy." In: *Reason in the Age of Science*, translated by F.G. Lawrence. (Cambridge: MIT Press), 88-138.

He argued that despite the presuppositions of our culture, what dominated human thought were questions to which science provided no answer. Suggesting that this is where Heideggerian philosophy took up its task, Gadamer developed the new starting point that Heidegger provided. He developed Heidegger's idea that pre-understanding or prejudice is a precondition for understanding. Gadamer saw hermeneutics as a means by which understanding, perception, experience and knowing itself occurs.[51] Elevating Heideggerian though to a new epoch in philosophy, he positions Heidegger's immersion among great thinkers: Aristotle and Plato, Augustine and Aquinas, Leibniz and Kant, Hegel and Husserl.[52] Gadamer postulates that because of Heidegger's work, the concept of understanding that the Historical School had made methodologically respectable transformed into a universal philosophical concept. For Gadamer, this drives the concept of self-understanding and selfhood from its position in Western philosophy. David Linge suggests that Heidegger's discovery of the ontological significance of understanding is a major point in hermeneutical theory. He considers Gadamer's work as having close parallels between the "the priority of being in its relation to thinking."[53] Gadamer traces his thinking to the Platonic and Socratic outlook and the Aristotelian conception of ethics as the true fulfilment of the Socratic challenge.[54] His Platonic model of dialogue inaugurated a completely new groundbreaking phase in the development of continental philosophy, carrying on the tradition inaugurated by Schleiermacher (in Biblical studies), Wilhelm Dilthey (in historical studies) and Heidegger (in ontological studies). Gadamer was concerned with applying Heidegger's later philosophy to the humanities and social sciences. He developed the concept of horizon, a word that he traces philosophically to Nietzsche and Husserl to characterize the way in which thought binds to its finite determinacy. All understanding, according to Gadamer, occurs as a fusion of horizons, so in order to understand a text; we need a fusion between the researcher's horizons and the text, arguing that the world is itself given by, or is a function of language.

[51] Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *The Historicity of Understanding*, (Penguin Books Ltd, 1976).
[52] Gadamer, Hans-Georg. "Heidegger and the Language of Metaphysics." (1967), in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, (2008), 229.
[53] Linge, David E. "Editor's Introduction." In *Hans-Georg Gadamer Philosophical Hermeneutics*. (University of California Press: 2008), 111V.
[54] Gadamer, (1991), 13-22.

According to Gadamer, we are not seeking to reach agreement on the same subject because the specific contents of the conversation are only a means to get to know the other's horizons. We must already have a horizon in order to transpose ourselves into a situation. He saw this as a process of "reciprocal foregrounding" (German *abheben*), that is, how prejudices are brought into play.[55] In all understanding, whether we are expressly aware of it or not, the efficacy of history is at work, thus, historically effected consciousness is an element in the act of understanding itself and is already effectual in finding the right questions to ask.[56] We always find ourselves within a situation where the task of illuminating it is infinite, applicable to the hermeneutic situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition that we are trying to understand, never completely achievable. Thus, Gadamer argued that knowledge of oneself can never be complete.[57] The hermeneutical situation for Gadamer centred on prejudices (present horizons) for openness to the world. In his view, understanding is always a fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.[58] However, the horizon is something into which we move and that moves with us, so horizons change for a person who is moving.[59] He saw horizons as the mechanism by which identification of distorted understanding and impediments to communication occur. Thus, anything that is to transform our horizon must already belong to our horizon. Outside our horizon, it would invariably be outside our limits of comprehension.

Although Gadamer does not directly address religion and religious questions, his work is important for the hermeneutics of religion in highlighting a form of presupposition or foreknowledge that implicitly argues against an objective scientific reductionism. As Flood suggests, while science gives us a certain kind of knowledge, it must be assumed into the realm of meaning, and so interpretation.[60] Understanding comes about when one or both (in this case my

[55] Gadamer, (2013), 316.
[56] Gadamer, (1991), 312.
[57] Gadamer, (1991), 313.
[58] (German "*Verstehen ist immer der Vorgang der Verschmelzung […] vermintlich fur sich seiender Horizonte*" in Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Wahrheit und Methode, Grundzuge Einer Philosophischen Hermeneutik,* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1960), 311.
[59] German *"Der Horizont ist vielmer etwas, in das wir hineinwandern und das mit uns mitwandert. Dem Beweglichen verschieben sich die Horizonte,* (Gadamer, (1960), 309.
[60] Flood, (2006), 156.

participants and me as both researcher and bricoleur) undergo a shift; the horizon is extended to make room for the possibility of other perspectives. Challenging personal opinions thus make way for the accommodation of beliefs from a different (in this case youth) culture. According to Gadamer, our preconceptions are fragments of our individual linguistic experience, which makes understanding possible at all. The key question for Gadamer was what prejudices or forestructures are good and which are unhelpful. In his view, interpretations are not all created equally. Human consciousness ('universality') and a fusion of horizons makes understanding conceivable.[61] Gadamer implied that because of different understandings a fusion of horizons does not mean reaching a consensus.[62] How we can distinguish between 'correct' and 'distorted' interpretations – or what the epistemological criteria are for judging between conflicting interpretations – is a question for determining the legitimacy of a discourse and the source of its authority. Suspicious of method, Gadamer postulated that it does not give rise to truth but rather understanding, modified in the light of further inquiry based on the ongoing Platonic method of ongoing (question and answer) dialogue. Understanding and interpretation are bound together, with interpretation always a growing process, thus, a conclusive interpretation is likely never possible.[63] Regarding texts (in my case interview transcripts), there is an anticipation of completeness on the part of the interpreter. This completeness is the text's truth. The meaning of the text, and indeed life in general, only arises because of preconception and the route of the hermeneutical circle, the idea that "parts of a text are understood in relation to the whole and the whole in relation to the parts."[64] Gadamer saw language as our fundamental way of being in the world, and the being that can be understood is language, so we cannot understand in any other way. An important understanding that Gadamer brings to religion is the historicity of the human conditions in which we find ourselves and from which we cannot escape, thus, as Jean Grondin

[61] See: Morse, Janice M, *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods*, (Sage Publications Ltd, 1994).
[62] Gadamer, (1976.)
[63] See: Moules, Nancy J. "Protecting the Sufferer", *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics*. Editorial, (2019), http://doi.org/10.11575/jah.V0i0.61824
[64] Flood, (2006), 158.

suggests, our prejudices constitute the historical reality of our being.[65] Hence, in reading a text we are reading how it speaks to us. Applied to my study, the fusion or meeting of horizons is a version of the hermeneutical circle. Theoretically, understanding occurs when my horizons as both researcher and data subject meet/fuse with the horizon, context and perceptions of participants, leading to a new understanding of the study topics that sheds light on the limitations of our previous understanding. Gadamer terms these processes as gestalt switches, which suggests a kind of incommensurability between horizons. Traditions shape our pre-judgments, which in turn set the horizons, the limits on what we experience and believe at a particular time. Through dialogue with others, we can become critically reflective of our pre-judgments, and, in turn, our traditions. We fuse horizons when we acquire a broader understanding, one inaccessible simply from the original point of view. Since we need the encounter with others to show us the limitations of our points of view, we do not view the limitations themselves solely from within our perspective. This means that the new point of view acquired through the meeting/fusion of horizons amounts to a new way of seeing the limitations of what we saw before. This requires being able to see beyond our original horizons. Working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by tradition.[66] This is the precise object of my interview approach. It demands a radical openness to the experience of my participants and a respect for their experiences that may transcend the historically based traditions of my culture and pre-judgments that shape my own horizons and worldviews. This accord with Gadamer's ontological view that researchers act on that way of being in the world.[67] From an ethical standpoint, Gadamer references Aristotle's moral notion of *phronesis* as opposed to theoretical (*episteme*) knowledge.[68] He argues that if we relate Aristotle's description of the ethical phenomenon and especially the virtue of moral knowledge to our own investigation, we find that analysis offers a kind of "*model of the problems of hermeneutics*" (his emphasis).[69]

[65] Grondin, Jean, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics,* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, (1994), 114.
[66] Gadamer, (2013), 313.
[67] Gadamer, (1976).
[68] Gadamer, Hans-Georg. "The Hermeneutic Relevance of Aristotle." In: *Truth and Method,* (1991), 322-333.
[69] Gadamer, (1991), 333.

Applied to the present study, this requires application of phronesis as an imperative to consider not merely a part of the phenomenon of understanding, but to codetermine it as a whole from the beginning. It also decrees that I do not apply some pregiven universal perspective to a differing perspective articulated by any particular participant in a qualitative interview. As alluded to in my general introduction, Carl Rogers' psychotherapeutic insights on openness to experience resonate deeply and phenomenologically with Gadamer's fusion of horizons concept in my view and influence my approach to empathetic interviewing.[70] I discuss this further in appendix L.

The next section considers important illuminations by Taylor and Linge on aspects of Gadamerian thought on issues of culture, relativism, Gadamer's view of science in addition to his main fusion concept in a more contemporary context.

5.4. Taylor and Linge on Gadamer

In *Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes*,[71] Taylor considers Gadamer's hermeneutics in the context of understanding of the other. He considers that Gadamer, concerned, as he is with the place of culture in human life, made a tremendous contribution to thoughts on relativism, the notion that one can validly judge affirmations both unconditionally and from different points of view or perspectives.[72] Taylor bifurcates two contrasting scientific conceptions of human life. One view sees human nature through a sociobiological lens that explains cultural variation, whereas the other view prioritizes the influence of cultural difference (of which Gadamer is an advocate) as human science could never consist exclusively of species-wide laws. Taylor outlines how postmodern philosophers and social scientists defend Gadamer's view, while those who oppose it do so on the grounds of relativism, which he attributes to a misunderstanding of Gadamer's view of science.[73] He contends that Gadamer is anything but a relativist. Taylor suggests that the difference in the two kinds of science relates to the fact that the languages of human science

[70] Rogers, (1961), 115.
[71] Taylor, Charles, "Understanding the Other: A Gadamerian View on Conceptual Schemes", in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honour of Hans-Georg Gadame*r, edited by Jeff Malpas *et al*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press), (2002).
[72] Taylor, (2002), 24.
[73] Taylor, (2011), 27.

always draw from their intelligibility on our ordinary understanding of what it is to be a human agent, live in society, have moral convictions, aspire to happiness, and so forth.[74] He emphasises the point made earlier regarding how Gadamer's fusion concept comes about when one (or both) undergo a shift; the horizon is extended to make room for the object that before did not fit into it.[75] Challenging personal opinions makes way for the accommodation of beliefs from a different culture. Therefore, our horizon extends to consider this possibility, previously unconsidered – a fusion rather than extension of horizons through the Gadamerian image of the conversation. Taylor emphasises the inner complex, dynamic nature regarding Gadamer's horizons regarding overcoming barriers to understanding, which requires identification of the systematic differences in construal between two different cultures. He considers that this is what Gadamer achieves, allowing travel, change and extension of horizons. He argues that Gadamer's account of the challenge of the other and the fusion of horizons is applicable to attempts to understand different eras and societies. Because these horizons are not necessarily inherent in our own culture, the challenge is to acknowledge the humanity of others from different cultures, thereby increasing our self-understanding. This does not mean we forfeit our own cultural identity. Linge suggests that because hermeneutics is steeped in inter-subjectivity, alienation from meaning can occur in conversations to a similar degree as when interpreting religious texts, its original preoccupation. He suggests that the hermeneutical is concerned with bridging the gap between our familiar world and the strange meanings that resist assimilation into our world horizons.[76] Linge asserts that Gadamer's principle contribution to hermeneutics is his concerted effort to shift the focus of the discussion away from techniques and methods of interpretation, which assume understanding as a deliberate product of self-conscious reflection, "to the clarification of understanding as an event that in its very nature is episod*ic* and trans-subjective."[77]

The next section briefly discusses an aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy relevant to the present study. Its main purpose is to discuss how his conception

[74] Taylor, (2011), 28.
[75] Taylor, (2011), 30.
[76] Linge, (2008), xi.
[77] Linge, (2008), xxxviii.

of religion as a language game and form of life relate to Heideggerian-Gadamerian concepts of understanding of being. Gadamer alludes several times to the convergence between his own phenomenological tradition and Wittgenstein's approach. In my view, his language game concept impinges on key theological issues, specifically the learning (or not) of Christian faith as a form of life and is thus relevant to the present study. In *Philosophical Arguments,* Charles Taylor devotes a chapter to parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein.[78] He underlines how the 'form of life' concept is evident in the work of Heidegger and Gadamer in addition to Wittgenstein.

5.5. Wittgenstein's language hermeneutic

According to Gadamer, Aristotle established the classical definition of the nature of man according to which s/he is the living being who has *logos.* In truth, he argued, the primary meaning of this word is language.[79] Emphasising language's centrality in the phenomenological tradition, Gadamer suggests that only in Wittgenstein does it have its full effect.[80] Wittgenstein saw language as cultural, communal and socialization into a people rather than the didactic ingestion of ideas.[81] He saw all talk (providing examples in different contexts) as a language game, autonomous with rules, intelligible only to the players, with every word having a correlated meaning, depending on the language-game context. A self-identified atheist, he surprisingly opens his classic *Philosophical Investigations* with a quotation from Augustine's section on language (*Confessions,* I.8). Wittgenstein's summary of Augustine's view of the learning of human language is,

> As if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is if he already had a language, only not this one. Or again, if the child could already think, but not yet speak.

Gadamer references Wittgenstein's assertion in his earlier *Tractatus* regarding artificial language (recanted in *Philosophical Investigations*) that the

[78] Taylor, Charles, "Lichtung or Lebensform: Parallels between Heidegger and Wittgenstein", in *Philosophical Arguments*, (Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
[79] Gadamer, (2008), 75.
[80] Gadamer, Hans-Georg. "The Phenomenological Movement." (1963), in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Translated and Edited by David E. Linge. (University of California Press. 2008), 173.
[81] Wittgenstein, (1984), 198-219.

introduction of any artificial language is self-contradictory, because it requires the use of a mother language, thus entailing a natural language.[82] An important issue at stake here is a fundamental question raised by Linge in relation to Wittgenstein's language game concept, specifically whether one ever undergoes more than once a training or socialization such as children undergo.[83] Linge asserts that learning our first language and learning subsequent ones are not the same thing. The latter presupposes the mastery of at least one language, and in learning the first language, we acquire the basis for altering it and fusing it with other language games. In the learning of the mother tongue, we learn not only its particular grammar but also the way to make other languages intelligible.[84] Wittgenstein saw the use of words in ordinary language as the means of acquiring meaning, so the meaning of a word in one context is not necessarily applicable in a different context.[85] Arguing that we cannot give language a universal rule for its use, Wittgenstein uses the concept of family resemblance clusters (*Familliennahnlichkeit*)[86] - things thought to be connected by one essential common feature may in fact be connected by a series of overlapping similarities.[87] He applies this to religion, suggesting that it is "a form of life which has to be accepted - a language embedded in action."[88] Referring to Wittgenstein's atheism, Norman Malcolm, who initiated the concept of religion as a form of life, suggests that although Wittgenstein did not practice religion, it greatly interested him.[89] His concept replaces the ideal of a universal grammar,[90]

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[82] Gadamer, Hans-Georg, "The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century." 1962. In: *Philosophical Hermeneutic*s (2008), 126.
[83] Linge, (2008).
[84] This is an important point relating to my survey and interview question asking participant's if/why they found aspects of other religious traditions as either interesting or attractive.
[85] Wittgenstein suggests that if we say, "Every word in the language signifies something", we have so far said nothing whatever; unless we explain exactly what distinction we wish to make. He suggests that it might be that we wanted to distinguish the words of language from words without meaning.
[86] According to Wittgenstein, "family resemblance" in fact allows us to highlight similarities and differences in all these well-defined circles."
[87] Wittgenstein, (1953), 119.
[88] Wittgenstein, (1953), 226.
[89] Malcolm, Norman, "Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir, With a Biographical Sketch by G.H. von Wright." 2nd Edition. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 72.
[90] In a somewhat similar vein to Wittgenstein, American linguist and activist Noam Chomsky based his theory of syntactic forms, or the theory that all languages contain similar structures and rules (a universal grammar), evidenced by the fact that children everywhere acquire language in the same way. See: Chomsky, Noam, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press), 1965.

when he suggests that "Essence (German *Wessen*) is expressed by grammar."[91] He follows this with his only reference to theology; when he argues, "Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is … theology as grammar."[92] Wittgenstein's concept bears similarities to Gadamer's concept of prejudice structures. The concepts that are familiar in religion are supposedly available only to those who share the form of life where employing them. Religious talk supposedly constitutes a distinctive and autonomous language game, which outsiders could not understand. Both Gadamer and Wittgenstein argue that the rules of a game are discovered in its use in interpersonal communication, which Gadamer emphasises as the locus for the real determination of meaning.

Linge underlines a missing dimension from Wittgenstein's language hermeneutic. He argues that with the learning of our native language, we have simultaneously learned how languages are generally learned. He argues that the close connection of language and practice means that we cannot learn a language by reference to an ideal grammar. We can only achieve this by recalling the situation of training in which we learned the language. Accordingly, to learn a new language game, one must virtually repeat the socialization process of the persons who use it.[93] Ronald Michener makes a pertinent point in this regard, that learning a foreign language involves immersion within a community that speaks it rather than poring over its grammatical rules. The language rules have arisen in the context of community practice, so likewise learning and understanding the Christian faith in terms of its discourse and grammar requires immersion in the community of faith. Just as one should not impose the grammatical rules of one language on another, likewise with theology. Mutual respect in the course of dialogue does not imply mutual belief and commitment.[94] In contrast to Wittgenstein, Gadamer sees learning our native language game as a basis for socialization into a new language game, which broadens our horizons, and not in isolation from each other. Wittgenstein sees

[91]Wittgenstein, (1953), vii.
[92] Wittgenstein, (1953), 373. Talal Asad asserts that this relates to how the changes in concepts articulate changes in practices, with new discursive grammars replaced previous ones. See: Asad, Talal. *Genealogies of Religion: Disciplines and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, (John Hopkins University Press, 1993).
[93] Linge, (2008).
[94] Michener, (2013).

religion as something that we can only acquire over time. Like a language, it results finally in the ability to use it.

5.6 Chapter summary

This chapter addressed important and interconnected ethical and philosophical elements of the present study. It began with Levinas' call to the ethical. The rise of National Socialism and its twelve-year reign had intellectual and personal effects on Levinas.[95] Growing up with the Talmud, his experiences of the Russian revolution shaped him intellectually.[96] Nazis murdered his entire family (apart from his wife and daughter). His transcendental motif of the other applied simultaneously to the human other as human and the divine, is in my view is a perpetual beacon of good arising from the ashes of the Holocaust. Central to Levinas' work is the imperative to be held hostage to the other, at all times and in all circumstances. Following Jacques Derrida, I suggest that Levinas' works not only gives us true ethics, but *the* (my emphasis) "ethics of ethics." [97] Despite ethical concerns, I include Heidegger's seminal work for the reasons outlined. Transposing Gadamer's horizons concept to my research design, my purpose is to ensure application of an appropriate orientation and adjusting my theoretical lens by acquiring the correct horizon of inquiry. In short, I consider that Gadamer's subjective, existential and integrative ontological view is a push back against the norms of a purely objective, positivist disinterested scientific paradigm that does not allow for any possibility of interpretation or understanding. In this sense, it is consistent with my research aims and methodological stance. In my view, Wittgenstein's form of life concept relates philosophically to issues of contemporary theology, specifically the socialisation or not into Christian faith and is thus very relevant to my study.

The next chapter moves my discourse from method to application, where I discuss important research process issues in my study.

[95] Morgan, (2011), 1.
[96] Soldiering for France in the Second World War.
[97] Cited in Robbins, (2001), 23.

Chapter 6: The Bricolage: Conducting the Present Study

6.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter focuses on the bricolage and actual study conduct as an entrée to my findings, discussion and concluding chapters. I begin by discussing the application of important ethical principles. I then briefly discuss my quantitative sampling strategy followed by elaboration on how I organically used interdisciplinary literature reviewed in chapter 2 to compile a fit-for-purpose survey instrument. Then I outline my processes for quantitative data collection, followed by discussion of my interviewing approach. Finally, I outline my data analysis strategy, blending phenomenological with specific Gadamerian thematic analytic frameworks. Achieving thick descriptions requires a phenomenologically inspired/enhanced interview approach, mindful of the point made earlier that there are methodological tensions between ethnography and phenomenology, and important nuances between phenomenological and descriptive qualitative research.

6.2 Ethical principles

In chapter 5.1, I discussed how Levinas underpins my ethical framework as a Practical Theological researcher. This section discusses the precise over-arching ethical principles I applied in my research processes. Because my study involved human subjects in data co-production with me as bricoleur, adherence to a set of specific ethical principles was of paramount importance. The ethical obligation to research participants to generate the best possible research alluded to in my general introduction was imperative when the issues relate to personal and intimate perceptions of the extent to which God relates, or does not relate, to their lives. Thus, the four overarching ethical principles based on the seminal work of Tom Beauchamp and James Childress in biomedical ethics underpinned the present study.[1] These are autonomy, beneficence (doing good), non-maleficence (doing no harm), and justice. These ethical imperatives have underpinned previous mental health research projects with which I was involved

[1] Beauchamp Tom L, Childress James F. *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, 5th Edition, (Oxford University Press, New York, 2001).

and apply equally, in my view, to all research contexts where human subjects are involved as data sources. Ethical commitment is a continual concern in ethnographic work because researchers are actively engaged in issues of participation and power.[2] Emerging empathetic ethnographic approaches adopt an ethical stance in favour of the individual or study group where the interviewer becomes a partner. Hence, although ethnographic interviews appear to be casual conversations, they have a specific but implicit research agenda. Simply put, they are conversations with a purpose. A further ethical consideration is the addition of new findings as opposed to duplicating previous research - moving and making rather than mirroring as alluded to in chapter 4. Research that is not creative or does not have the quality to contribute new knowledge but merely duplicates existing research is unethical.[3]

The next section briefly explains my quantitative sampling strategy.

6.3 Quantitative sampling strategy

When conducting a mixed-methods study, a researcher can use quantitative and qualitative methods simultaneously, interdependently or in a range of different sequences. To elicit grounding data, I chose a two-phase sequential design that began with recruiting volunteers aged 18-39 living in Ireland to complete a questionnaire via social media outlets.[4] I targeted a probability,[5] random selection of individuals from the wider population - a subset of the population, which represents the population of interest.[6] As discussed, I did not set out to achieve the external standards of the social sciences. Thus, I did not aim for generalisability[7] of findings, frequencies or distributions, or to use Analysis of Variances (ANOVAs) to study related samples or independent groups, for example in the *Spiritual but not Religious* category.[8] I was not attempting to

[2] Ward, (2012), 7. I addressed this issue specifically in my section on reflexivity and autoethnography.
[3] Flick, (2007), 127.
[4] Predominantly *X* (formerly twitter).
[5] Probability sampling refers to a sample that is probably representative of the target population.
[6] In simple terms, it is the random selection of persons to study from a bigger population.
[7] Generalisability, often referred to as external validity is the extent to which the results of a study based upon evidence drawn from a sample is applicable to a population as a whole. See: Gray, (2022), 838.
[8] ANOVAs determine whether there are differences between two or amongst three or more groups on one or more variables using the *F*- test. See: Gray, (2022), 834.

establish cause and effect or draw inferential statistics.[9] For example, I did not set out to determine differences in my sample between genders, age or any other variable associated with their perceptions of spirituality and religion. In short, I sought general descriptives only for qualitative exploration in phase 2 where my purpose was to explore topics more deeply and add hermeneutic substance to these quantitative data.

6.4 Quantitative data collection

Phase 1 involved the distribution of the 43-item Google Forms[10] questionnaire via social media between 28 February and 31 March 2023. While based on surveys previously used, I made amendments to suit an Irish context. It sought to elicit views, perceptions and beliefs about a wide range of socio-theological issues. These included beliefs about God, religious affiliation, the perceived meaning of religion and spirituality and interrelationship (if any) as perceived by respondents. While some questions specifically targeted Roman Catholics, most were applicable to all respondents.[11] The introduction section asked respondents to indicate their answers by ticking (mostly) one box. Where appropriate, an option was available to provide free-text, write-in qualitative responses. Following options for gender self-identification, I asked respondents to denote their religious affiliation (if any) including a 'no religion' option.[12] If respondents ticked this particular box, I provided them with three options of nonreligious self-identification: atheism, agnosticism and secular humanism of which I did not delineate the four types. I included questions to elicit perceptions of nominal religious affiliation.[13] I then asked respondents to complete two 4-point Likert-type option columns according to the degree to which they considered themselves religious or spiritual, similar to the study by Zinnbauer *et al*, followed by an option to self-identify in one of the four categories of the two-by-two typology discussed previously. Following this, I asked respondents to

[9] This relates to statistical tests that draw inferences from a single study sample under to a larger population from whence the sample derives. See: Gray, (2022), 838.
[10] Google Forms is the least desired option for market surveying. However, Qualtrics platforms or similar software programs were not available. Additionally, the Research Ethics Committee would not permit me to use survey monkey software.
[11] I refer to those who partook in the survey as 'respondents', while those who were interviewed are 'participants.'
[12] Based on the first wave of the ESS, 2002/2003.
[13] Abby Day's work discussed in chapter 2 influenced this question.

choose one among five sets of options that best described their perceptions of how religion and spirituality interrelate. The options were 'spirituality is a broader concept than religion and includes religion', 'religion is a broader concept than spirituality and includes spirituality,' 'religion and spirituality are different and do not overlap,' 'religion and spirituality are the same concept and overlap completely,' 'religion and spirituality overlap but they are not the same concept.' Similar to Palmisano's study, I asked respondents to choose one option among six statements about the existence of God, with options eliciting belief in a personal relationship with God, a higher power or life force and so forth.[14] I used a 5-point Likert scale to elicit responses to the statements *Jesus Christ is God's Son* and *what comes after death*? I posed a question regarding belief in heaven and hell, similar to one used by Palmisano. Similar to her study, a number of questions sought to determine whether respondents linked spirituality with a Christian God external to themselves, or alternatively to personal experiences of sacralities.[15] A further question sought to determine experiences of a presence or power outside normal everyday experience, whether these experiences connect externally with the sacred in the minds of respondents, or individually internalised and unrelated to sacralities. As a fundamental research aim is to extract meanings attached to the *word* spiritual, I based questions on Ammerman's study that had the aim of isolating meaning clusters. These questions sought perceptions of theistic spirituality (God, practices, mystery), extra-theistic (naturalist) spirituality concerned with meaning, connection, and *Belief and Belonging* spirituality connected to a religious tradition. I used Hérvieu-Leger's *Validation of Faith* thesis to elicit the extent to which a self-referential relationship existed between personal belief systems and traditional faith.[16] The spirituality aspects aimed to elicit responses to questions of existential life meaning, the holistic milieu, engagement in Eastern religions and philosophies or New Age holistic spiritual practices. I included a series of options, which sought to elicit if, and why respondents partook in these practices. This attempted to ascertain whether a religious or spiritual quest, both or neither, motivated respondents to engage. I included questions on horoscopes, astrology,

[14] Based on RAMP Italian 1998 data with one addition "I believe there is something out there."
[15] Palmisano, (2010), 238.
[16] Hervieu-Léger, (2000), 166.

fortune telling and tarot reading in addition to a question on whether respondents perceived spiritual energy as emanating from physical objects.[17] A question about Catholicism and social/personal identity specifically targeted those who self-identified as Catholic.[18] A 5-point Likert scale question that sought responses to the statement *God is everywhere and within everything* was an amendment to a similar question used by Heelas,[19] also Zinnbauer *et al*'s *Belief about God* items. A final section relating to the dimension of affectivity and emotion sought participant experiences of sacred, numinous (see appendix A) heightened forms of spiritual experiences including epiphany and AW moments, and situations that evoked these experiences. Elaine Graham identifies a resurgence of the sacred, especially in New Age and other religious movements as a feature of postmodernity.[20] I based the existential search for identity and purpose question *Please state why you think you are in the world* on Swinton and Mowat's study of marginalized people.[21] The GSS tool prompted the question asking respondents for one response to three statements regarding beliefs about the Bible.[22]

6.5 Qualitative sampling strategy

The major qualitative aspect entailed interviews of a separate sample of the defined demographic. As the sample were not a homogenous group, my sampling strategy was primarily random, with an evolving small snowball element.[23] I applied no exclusion criteria except for a reasonable command of the English language. Normatively, approximately eight interviews are

[17] Similar to questions posed by Glendinning and Bruce (2006).
[18] Based on the "2018 Religion1V questionnaire for the International Survey Programme," with the country amended to 'Ireland. Source: A compilation of documents used to develop the 2018 Religion1V questionnaire for the International Survey Programme. See: Smith, Tom W. 'NORC at the University of Chicago' July 2020. These questions are also influenced by Voas's subgroup categorical classification from Abby Day's work of natal, Christian and aspirational nomalists.
[19] Heelas, (2007).
[20] Graham, (1996), 2.

[21] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), 227-253.
[22] Cited in Burge, (2021), 8.
[23] See Miles, Matthew B., Huberman, Michael A, *Qualitative Data Analysis.* Second Edition, (Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage, 1994), 27-28.

sufficient for qualitative interviews.[24] A good rule-of-thumb is to aim for around twelve interviews of approximately thirty minutes in length or six to eight interviews of around an hour.[25] However, as I sought thick descriptions, I targeted longer in-depth interviews. The emergence of an interesting new theme at the mid-point of the interview schedule motivated me to continue interviewing until I considered that I reached the point of data saturation.[26] In total, I conducted one online and 21 in-person interviews (12 female, 10 male).

The next section expands on the substantive stage, which aimed to deepen understanding of the topics by qualitative interviewing, congruent with Gadamerian hermeneutics. Here, although emanating from different philosophical frameworks, I discuss how ethnographic interviewing combined with a phenomenologically enhanced/inspired approach (alluded to in chapter 4) in a PAR ethos facilitated data to emerge from interviewer/interviewee interactions.[27]

6.6 Qualitative interviewing: achieving thick descriptions

Arguing that qualitative research is not merely a matter of following a set of procedural guidelines, John Mc Leod suggests,

> The principal source of knowing … is the researcher's engagement in a search for meaning and truth in relation to the topic of inquiry … in the end it is the capacity of the inquirer to see and understand that makes the difference.[28]

The guiding question in making my data collection research decision was to determine the most appropriate and feasible methodology to explore perceptions of contemporary spirituality and religion in Ireland in order to generate meaningful data. Thick descriptions relate to understanding the social world. Clifford Geertz saw ethnography as an interpretive search for meaning as

[24] For example, John Creswell considers this number appropriate to provide rich sources of data in qualitative research. See: Creswell John. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2nd edition. (London: Sage Publications, 2007).
[25] Rowley, Jennifer, "Conducting Research Interviews," *Management Research Review*, 35:3-4, 2012), 260-71.
[26] Data saturation is the point at which data collection can cease, because data have become repetitive with the emergence of no new themes or ideas. See: Gray, (2022), 836.
[27] Hoffding and Martiny, (2016), 540.
[28] McLeod, John, *Qualitative Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy*, (London: Sage. 2010), 55.

opposed to an experimental scientific search for laws,[29] where researchers study knowledge and practice as local knowledge and practice. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln see the central task of qualitative enquiry as making sense out of local situations.[30] According to Adrian Holliday, thick descriptions consist of a data network that show the different facets of a social phenomenon interconnected with the researcher's argument and commentary. According to Catherine Adams and Max van Manen,

> The focus is on the direct description of a particular situation or event as it is lived through without offering causal explanations or interpretive generalizations.[31]

Congruent with Gadamerian hermeneutics, Pete Ward sees the core value of these descriptions as the way ethnographers attempt to describe the study situation in as much detail as possible, not fully achievable until the researcher fully articulates the interconnections in the written study.[32] Simon Hoffding *et al* address defend the reliability and validity of ethnographically inspired phenomenological interviews.[33] They argue that the approach can provide a rich source of knowledge, in no principled way less reliable or valid than quantitative methods. Hoffding and Kristian Martiny propose a general framework that integrates the research paradigms of phenomenological philosophy and qualitative methodology-a phenomenological interview.[34] The first tier is the actual interview itself that co-generates data. A segment of tier two actually occurs before tier one, i.e. before the interview with the formation of interest in certain research questions, usually of a phenomenological nature. This guides the entire ensuing research process stemming from the questions posed during interviews, with the researcher focusing more on tier two during data analysis

[29] Geertz, (1973), 7.
[30] Denzin, Norman K. Lincoln, and Yvonna S, "Introduction: Entering the Field of Qualitative Enquiry." in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Edited by Norman K. Denzin & Yvonna S. Lincoln. (London: Sage), (1994), 25.
[31] Adams, Catherine, Van Manen, Max. "Phenomenology", In: *The Sage Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Edited by L.M. Given. Volume 2. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 618.
[32] Ward, (2012), 7.
[33] Hoffding, Simon. Martiny, Kristian, Roepstorff, Andreas, "Can We Trust the Phenomenological Interview? Metaphysical, Epistemological and Methodological Objections", *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 21, (2022), 35-51.
[34] Hoffding, Simon, Martiny, Kristian, "Framing a Phenomenological Interview: What, Why and How", Phenomenology *and the Cognitive Sciences*, 15 (2015), 539-64.

and drawing conclusions of phenomenological interest.[35] They argue that there is nothing particularly phenomenological about the phenomenological approach itself. They suggest that this type of interview is a short hand term for a phenomenologically enhanced /inspired interview.[36] They describe this method as,

> A highly dynamic, shared investigation: the interviewer attempts to guide the interviewee to even more precise descriptions of…a state of affairs.[37]

Theoretically, this process potentiates a fusion/meeting of horizons. This contrasts with the Husserlian notion of interpretation which takes the view that meaning is "unsullied by the interpreter's own normative goals or view of the world."[38] Phenomenologically inspired insight, in providing deep understandings of the way things are, enables people to see the world differently, and in seeing it differently to act differently towards it.[39] Cohen *et al* underline how hermeneutical phenomenological research aims to highlight the experience under exploration as close as possible to how it was lived by the participant, while noting the interactions and overlapping horizons between researcher and participant.[40] Because of its focus on care, empirical health related sciences began to apply hermeneutic phenomenological research methodologies to various topics in the 1990s.[41] Research on spirituality increasingly employs Gadamerian hermeneutics.[42] Alsaigh and Coyne, for example, cite the evidence base for congruence between Gadamerian hermeneutics and nursing, discussing how the discipline uses the methodology in the interpretive practice of

[35] Hoffding *et al*, (2022), 37. I discuss this aspect later in my thematic data analysis section.
[36] Hoffding *et al*, (2022), 36.
[37] Hoffding *et al*, (2022), 39.
[38] Koch, Tina. "Interpretive Approaches in Nursing Research: the Influence of Husserl and Heidegger", *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 21, (1995), 832.
[39] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), 107.
[40] Cohen, M.Z., Kahn, D.L., Steeves, R.H, *Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research: A Practical Guide for Nurse Researchers*, (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2000).
[41] See for example, Smucker, C, "A Phenomenological Description of the Experience of Spiritual Distress." *Nursing Diagnosis*, 7:2, (1996), 81-91. Stiles, M.K, "The Shining Stranger: Application of the Phenomenological method in the Investigation of the Nurse-Family Spiritual Relationship", Cancer *Nursing*, 17:1, (1990), 19-26. Ajjawi and Higgs, (2007), 612-38, Alsaigh and Coyne, (2021).
[42] Nurse researchers consider that spirituality has become the "Holy grail" of nursing. See, for example, Timmins, Fiona, McSherry, Wilf, "Spirituality: the Holy Grail of Contemporary Nursing Practice", *Journal of Nursing Management*, 20 (2012), 951-997.

research.[43] Increasingly, a range of topics are researched such as issues of life, death and/or their associated beliefs, depression, suicide, existential angst among a younger generation and so forth using the methodology.

Many scholars emphasize how establishing trust and rapport is paramount in ethnographic interviews, because their ultimate goal is achieving understanding. According to Michael Quinn Patton, a central premise of qualitative interviewing is that the quality of the information obtained largely depends on interviewer competency and that prior experience is the most important interviewing variable.[44] Patton emphasises that an interview is an interaction, a relationship and a two-way observation. At their heart is the generation of tacit knowledge, found in one's body language, facial expression and tone of voice.[45] I developed competencies through extensive interview experiences in a professional context, that I consider influenced and enhanced my ability to conduct good interviews.[46] In an academic research context, previous co-produced, PAR projects with a vulnerable population enhanced my ability to make ethical on-the-spot decisions in interview situations depending on the interview flow and interviewee emotional responses.[47] Allied to experience, the seminal work on focused interviewing by Robert Merton and Patricia Kendall influenced my approach.[48] According to Fetterman, the purpose and focus of ethnographic interviews is to "serve comparative and representative purposes – comparing responses and putting them in the context of common group beliefs and themes."[49] He underlines that they are most valuable when the fieldworker comprehends the fundamentals of a community from the insider's perspective.

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[43] Alsaigh and Coyne, (2021), 2.
[44] Patton, Michael Quinn, "Qualitative Interviewing", in *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. 4th Edition. (Sage Publications, 2015), 427.
[45] Hoffding and Martiny, (2015), 542, f 3. These authors outline how the constitutive role of body language, facial and emotional expression in consciousness has a long tradition in phenomenology, especially in the works of Scheler and Krueger.
[46] By professional, I mean experience gained as a panel member of interview boards for the purpose of recruitment and retention of nursing staff, as opposed to interviewing for research purposes.
[47] For example, I conducted an interview for the evaluation of a mental health project with the father of a young adult recently diagnosed with first-episode psychosis. I needed to prioritise the participant's wellbeing by stopping the interview and facilitating cathartic expression when he became emotionally overwhelmed.
[48] Merton, Robert K., Kendall Pl, "The Focused Interview", *American Journal of Sociology*, 510, (1946), 541-57.
[49] Fetterman, David M, "Ethnography", in *The Sage Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Edited by L.M. Given. Volume 1. (Thousand Oaks: CA, Sage, 2008), 477-479.

Steinar Kvale describes this as "a conversation about the human life world, with the oral discourse transformed into texts to be interpreted."[50] van Manen asserts that "even the 'facts' of lived experience need to be captured in language … inevitably an interpretive process."[51]

When a study is relatively small-scale, interviews are the most appropriate design, requiring me to decide between unstructured or semi-structured. Differing in format, both have advantages and disadvantages in addition to some overlap. Ethnographic pioneer Bronislaw Malinowski identified the key delineation between the two approaches in his description of a day in the field.[52] Unstructured interviews provide greater depth because they do not impose *a priori* categorization that may limit the field of enquiry.[53] Allowing free association, they are superior in eliciting rich descriptions because interviewees can relate experiences not bound by rigid structuration. This approach facilitated dialogic interaction (a basic requirement of Gadamerian hermeneutics). Logistically, however, an element of structuration is required. Purely unstructured interviews potentially lead to a drift into general statements, not addressing the critical lines of enquiry. Semi-structured elements facilitate the preparation of questions by means of topic/interview guides prior to the actual conduct of interviews (see appendix H).[54] They increase the comparability and structuration of data, important for analysis. Grant McCracken describes their function, as a "rough travel itinerary … (to) establish a clear sense of direction of the journey and the ground it will eventually cover."[55] In line with Flick's suggestion, I used retrospective inspection, with which I began each interview. An example was *please; could you recount a situation when you had experiences of something religious or spiritual*? Probes that sought subjective definitions

[50] Kvale, Steinar, *Interviews. An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing.* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), 46.
[51] van Manen, Max, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for An Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 181.
[52] Malinowski, Bronislaw, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1989). Original work published in 1967.
[53] Fontana and Frey, (2005), 706. The concept of '*a priori'* in this research context refers to a form of deductive thinking in which theoretical formulations and propositions precede and guide systematic observation.
[54] Creswell, (2007).
[55] McCracken, Grant, "The Long Interview", *Qualitative Research Methods Series*, 13. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988), 37.

complemented these questions.[56] For example, I then asked *what do you link the word religion or spirituality to today*? Alternatively, *do you link the word spirituality in any sense to religious expression?* I applied this format throughout the interviews, pivoting my approach, depending on responses and non-verbal cues, mindful of Kvale's emphasis on the importance of what interviewees are not saying in addition to what they say between the lines.[57] From a quality, rigour and audit perspective, this process ensured that I pursued the same basic lines of enquiry with each participant, as suggested by Patton.[58] My interview guide comprised a set of questions not posed in a strict standardized formulation. Using a focused non-directional approach allowed expression of participant's first-person point of view while I receded into the background, merely serving the purpose of a prompt for participants to articulate their perceptions of the constructs. For example, I initially encouraged participants to associate general views of religion and spirituality freely before I began to explore these topics more deeply. In this regard, Rogers' seminal work on interpersonal relationships underpinned my non-directive, freestyle approach.[59] Familiarity with the questions and probes before the interview without constant reference to the guide helped me to observe and interpret non-verbal communication, which can substantiate or refute participant narratival descriptions. Rigid application of the guide would have restricted the benefits of openness and contextual information.[60] In short, my interview guide was an *aide-memoire*, allowing me to concentrate on the ethnographically important communication elements.

The research literature raises issues of methodological and epistemological objections to phenomenological interviewing, including objections to the issue of trust and lack of rigour, concerned with the quality of the study and reflexivity when interpreting raw data. To achieve rigour, I applied criteria of

[56] McCracken, (1988).
[57] Kvale, Steinar, *InterViews,* (Thousand Oaks: CA, Sage, 1996).
[58] Patton, (2015), 439.
[59] Experience of teaching Rogerian principles for use in dialogic interactions with mental health service users for 25 years to undergraduate mental health nursing students influenced my approach. Additionally, I taught these skills on a psychosocial interventions master's degree mental health programme module. This involved the video recording of students using listening and communication skills during simulated mock assessments of 'voice hearers' using the Maastricht interview guide (Escher and Romme, 1998), an aspect that also explores possible spiritual stimuli to the experience of voice hearing.
[60] Flick, (2002), 95.

'consistency,'[61] 'specificity,' 'range,' 'depth,' and 'personal context.' The aim of specificity was to extract the crucial elements that illuminate the meaning of the constructs at play from participant perspectives. Range was concerned with ensuring that I addressed all aspects of the topics. Depth and personal context related to the emotional responses of participants,[62] which I captured in field notes (see appendix D). I based my overall approach on achieving quality responses that potentially added rich texture to overall findings. Flick addresses quality at four different levels and by four different groups of actors.[63] With regard to the first level (quality of the interview), he provides good examples of determining the quality of an interview conducted against which I measured my approach.[64] Considerations relate to the extent to which I could confirm trustworthiness, draw conclusions, and the extent to which the interviews represented participant experiences.

The next section discusses my approach to data analysis. I briefly discuss a number of generic frameworks, some of which I used in previous research projects before deciding to blend frameworks to cohere more precisely with Gadamerian hermeneutic theory.

6.7 Qualitative data analysis

As alluded to, research scholars have criticized the interpretive research approach as lacking a prescribed method of data analysis.[65] Kate Caelli argues that a more explicit approach is required to make these methods more explicit.[66] Pure phenomenological research scholars sometimes use specific procedural

[61] Consistency involves ensuring that the instrument measures what it sets out to measure. See Hoffding *et al,* (2022), 35. These scholars note a further nuance to consistency. They describe the concept as an assessment of whether the method consistently applies the same methodological steps or tools and arrives at somewhat reproducible conclusions.
[62] Flick, (2002), 77.
[63] These are the researcher's interest in knowing how good or bad their own research is, funding institutions' interest in grants, journal editorial interest in what to publish, and reader's interest in orientation of which research to rely on or not. See, Flick, (2007), 3–5.
[64] Kvale, Steinar, *Doing Interviews* (Book 2 of the Sage Qualitative Research Kit). (London: Sage, 2007).
[65] Fleming, V., Gaidys, U., Robb, Yvonne, "Hermeneutic Research in Nursing: Developing a Gadamerian -Based Research Method", *Nursing Inquiry*, 10: 2 (2003), 113-120.
[66] Caelli, Kate, "Engaging with Phenomenology: Is it more of a Challenge than it Needs To be?" Qualitative *Health Research,* 11:2, (2001), 273-281.

steps, for example, those of Paul Colaizzi[67] or Max van Manen.[68] However, other scholars contend that a formulated data analytic framework is antithetical to interpretivism generally.[69] Hermeneutic phenomenology is not a rigidly set or prescribed methodology, thus there are challenges in applying concepts underpinned by Gadamerian phenomenology, particularly in the data analysis phase.[70] Framing my research in a theological horizon and in fidelity to Gadamerian hermeneutics, as a researcher my first step was to establish my pre-understandings. In order to provoke these, I found it useful to have conversations with family members and friends regarding religion and spirituality in addition to reflection on mental health nursing student views of spirituality emanating from teaching the subject at university undergraduate level. Of particular contemporaneous value was a plenary, question and answer discussion session (focused on the theme of Bourdieu's habitus) in the context of my online presentation to the *EENA* conference in Princeton University in 2023. This discussion prompted deeper awareness of my pre-understandings regarding the influence of Catholic habitus on my worldview and belief systems, and the need to be reflexively aware of these influences as bricoleur. Additionally, using prior experience of data analysis of a mental health study on prisoner's perceptions of a wellness intervention as part of a research team,[71] I was cognisant of what Campbell-Reed and Scharen refer to as the modern impulse to dissect and analyse. This is where the value of the integrated thematic analysis framework that I employed, discussed in my next section, helped achieve a more circumspect view.

[67] Colaizzi, Paul F, "Psychological Research as the Phenomenologist Views It", In *Existential Phenomenological Alternative for Psychology*, edited by R. Valle & M. King. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 48-71.
[68] Van Manen, (1990).
[69] See for example: Moules, Nancy, McCaffrey, Graham, Field, James C., Laing, Catherine M. *Conducting Hermeneutic Research: From Philosophy to Practice*, (International Academic Publishers, (2015).
[70] See, for example, Alsaigh and Coyne, (2021).
[71] Keogh, Brian. Mc Bennett, Padraig, de Vries, Jan., Higgins, Agnes, O'Shea, Marie, Doyle, Louis, "Prisoners Perceptions of a Mental Health Wellness Workshop", *International Journal of Prisoner Health*, 13 (2), (2017), 81-90.

6.8 Thematic analysis underpinned by Gadamerian hermeneutics

Despite challenges, to ensure rigour it was imperative for me to adhere to Gadamer's central concepts of pre-understandings, hermeneutic circle and fusion of horizons. Although Gadamer proposed insights into how one may acquire a deep understanding of texts, he did not suggest a methodology or method for doing so, but nonetheless advocated a systematic approach in order to gain understanding. Following a research literature review of analytic frameworks, I chose one advocated by Gaidys Fleming *et al*, which appeared to hold most fidelity to Gadamer.[72] This involved formulating a research question, identifying pre-understandings (before data collection), gaining understanding through dialogue with participants (interview and field notes), gaining understanding through dialogue with text (interview transcripts) and establishing trustworthiness. Additionally, guided by the experience of Alsaigh in her paediatric nursing study, I included a sixth stage advocated by Rola Ajjawi and Joy Higgs.[73] This structured stage, which I used as a heuristic guide, illuminated how to apply Fleming *et Al*'s fourth stage of gaining understanding through dialogue with text. Thus, my first step involved identifying my research question and pre-understandings. The immersion analytic stage is where I conducted the interviews, and the understanding analytic stage was concerned with transcribing and becoming familiar with data. This involved generating initial codes, coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set and collating data relevant to each 'free' code.[74] Free codes are the totality of participant narratives across the entire data set, which also involved auto coding where I identified different aspects coming into different parts of the topics under discussion (appendix F presents higher and lower codes). These free codes formed the basis of creating categories. The abstraction analytic stage involved integration of my (second-order) horizon constructs (see appendix G). This phase involved grouping free codes into higher categories. The synthesis and theme development (aggregation) stage is where I began establishing a hierarchy of developing themes and sub-themes. The illumination

[72] Fleming *et al*, (2003).
[73] Ajjawi and Higgs, (2007), 612-38.
[74] 'Free' codes in this context refers to academic generation of codes as opposed to 'tree' nodes generated by software.

of phenomena stage is where I integrated themes with extant literature. The final integration and critique stage related to situations where a fusion/meeting of horizons occurred. The following table depicts my approach.

Table: Gadamerian hermeneutic analytical framework.[75]

Fleming *et al* (2003) Based on Gadamer. Step.		Ajjawi & Higgs (2007).	Stage.	Steps followed in present study.
1. Research Question			1.	Research Question
2. Pre-understanding Identification.			2.	Pre-understanding identification
3. Gaining understanding through participant dialogue.	Analytical stages	1.Immersion	3.	Gaining understanding through participant dialogue (interviews).
4. Gaining understanding through dialogue with text.		2.Understanding	4.	Transcribing data, preliminary text interpretation to identify first-order participant initial codes/constructs.
5. Establishing trustworthiness.		3.Abstraction	5.	Identify second-order (researcher horizons)

[75] Based on Gadamer (1960), developed by Fleming *et al* (2003) and Ajjawi & Higgs (2007). Column 1 represents the five steps of analysis developed by Fleming *et al*. Column 2 represents the analytic stages developed by Ajjawi and Higgs. Column 3 represents the stages followed in the present study.

				constructs = integration
		4. Synthesis and theme development	6.	Meeting horizons where applicable and theme identification = aggregation

Some phases of this analytical approach overlap with those advocated by other scholars. Regardless of framework chosen, there is no substitute for being able to see the transcribed data at a glance during the analysis stage.[76] A reputable audio transcription company with whom I signed a confidentiality agreement (see appendix K) transcribed some of the interviews.[77] To assure pseudo-anonymity and confidentiality, I assigned a numerical code, changing specific contextual information that could potentially reveal identity, in addition to redacting names and inserting pseudonyms. The first analytic stage corresponded to phase one of my audit trail (discussed in the next section). It involved reading and re-reading interview transcripts, sometimes listening to audio recordings simultaneously to reach a code definition (see appendix F). Identifying initial meaning unit codes, I created categories using an approach that I used for data coding and categorisation with a co-researcher in the evaluation of a mental health wellness intervention guided by Braun and Clarke's framework.[78] I then ascribed meaning units relating to the lived experience as described by participants. According to Amadeo Giorgi, a meaning unit "signifies a certain meaning, relevant for the study … contained within the segregated unit."[79] Thus, I reduced themes or structural meaning units of data. Reviewing the codes to assess the commonalities and differences

[76] Gray, (2022), 423.
[77] This company transcribed eight interviews. I completed the other transcriptions because of the prohibitive costs involved.
[78] Doyle, Louise, de Vries, Jan, Higgins, Agnes, Keogh, Brian, Mc Bennett, Padraig, O' Shea, Máire T, "A Mixed-Method Longitudinal Evaluation of a One-Day Mental Health Wellness Intervention", *Health Education Journal,* 76: 2, (2017), 244-56.
[79] Giorgi, Amedeo, "The Theory, Practice and Evaluation of the Phenomenological Method as a Qualitative Research Procedure", *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology,* 28, (1997), 246.

between interviews helped create a better understanding of the extent to which data reflected issues relating to the topics. The next stage integrated and synthesised text into themes to achieve a coherent narrative, sorting codes into possible themes and collapsing similar themes until I achieved an aggregated description of participants experiences from the data set. In the real world of research, experience has taught me that a structured approach is challenging to achieve, arguably even more using Gadamerian hermeneutics. Having undergone training in NVivo R1 version 12 QDA (Qualitative Data Analysis) I made the research decision not to use this or other software programmes in the knowledge that they only assist coding of qualitative data. They do not magically produce results.[80] Although useful in analysing large amounts of raw-data, Robert Newell and Philip Burnard assert that word counting alone is insufficient to represent a valid analysis method.[81] I consider that software programmes cannot adequately capture annotated nuances emanating from data on spirituality.[82] Additionally, Pat Bazeley makes the point that thematic analysis is more than identifying themes.[83]

The next section discusses how I attempted to achieve quality and rigour (robustness), issues of paramount importance in qualitative research. Allied to rigour is reflexivity, fundamental to the confirmability of qualitative research when interpreting raw data. Managing quality requires using transparent criteria or strategies, such the production of an audit (decision) trail. Thus, quality is interwoven and visible throughout my process, not simply an add-on at the end of my project.

6.9 Achieving quality and rigour

In contrast to earlier stages in qualitative research development, the focus has shifted from epistemological and philosophical levels to more concrete and practical levels. Methodological reflexivity is crucial if the research is to be

[80] Gray, (2022), 718.
[81] Newell, Robert, Burnard, Philip, *Research for Evidence-Based Practice,* (Blackwell, Oxford, (2006).
[82] By nuances, I mean the particular way a participant says something.
[83] Bazeley, Pat, *Qualitative Data Analysis: Practical Strategies.* (London: Sage, 2013). Also, Bazeley, Pat., Jackson, K. *Qualitative Data Analysis with Nvivo,* 2nd edition, (London: Sage, 2013).

persuasive.[84] Clive Seale identifies reflexivity as a starting point to the achievement of rigour and suggests peer auditing and reflexivity as practical ways of enhancing credibility.[85] Credibility is the qualitative equivalent to ensuring internal validity of a quantitative study.[86] An audit trail enhances rigour and reflexivity by demonstrating transparency throughout every stage.[87] However, reflexivity is only one aspect of a good audit trail.[88] The normative constituents of an audit trail stem from the seminal work of Guba and Lincoln who clearly differentiate the criteria for establishing trustworthiness between scientific and constructivist paradigms.[89] It presents material gathered within naturalistic enquiry in a manner that allows other researchers trace the original researcher's analysis and conclusions. Hence, I needed to justify research decisions throughout my study that are credible and transparent. These included the collection and recording of raw data and any associated synthesising material (free codes, lower and higher categories, themes and so forth). It also included process notes on methodological decisions made. According to Tina Koch, separating description from one's own interpretation is challenging.[90] She advocated keeping a field journal, which note the content and the process of interactions.[91] This is an important part of rigour in my study, capturing the duality of co-production insights in a potential meeting of horizons. Reflexive documentation develops the reliability of the entire research process.[92] More specifically, Spradley suggests four forms of field notes, some of which I included.[93] These notes were handwritten either following the conduct of particular interviews or when undertaking data analysis about my field

[84] See for example, Mason, Jennifer, *Qualitative Researching,* 2nd Edition, (London: Sage Publications, 2002).
[85] Seale, Clive, *The Quality of Qualitative Research,* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 158-160.
[86] Shenton, Andrew K, "Strategies for Ensuring Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research Projects", *Education for Information,* 22, (2004), 63-75.
[87] Hoffding *et al*, (2022), 35.
[88] Creswell, (2007).
[89] Guba, Egon G., Lincoln, Yvonna S, *Effective Evaluation: Improving the Usefulness of Evaluation Results through Responses and Naturalistic Approaches*, (San Franscisco: Jossey Bass, 1985).
[90] Koch, (1995), 827-836.
[91] Koch, Tina, "Establishing Rigour in Qualitative Research: the Decision Trail", *Journal of Advanced Nursing.* 19, (1994), 977.
[92] Flick, (2007), 16.
[93] Spradley, (1980), 69-72. Gray describes field notes as notes written when conducting interviews or observations in the field. They may include the researcher's personal comments or observations. See: Gray, (2022), 837.

observations and reflections (See appendix D). I used these notes to capture the essence of interview interactions for recall during data analysis. This facilitated clarity and accurate recall of field interactions to assure reliable interpretation of participant data.[94] For example, I documented which interviews imbued a sense of spirituality, what issues contributed to evoking this sense, and examples of interview extracts that led to a meeting of horizons. I also documented aspects of non-verbal communication post-interview for referencing when analysing particular interview data segments. A further challenge in ethnographic research is the subjectivity brought by the researcher, where discipline-related theoretical conversations may shape this subjectivity. Acknowledging that the act of interpretation is value-laden, I documented how I reflexively dealt with potential bias or prejudice. This is where I applied Valandra's model of reflexivity.[95] The key imperative here was transparency within an audit trail as it related to rigour. Transparency is an assessment of whether my method disclosed all its steps, presenting the reasons for these steps aimed at potential reproduction. A study and its findings are auditable when another researcher can clearly follow the audit trail and arrive at similar, but not contradictory conclusions based on the data.[96] In this context, my supervisor corroborated findings as suggested by hermeneutic research scholars.[97] Appendix E provides a detailed audit trail summary of my key research decisions.

The constructivist paradigm is concerned with credibility, transferability and dependability. Marguerite Sandelowski suggests that a qualitative study is credible when it presents description or interpretation of a human experience, immediately recognizable to study participants.[98] Ethnographic research critics

[94] Barroso J, "Introduction to Qualitative Research", in *Nursing Research Methods and Critical Appraisal for Evidence-Based Practice,* 7th edition, edited by G. LoBiondo-Wood G. & J. Haber, (Mosby Elsevier: St. Louis Missouri, (2010), 85-99.
[95]Valandra, V, "Reflexivity and Professional Use of Self in Research: A Doctoral Student's Journey", *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research,* 6 (4), (2012), 204-220. Valandra's model emanated from his phenomenological doctoral study of African American mothers' experiences of sexual mistreatment, and how those experiences influence their child rearing practices within an extended family system.
[96] Sandelowski, Marguerite, "The Problem of Rigour in Qualitative Research", *Advances in Nursing Sciences,* 8: 3, (1986), 27-37.
[97] For example, Whitehead, l, "Enhancing the Quality of Hermeneutic Research: Decision Trail", *Journal of Advanced Nursing,* 4 (5), (2003), 512-518.
[98] Sandelowski, (1986), 27-37.

argue that findings lack these criteria.[99] Within qualitative methodology, the meaning of terms such as validity and reliability are "complex, confused and contested."[100] For example, hermeneutic phenomenologists establish their own criteria for trustworthiness of research.[101] Validity, reliability and objectivity are generic qualitative criteria, not sufficiently developed to evaluate the subjective nature of ethnographic research specifically.[102] Normatively, qualitative researchers return transcripts to participants for 'member checking', the technical research term for this process. However, as there is no decree in interpretive research to verify or generalise findings,[103] I omitted this step due to its contested nature and on the basis that I am not seeking to make findings generalizable.

6.10 Chapter summary

Following the presupposition that reality and knowledge are socially constructed,[104] this chapter discussed my use of an interpretive theoretical lens, embracing as it does holistic and subjective data, based on the assumption that multiple worldviews co-exist. Through this lens, I attempted to gain understanding of experiences and perceptions through exploration, observation, and interpretation of how young individuals uniquely sense, reason, think and behave regarding religion and spirituality. I emphasised critical research process issues in my quest to achieving quality and rigour in my task as bricoleur entering into constructive, critical dialogues allowing for a potential meeting or fusion of horizons. The key point of this chapter was to identify transparently how I produced a robust piece of analysis through my chosen strategy.

The next chapter presents and discusses my quantitative findings.

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[99] Gray, (2022), 490.
[100] Hoffding *et al*, (2022), 35.
[101] Koch, (1995), 832.
[102] Norlyck and Harder, (2010), 420-31.
[103] Webb, C, "Editor's Note: Introduction to Guidelines on Reporting Qualitative Research", *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 42: 6, (2003), 544-45. Also, McConnell-Henry, Tracy, Chapman, Ysanne, Francis, Karen, "Member Checking and Heideggerian Phenomenology: A Redundant Component", *Nurse Researcher*, 18: 2, 2011), 28-37.
[104] Berger, Peter L, Luckmann, Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1966).

Chapter 7: Quantitative Findings

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from phase one that sought to elicit quantitative grounding data regarding young people's perceptions of religion/spirituality, the metaphysical world around them, and the ontology of their daily experiences. Following description of my survey instrument, I present data (n=178) mostly in the form of bar charts and tables copied from the Google Forms questionnaire, followed by analysis of these data. I present and discuss the qualitative data captured in the free-text (write-in) sections of the questionnaire in the next chapter in the context of themes and sub-themes.

7.2 Survey instrument

As stated, the quantitative element constitutes a subordinate, albeit important element of the overall study. Following draft iterations of the questionnaire that applied sensitivity to wording and format, I piloted it with a small number of respondents to ensure that questions were unambiguous, user-friendly and ensure that the questionnaire was capable of completion within a 15-20 minute timeframe. I corrected areas of ambiguity noted and amended some sections. As stated, most questions targeted all respondents, whereas some specifically targeted Roman Catholics. I used tick boxes, 5-point Likert scale type statements,[1] and short qualitative options to allow participants to elaborate on answers where appropriate. A frequently encountered consideration in social survey opinion questions is whether to offer the choice of a middle option denoting a neutral response when using scales.[2] I included this option on the basis that the option to express no opinion was relevant for some questions.[3] In the study introduction/instruction/consent section, I asked participants to indicate their responses by ticking one box only unless the question prompt stated otherwise.

[1] The range is from 'strongly disagree' (1) to' strongly agree' (5) with 3 denoting no opinion.
[2] See: Kalton, G. Roberts, Julie, Holt, D, "The Effects of Offering a Middle Response Option with Opinion Questions," *The Statistician,* 29:1, (1980), 65-78.
[3] For example to the statement, "*Jesus Christ is God's son*."

7.3 Issues of consent

In my introduction, I outlined the nature of the study and an acknowledgement of my responsibility to adhere to the ethical parameters decreed by both the Irish Data Protection Commissioner and University Research Ethics Committee who approved my study together with contact details of both these bodies should respondents have any issues or concerns. I reassured them that I would treat all data confidentially, that they would be pseudo-anonymised to ensure no data link to personal identities.

Paramount to any researcher's attempt to add new findings is the need to contextualise a study within previously conducted research. The next section briefly recaps on the most significant influences shaping my questionnaire. I attempted to construct a bespoke, fit for purpose questionnaire while incorporating appropriate questions and scales from other studies, making amendments to suit an Irish context.[4] While my questionnaire did not set out to replicate studies, it allows for comparison and contrast with previous international research.

7.4 Recap of influences on questionnaire construction

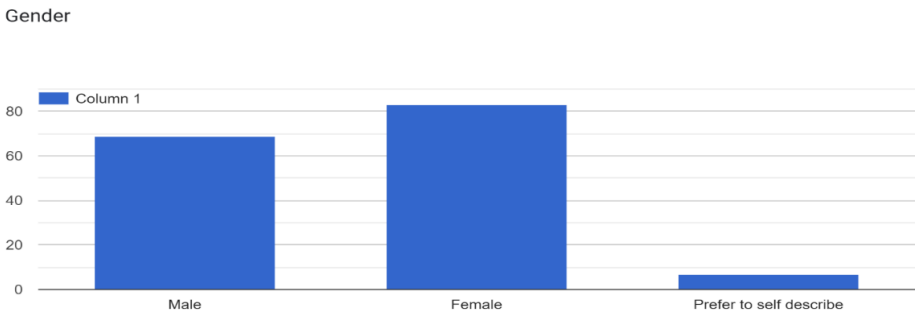
As outlined in my literature review, a number of scholars have explored my topics in different contexts. The major studies consulted were Palmisano's empirical investigation of Italians' distinction between religion and spirituality using the four-category, two-by-two typology. Zinnbauer *et al* also used Palmisano's typology in their US study. Marler and Hadaway's survey methodology also used cluster analysis of 'being religious' or 'being spiritual' before qualitatively exploring the constructs meaning. Hérvieu-Leger's validation of faith thesis influenced the questions that attempted to ascertain the nature of spirituality quests in addition to questions on holistic activities/practices.[5] Studies discussed in my literature review in an Irish context prompted other questions, notably Inglis' reporting of findings from the *CII* study, in addition to Andersen's reporting of the findings from the C&R study.

[4] This negates the requirement to statistically test for issues such as Cronbach's Alpha, internal consistency and content validity.
[5]Hervieu-Léger, (2000), 166.

Other influences were Glendinning and Bruce's Scottish study of spirituality and Day's empirical ethnography of young people's construction of belief in the U.K. Swinton and Mowat's research with marginalized people influenced one of my questions. I also based some questions on the religious belief and self-descriptor instruments described in appendix A. The following sections present my survey findings. A link to the survey can be accessed here PhD Survey (google.com).[6] I begin with a brief profile of my sample.

7.5 Profile of respondents

Of the 178 individual responses, 77 (44%) were male, 92 (52%) female, and 8 (4%) preferred to self-describe, represented in the bar chart below.



My sample represented most age categories of the defined demographic with an even spread between the ages of 18-39. The majority of respondents were in their early 20's (for example, 22 were in the 20 age bracket, 17 in 21, 10 in 22, with a spike of 12 in 36 year olds).

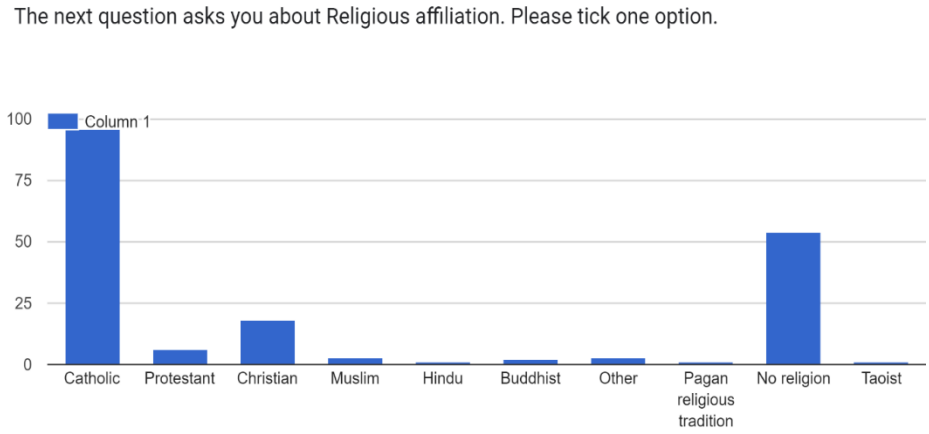
7.6 Religious affiliation and worship beliefs

The first major section sought to elicit data on religious affiliation/non-affiliation in order to represent theistic, atheistic and other nonreligious worldviews.[7] Davie's *Believing without Belonging* and Ammerman's *Belonging without Believing* concepts prompted these questions. I included all the major world

[6] http://docs.google.com/form/d/15mcdu7omgimvdxiau91d7eaujmrfnco67zt9Zhiqsg0/viewform?

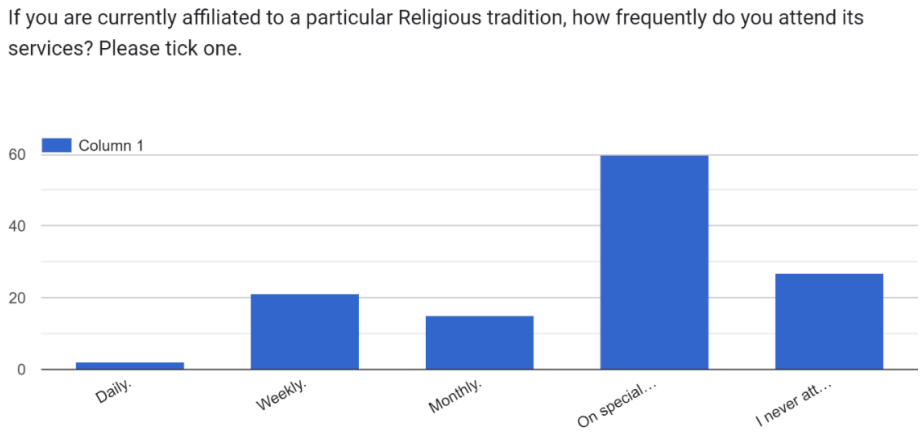
[7] Based on the first wave of the ESS undertaken during 2002/2003.

religions in addition to the 'no religion' category in the tick-box options as the bar chart below identifies.



Respondents represented all traditions with the exception of Judaism.[8] The majority, 96 (54%) self-identified as Roman Catholic, while a significant 54 (30%) self-identified as having no religion. I provided this cohort with three options of nonreligious self-identification. These were atheist, agnostic and secular humanist. Data revealed that 22 (32%) self-identified as atheist, 38 (59%) agnostic and 10 (15%) as secular humanist. I then asked respondents to denote one of three options regarding religious affiliation: whether they never belonged to a religious tradition, previously belonged but no longer do or currently belong. Of my sample, 12 (7%) never belonged to a religious tradition. A larger number, 66 (37.5%) previously belonged but no longer do. The majority, however, 102 (58%) were currently affiliated to Roman Catholicism. I included questions aimed at eliciting perceptions on nominal religious affiliation.[9] I included a 5-point option to elicit the degree to which respondents displayed commitment to their religious tradition by attending its services. These options were 'daily,' 'weekly,' 'monthly,' 'on special occasions' and 'never.' The bar chart below presents these data.

[8] Chart 2 does not capture the option of Judaism. However, the tradition was included in the question options.
[9] Abby Day's 'nominal' religious affiliation thesis influenced this question.



A significant finding was that the majority of my sample, 60 (34%) attend services on special occasions only, while 27 (15%) never attend.

Another question asked respondents to denote which (if any) service they attended the previous weekend. The findings here were:

	No. of respondents	% of respondents
I attended a service relating to my religious tradition	21	13%
I attended a service in person	16	10%
I attended a service virtually - webcam, online etc.	5	3%
I did not attend any service	133	80%
I did not attend any service last weekend but when I do I prefer to attend online	2	1.2%*[10]
I did not attend last weekend, but I normally do	3	1.8%

The next section posed two separate questions to elicit respondent perceptions regarding whether religion is a private or public affair.

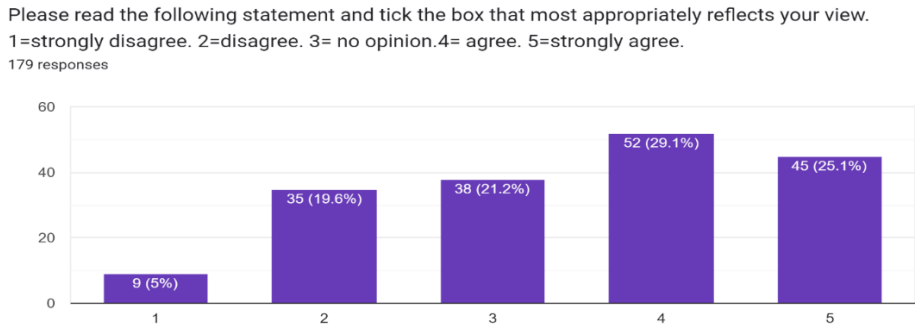
[10] I included a section on participant preferences to attend services virtually, using the internet for any kind of religious or spiritual communication. The response rate to this question was small at 13.5% of the total sample. The responses, evenly spread, related mainly to using online accessibility to services during the Covid-19 pandemic, as I distributed the questionnaire shortly following the pandemic.

7.7 perceptions of religion as a private or public affair

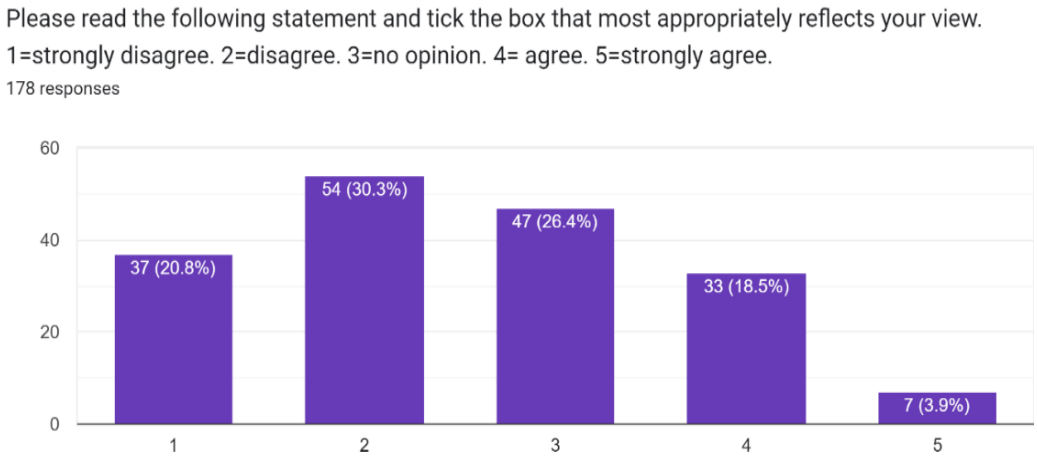
The self-referential nature of religious/ spiritual experience prompted this section.[11] I was interested in whether younger people view religion as something expressed privately or alternatively in a public way through community ritual. I posed two questions consecutively that sought to elicit these views. Most of my sample perceived religion as a private affair as the following bar charts demonstrate.

Statement:

Religion is a private affair and does not need to be expressed by adhering to a specific religious tradition



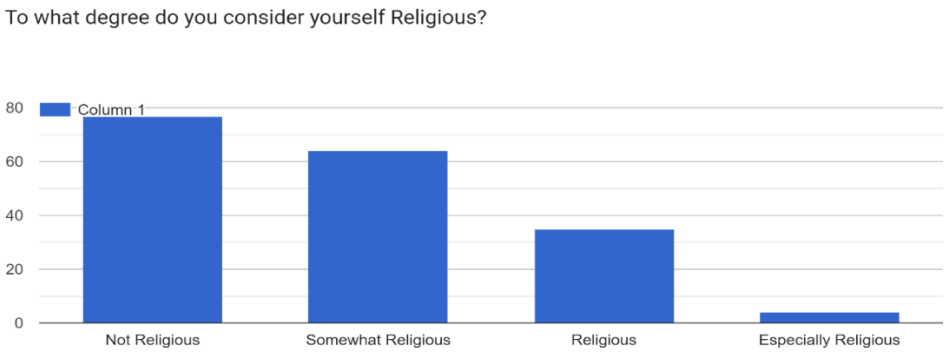
Statement: *Religion is a public affair to be expressed in a specific religious tradition*



[11] Hervieu-Léger, (2000), 166.

7.8 The interrelation of spirituality and religion

This major section sought to elicit respondent perceptions of the interrelation of spirituality to religion by a number of questions posed iteratively. Firstly, I sought responses to two 4-point option columns according to the degree to which respondents considered themselves spiritual (options were not, somewhat, spiritual and especially spiritual.)[12] Using a similar 4-point option format, I then asked respondents to denote the degree to which they considered themselves or religious. The following bar charts presents the questions and findings.



Data revealed that the majority (76%) considered themselves as 'somewhat spiritual' (39%) or 'spiritual' (37%). Only 20% of the sample considered themselves as 'religious,' 43% did not consider themselves as religious, with 34% self-identifying as 'somewhat religious.' Probing this issue further, I asked participants to choose from one of four statements that best defined their own religiousness and spirituality according to the two-by-two typology, (1) neither

[12] Zinnbauer *et al* posed similar questions.

religious nor spiritual (2) religious, but not spiritual (3) spiritual, but not religious (4) both spiritual and religious.

The following table captures these data.[13]

Both spiritual and religious	69
Spiritual, but not religious[14]	50

I then asked respondents to choose one among five sets of options that best described the ways in which they believed that the concepts of religiousness and spirituality interrelate, as presented in the box below:

Spirituality is a broader concept than religion and includes religion.	57 (32%)
Religion is a broader concept than spirituality and includes spirituality.	
Religion and spirituality are different and do not overlap.	
Religion and spirituality are the same concept and overlap completely.	
Religion and spirituality overlap but they are not the same concept.	95 (54%)

I asked respondents to denote what the word 'spirituality' meant to them in the next question. I present these data in tabular form below, as the bar chart did not include the full statement options when copied from Google forms.

To strive for a state of harmony and inner peace.	87
To seek the meaning of life.	56
To strive for holism of mind, body and spirit.	80
To seek to be a good person.	51
To believe in God and follow His teachings.	19
To help and give time to others.	24
To be able to distinguish between right and wrong.	26
To believe in a higher, transcendent power.	54
To affirm a sense of personal worth.	41

[13] Google Forms failed to copy responses to the other two categories of the typology.
[14] This typology is based on Palmisano's study which in turn was based on the one used by Garelli *et al*. Zinnbauer *et al* also used this typology in their study.

To go to Church and follow its expectations.	3

These findings suggest that respondents appeared to perceive spirituality more in terms of moral uprightness, holism, inner peace and meaning. This is in contrast to the two lower rates relating to belief in God, his teachings, or Church. A number of questions attempted to elicit whether respondents linked spirituality with Church or God or alternatively to personal experience. I posed iterative questions that attempted to elicit meanings respondents attached to the word spiritual. These options sought views on theistic spirituality (God, religious practices, tradition, belief), extra-theistic spirituality concerned with personal worth, meaning, morality, self and 'Belief and Belonging' spirituality (mystery).

A major section posed a number of questions that sought to elicit participants' beliefs about God. I thematically present the responses in the next section.

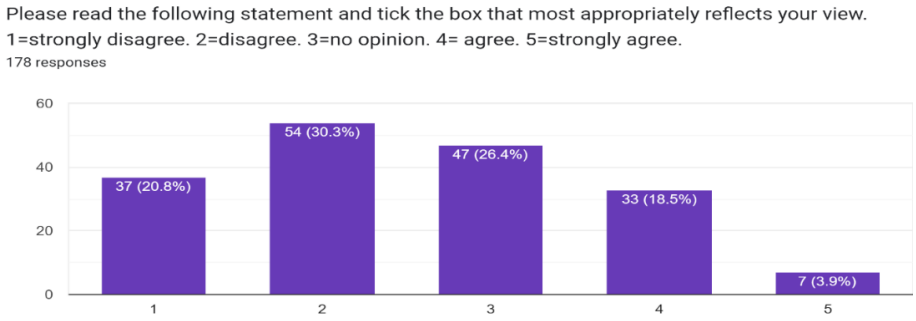
7.9 Beliefs about God, Jesus, life after death and the bible

Firstly, I asked respondents to tick one from six available options that came closest to their beliefs about the existence of God. The following were the options with the number of responses converted into percentages in brackets:

	No. of respondents	% of respondents
I believe that God does not exist	26	15%
I have no interest in whether God exists or not	22	15%
I believe in a higher power or life force, but not God	39	22%
I believe in God from time to time	20	11%
I believe in God with some doubt	40	23%
I believe in God without any doubt	35	20%

An interesting finding here was that a significant number of respondents believed in a higher power or life force, but not God. Another 5-point scale question sought to elicit view on the extent to which God and organised religion were important in the lives of respondents, presented in the chart below.

Statement: *God and organized religion are important in my life at the moment*

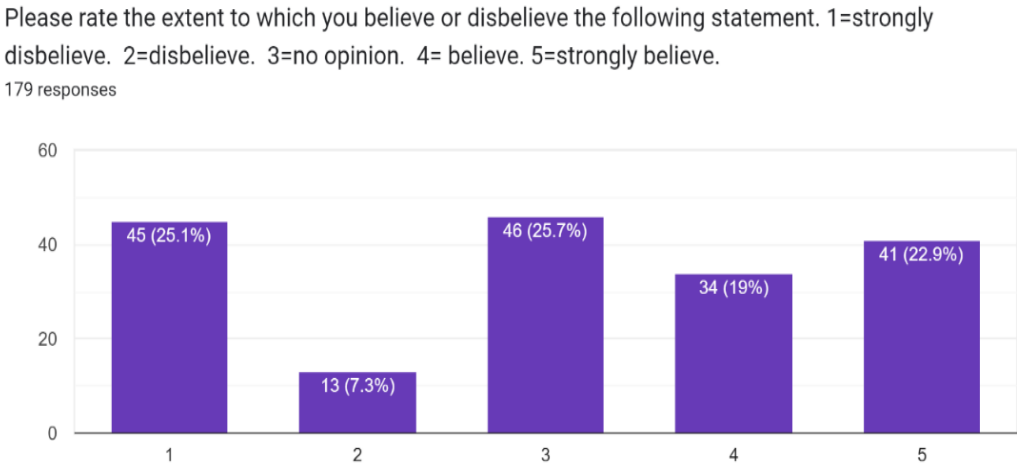


Data revealed that 79.5% either strongly disagreed, disagreed or held no opinion regarding the importance God and organised religion (represented in columns 1-3 in the bar chart). Probing this issue further, I asked respondents to choose one option among six statements about the existence of God.[15]

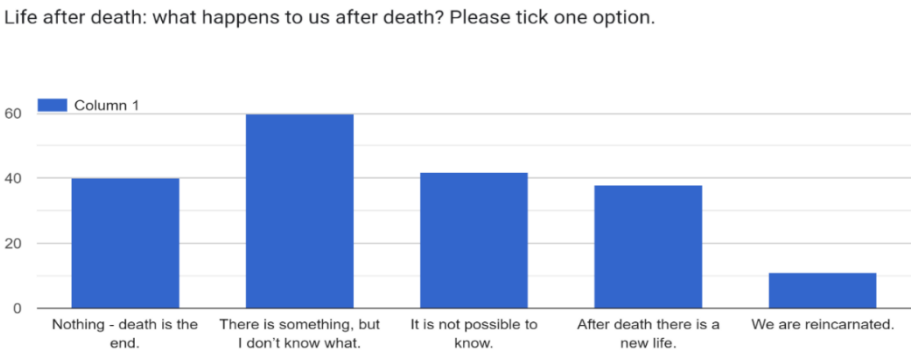
I believe in a personal relationship with God	45
I believe in a higher power or life force	32
I believe God is one with the soul and nature	19
I don't believe in any kind of God or life force	24
I really don't know what to believe	29
I believe in there is something out there*[16]	25

[15] RAMP 1998 data influenced the statement options relating to belief in a personal relationship with God, a higher power or life force and so forth.
[16] I added the statement "*I believe there is something out there*" to the RAMP 1998 questionnaire.

I used a 5-point Likert scale to elicit responses to the statement *Jesus Christ is God's Son.*



Thus, 58.1% either strongly disagreed, disagreed or held no opinion regarding this statement (columns 1, 2 and 3). The next question sought responses to the question *what comes after death*?[17] The following bar chart denotes the options:

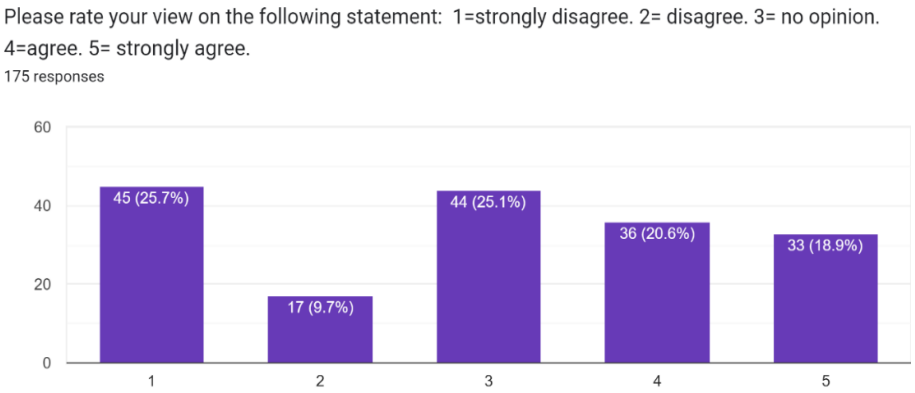


The majority (60) considered that 'There is something, but I don't know what' (60). Responses were evenly spread between 'Nothing – death is the end' (40), and 'It is not possible to know' (42), with 38 respondents believing that 'After death there is new life.' A small number believed that 'We are reincarnated.'

[17] I included these questions because of the interesting findings from Palmisano's study.

The next Likert scale question sought to elicit responses to the statement *God is everywhere and within everything*.[18]

Data revealed that 64.6% of my sample either strongly disagreed, disagreed or held no opinion in response to this statement (columns 1, 2 and 3).



The next question asked respondents to tick one response to three statements relating to their beliefs about the Bible.[19] The three statements were,

Statement 1 – *The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken word for word.*

Statement 2 – *The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally.*

Statement 3 – *The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by human beings.*

Data revealed that only 2.38% of my sample believed that the Bible is the actual word of God, 39% believed that it is the inspired word of God, whereas 58% considered it an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by human beings.

As some of my questions specifically targeted Roman Catholics, I sought to elicit views of how Catholicism relates to social/personal identity.[20]

[18] This question is an amendment of one posed by Paul Heelas (Heelas, 2007, 1-28), and one posed by Zinnbauer *et al* regarding '*Belief about God items*.'
[19] This question is based on one used in the GSS, Cited in Burge, (2021), 8.
[20] I amended a question from the '2018 Religion1V Questionnaire for the International Survey Programme,' (country amended to 'Ireland). Source: A compilation of documents used to develop the 2018 Religion1V questionnaire for the International Survey Programme. See:

7.10 Catholicism and social/personal identity

I presented a menu of options (tabulated here, as copying from Google Forms did not capture the full text statement of each option), with response percentages included:

I am Catholic although I do not attend any services	32%
Catholicism still an important part of Irish life	32%
Belonging to Catholicism is an ethnic/cultural rather than religious membership	14%
Catholicism is no longer of any importance as part of the Irish way of life	7%
Regarding oneself as Catholic but not engaging in its traditions/rituals is hypocritical	8%
Although I do not consider myself Catholic, I occasionally attend Catholic services for special events	10%

Data revealed that a large percentage of respondents no longer attend services but continue to self-identify as Catholic, and that Catholicism remains an important part of Irish life. I included questions eliciting Catholic beliefs about heaven and hell. The statements were as follows:

Statement 1 – *I believe in heaven as understood by the Roman Catholic tradition.*

Statement 2 – *I do not believe in heaven.*

Statement 3 - *I believe in hell as understood by the Roman Catholic tradition.*

Statement 4 - *I do not believe in hell.*

Sixty-six percent of respondents believed in heaven, while 38% did not believe in hell.[21]

The next section, open to all respondents, discusses findings that sought to elicit perceptions of holistic, New Age practices, mysticism and AW.

Smith, (2020). Voas's subgroup categorical classification from Day's work of Natal, Christian and Aspirational nomalists also influenced these questions.

[21] Palmisano used these questions in the Italian Religious and Spiritual Project. Findings from the Irish *CII* qualitative study cited earlier which explored how people construct and act upon their identities in contemporary Ireland were sources for some of the other questions.

7.11 Holistic practices, mysticism, AW

One of my research aims was to elicit whether my sample construed spirituality in religious terms or as something beyond the ontology of daily experiences. I was interested in whether respondents connected these practices/phenomena to either religion or spirituality, or alternatively with health, personal development and wellness as some literature suggests. I elicited perceptions by means of a 9-option menu which respondents could tick all that apply. The following table presents respondents reasons for participation in these activities. As respondents (106) could tick all that apply, it is impossible to calculate percentages.

Cultural enrichment/interest in other ways of life	18
Spiritual growth reasons	30
Curiosity	36
Hoping to meet new people of similar interests	10
Overcoming stress	65
General health and wellness	64
Overcoming a difficult life event	24
Fun	23
Search for personal authenticity	14

I then asked respondents their experiences (if any) of a presence or power outside normal everyday experience. My interest was in ascertaining whether respondents linked these experiences to forms of sacralities. The majority of respondents answered that they did not have such experiences. I then asked if respondents engaged in one or more of the following menu of options within the past year: Yoga, mindfulness, reiki, aromatherapy, shiatsu, transcendental meditation, shiatsu, Zen, or other practices. I further attempted to elicit whether respondents read texts or participated in meetings on Eastern religions, philosophies and spiritualties. I sought data regarding whether Yoga, mindfulness and other wellness practices link to religious or spiritual dimensions. Data revealed that only 8.62% of the sample regarded wellness practices as having a religious association, while the majority (54.91%) associated them with spirituality. I included an option menu to elicit the reasons

why respondents partook in these activities. The majority partook to improve general health and wellness (61.34%), while 58.82% partook specifically to overcome stress and break up life's routine. Over thirty-five percent of the sample participated out of curiosity and 28.57% participated for spiritual growth reasons. I included questions on engagement in horoscopes, astrology, fortune telling and tarot reading. Sixty-four percent of respondents engaged in horoscopes, 61% in astrology and 53% in fortune telling /tarot.[22] I asked if respondents had consulted a psychic or card-reader. Twenty-five percent of respondents had, while 75% had not. Then I asked if respondents believed that spiritual energy could come from physical objects.[23] Forty-two percent of respondents answered yes, while 58% answered no.

I included the mysticism, AW section to elicit responses relating to the dimension of affectivity and emotion. Palmisano outlined how the dimension of affectivity and emotion is where one can experience a profound and immediate unity with all that is absolute.[24] Almost sixty-two percent of participants responded that they had experienced AW with a further 22.41% indicating that they possibly had. Asked if they thought the experience related to God/gods, 51.33% did not, while 31.33% considered this a possibility. An option to provide a short qualitative answer for those respondents who related the experience to God/gods followed. These qualitative data are included in the next section along with content analysis of the other free-text, write-in data.

The next subsection provides a rationale for not including specific questions on the Irish CSA scandals in my research instruments.

[22] Only 64 individuals responded to this question.
[23]Glendinning and Bruce posed similar questions in their 2006 Scottish study of spirituality.
[24] This dimension of affectivity closely relates to a Hood and Chen's definition of numinous experiences as "an awareness of a holy other beyond nature with which one is felt to be in communion." See: Hood and Chen, Zhuo, "Mystical, Spiritual and Religious Experiences," in *The Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. Edited by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, (The Guildford Press, 2005), 348-364.

7.12 Rationale for not including direct questions on CSA in research instruments

One could argue that any exploration of religious and spiritual perceptions of young people living in Ireland should include direct questions on the CSA scandals that rocked Irish Catholicism in the 1990s and 2000s. However, it is important to state that the demographic from which I elicited data (18-39 year-olds) largely constituted a generation removed from public discourse about the scandals. Most of the millennial age bracket were born around or post that period, while those in the mid to upper 30s age brackets would have been minors. However, my primary reason for not including direct questions was that I considered it highly unlikely that either/both the Irish Data Protection Commissioner and University Research Ethics Committee would have approved the study had I included such questions. I based this decision on analysis of the other types of questions that these ethical governance bodies did not permit. For example, the parameters which they set precluded the use of a gatekeeper (a standard method of accessing participants in fieldwork), because of the danger of a breach of General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).[25] Additionally, I had to justify how I would prevent the possibility of identity revelation by means of reverse social engineering in email exchanges with potential interview volunteer participants. In my view, direct CSA questions would have necessitated a different category of ethics application because of the sensitivity involved. The issue essentially related to the support services available for participants regarding circumstances of disclosure in a research context of issues such as abuse. The university code of good research practice guided my research.[26] For example, in response to an email query to the university research office regarding support services to participants, I received the following reply,

> *Please note that we would not centrally specify what support services are available for research participants. The appropriate support services would be determined by the research being conducted and the specific needs of your intended research cohort.*

[25] Their rationale was that a gatekeeper would know the identity of participants by virtue of access to their email accounts.
[26] Version 2.0, dated 21/10/2021 which does not appear to specify support services for research participants.

In my ethics application, I stated that the intended study population were not categorised as a vulnerable group, and that,

> *Because my study poses no greater risk to participants other than one encounters in everyday life, I consider that my project does not require additional support* (section 3.6).

I stated that in the unlikely event of a participant becoming distressed or overwhelmed during interviews, I would terminate them immediately. I stated that if I encountered situations where I deemed interviewees in need of counselling services that I would provide them with the option of speaking to someone at the university's chaplaincy services (who support people of faith and those with no faith) to whom I would send a referral with their permission. If they were unwilling to avail of that option, I stated that that I would advise them to consult their GP for counselling services. I emphasized that the well-being of participants would take precedence over data collection.

In short, I made the research decision that including direct questions on CSA constituted a special category and fell outside the ethical approval granted. In this regard, the letter of ethics approval states,

> Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application (see appendix J).

However, it is important to state that I did not attempt to evade the issue of CSA. Rather, based on interview experience, I made the research decision to allow a participant-led approach to the issue. My approach facilitated a strategy where the issue would not dominate the interview discourses. Questions specifically relating to Catholicism in both my questionnaire and interview guide provided scope for participants to express their views on this or any other issue. In my first case study (Liam) in section 8.4, for example, my indirect approach to this issue yielded rich data. Although one can never predict the outcome of qualitative interviews, I held the view that that questions on CSA in the context of a study on perceptions of contemporary religion and spirituality were unlikely to yield meaningful data, bearing in mind the age group. Additionally, I considered that posing direct questions on CSA could potentially hamper circumspect qualitative discussion of issues of contemporary importance to Catholic participants. Instead of directly asking, *please, what are your views on*

the Catholic clerical sex abuse scandals in Ireland? Alternatively, *please, in your view, have the Catholic clerical sex abuse scandals in Ireland damaged the trust of young people?* I considered it more appropriate to ask a general question, *please, in your view, what mistakes, if any, have the Irish Catholic Church made in recent history?* An example from my data where this approach was successful is my interview with Liam (case study 1) and the excerpt from Colin when discussing religion and Irish ethno-identity. Rather than posing a direct question regarding his perceptions of sectarianism while growing up in a town straddling the Republic and Northern Ireland, my line of questioning yielded rich data on this topic. Thus, I was not steering him in a specific direction, while keeping open the potential for data generation on this issue.[27] A further issue of concern was the possibility, however unlikely, of iatrogenesis.[28] Thus, I made a deliberate research decision to avoid or mitigate any potential harm or side effect to any participant by directly asking or probing questions that might potentially bring unprocessed traumatic experiences to surface. I based this research decision on previous experience of qualitative interviewing, conducted with a vulnerable population and their families who had experience of mental health challenges.

The next section provides a brief analysis of my key quantitative findings.

7.13 Analysis of quantitative data

Quantitative data revealed interesting findings with surprises and some contradictions. These data essentially speak for themselves. Overall, they suggested a drift from organised, institutional religion to forms of spirituality. As outlined, 30% of my sample self-identified as having no religion, with the majority in this category self-identifying as atheist. Of the two-by-two typology, respondents mostly self-identified in the *Spiritual but not Religious* category.

[27] This is an important skill I learned as part of a research team already discussed. Prior to that, as part of my nurse management skills development and CPD, I undertook various training courses on skilled interviewing. Whereas I undertook this work mainly in the realm of recruitment, retention or promotion of staff to higher grades, the principles of ascertaining accurate and valid modes of thinking apply to qualitative research, in my view.

[28] This is a medical term referring to the unintentional induction of an unwanted side effect by a physician or surgeon's words or therapy. It can also be an issue in a research context. For example, when researching issues such as depression in young people there is a danger that one can unintentionally implant the idea of suicidality. This was a consideration in previous interdisciplinary research with a vulnerable group in which I partook.

The majority of my sample (76%) considered themselves as either somewhat spiritual or spiritual, while only 20% considered themselves as religious. Data also revealed low levels of attendance at religious services for those affiliated to Roman Catholicism. Thirty four percent of my sample attended religious services for special events or occasions only, while 15% never attend. My sample perceived religion as a private rather than public affair, with 54.2% agreeing or strongly agreeing that it is a matter of private expression. The question eliciting views on the extent to which God and organised religion are important in the lives of respondents revealed that 71.7% of my sample either strongly disagreed, disagreed or held no opinion regarding their importance. It appears that an experiential, self-referential spirituality is growing that is not associated with Church or God but based largely on personal experience and a quest for personal development and wellness. In this regard, data revealed a high engagement among the sample in a wellness culture, mainly Yoga, but also a wide range of holistic activities. Their main motivations for engagement appeared to be an improvement or maintenance of mental health and wellness, overcoming stress, as opposed to spiritual seeking/growth reasons. My sample did not appear to make any connection between holistic milieu activities and religion.. A key theme to emerge from the free-text qualitative sections is an attraction to Buddhist philosophy, particularly its meditative aspect, strive for enlightenment, inner peace, karma, loving kindness, focus on the individual, inclusivity, understanding and care for the earth. They also appeared to regard the Islamic commitment involved during Ramadan as attractive.[29] I discuss these findings in the context of one of the themes emerging from my qualitative data in chapter 8.

The next chapter presents and discusses my qualitative findings. This is where the substantive qualitative aspect of my triangulated study becomes highly relevant, setting out as it does to look behind statistics to focus on personal conviction qualitatively. My main objective is to demonstrate how a young demographic think deeply about spirituality in a post-Catholic Ireland. While

[29] Whereas some respondents may have completed my questionnaire during the later period of Ramadan (March 22 – April 20, 2023), none of my interviews were conducted during this time.

presenting an aggregated view of the most important findings, my overall aim is to respect and honour the uniqueness of each participant's story.

Chapter 8: Qualitative Findings

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

- T. S. Eliot, No 4 of Four Quartets, 1943.

8.1 Introduction

Congruent with my thematic analysis framework, this chapter presents and discusses data findings by means of generating themes and sub-themes following open coding and categorization of the large volume of data collected. Cohering with Tracy's theme of human experiences as a valid source of theological insights in addition to Practical Theology's underpinnings, I read and present data organically through these prisms, inserting significant participant statements to exemplify and contextualise particular themes together with my own analysis and assessment of their significance. Particularly relevant are Tracy's arguments discussed in chapter 1.3 for correlating sociological and theological understandings of the reality of the Church. This involves exploring the spectrum of possible relationships between Church and the world of young people and their complex interrelationship, so that the radical pluralism of paradigms on what constitutes theology as a discipline and thereby on its public character is likely to occur. My approach also reflects Gadamer's trust in conversation for hermeneutical reflection not only for questions of aesthetic meaning but also for the question of an adequate strategy for societal praxis. Hence, offering modes of analysis to explore the meaning of young people's common human experiences as theological sources completes the hermeneutic circle, where interview segments relate to the whole and the whole in relation to the parts.

Before presenting findings, there are some stylistic points to note regarding my approach to using direct quotations. In an attempt to enhance rigour and adhere to social science academic conventions, I use verbatim,[1] data extracts in some

[1] Verbatim means to use exactly the same words as another. In transcribing for legal or court proceedings, verbatim transcripts are the accepted standard for the highest level of accurate speech transcription. Hence, I researched and engaged a transcription company who specialise

cases accompanied by my own commentary of their significance. Some of the extracts include long quotations, characteristic of phenomenological interviews. This ensures that my choice of direct quotations is objective and free from bias or personal opinions with regard to some of the more important interview aspects, in an attempt to convey the illustrative message from first-person perspectives. In these cases, I insert extracts that convey the interaction between participants and me as researcher. These assist the reader access the 'look and feel' of the data, conveying a true reflection of the emotionality of experiences conveyed by participants in some situations.[2] An example of my approach is an extract portraying a participant's reaction to seeing the Roman Colosseum for the first time in the context of AW. She exclaimed in amazement at what she witnessed "…the Colosseum, *like*… the Colosseum…"[3] In my view, the word "like" here is important to include verbatim, as my description would not convey the emotionality involved. Hence, I use verbatim quotations judiciously, conscious of the need to avoid what one academic researcher refers to as the "data dump," where minimal narrative explanation accompanies a string of verbatim quotations.[4] In these cases I filter unnecessary words and stutters (including my own) to enhance navigation of text. In other situations, I paraphrase or summarise participant narratives instead of quoting text verbatim. In short, my aim is to present a true reflection of participant perceptions as narrative without over-using verbatim quotations. Because of the large volume of data collected, I undertook assessment and evaluation of the most important data, using particular interview extracts that best exemplified the emerging themes, rather than presenting all interviews as equally valid and relevant. However, I concur with Nicholas Healy's suggestion that ethnographic data analysis and subsequent writing up in textual order is "concretely confused and

in legal work, and who supplied legal testimonies from barristers attesting to the precision and quality of their work.

[2] This does not suggest that I am prioritising the value of these data over others. It is to capture specific nuances of particular units of data more intensely.

[3] See excerpts from my interview with 'Ria' later in this chapter. Another example relates to when 'Abby' described her epiphany moment in adoration of the Eucharist.

[4] Thorne, Sally, "On the Use and Abuse of Verbatim Quotations in Qualitative Research Reports", *Nurse Author and Editor*, 30: 3, (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, (2020), 5.

messy."[5] In that sense, some of the themes and sub-themes 'bleed' into each other.

Heimbrock's argument that case studies are appropriate to grasp lived religious experience (and spiritual in my view) developed in qualitative empirical research influences my decision to include two case study extracts. These are essentially intensive analysis of particular data segments. His argument that description and interpretation of a single case leads to fuller understanding is, in my view, reflected in the juxtaposition of a contrasting Catholic and secular humanist worldview. In these cases, I quote verbatim segments to capture the exact spoken word and the flow of narrative, while eliminating stutters. This applies when participants make points of special significance, where I may interrupt or not convey the meaning of the narrative by paraphrase or summary. It is also important to reiterate my awareness of the need for self-reflection and subjectivity in data interpretation in a project in which I was actively involved. Reimer-Barry advocates not limiting self-reflection to the power dynamics within the interview setting itself but extending it to data interpretation, and indeed, to the entire research journey. She suggests that this involves reflection on surprises, challenges and confusion arising from the project, arguing that one should not simply be self-referential by constantly "inserting" oneself into the analysis.[6] Thus, the issue of reflexivity and the points made in my autoethnography, and reflexivity sections have direct resonance here in the writing stage. Because my subjective experiences arise out of a specific social context, the dynamics of power or privilege discussed in that chapter are important to extend to the interpretation of data. In short, there is a need for subjectivity in a project in which I am actively involved as bricoleur.

[5] Healy, Nicholas M, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God: An Interplay of Reality Descriptions", In: *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Edited by Pete Ward, (W.B Eerdmans: Grand Rapids: Michigan, 2012), 187. Frances Ward outlines how studying congregations' generally using ethnography is "messy." See Ward, Frances. 'The Messiness of Studying Congregations Using Ethnographic Methods', in *Congregational Studies in the UK*. Edited by M. Guest, K. Trusting, and L. Woodhead. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).
[6] Reimer-Barry, (2011), 101.

8.2 Qualitative sample description

The qualitative data set comprises 22 interviews conducted between June-October 2023. The average duration of interviews was approximately 50 minutes (shortest 26 minutes, longest 115). The longest interview yielded rich data on holistic and New Age spirituality practices and in my view represents a theoretical construction of an ideal case, thus, it forms the basis of my second case study. My sample clustered mainly around 19-22 year old, urban dwelling, early stage college students in addition to young professionals in their late 20s or early to mid-late 30's. I also interviewed a small number of people living in border areas to capture an urban-rural divide. Of my sample, one is of African origin living in Ireland since childhood, one a student from another West European country now living in Ireland, while the remaining are Irish born citizens.

In the next sections, I discuss my major themes and sub-themes, highlighting the most important aspects of interviews. Following each theme, I provide a short summary, together with my evaluation and assessment of the data. The key criteria applied was the extent to which the data presented reflected those from the entire data set, and the extent to which they illuminated how young people think deeply about spirituality in contemporary Ireland.

8.3 Theme 1: Participant perceptions of religion and spirituality

The views that current conceptions of religion and spirituality as constructs "are nothing if not diverse"[7] are borne out in this theme. Data chime with the assertion that no single perspective dominates modern culture, but rather multiple perspectives simultaneously exist.[8] These data reveal a wide spectrum of religious and spiritual worldviews, congruent with one of Practical Theology's underpinning theses. In general, terms, it appears that young people living in Ireland embed in what one-scholar terms a "mosaic of communities with a pluralism of identities and worldviews."[9] Key findings confirm evidence of an apparent cultural shift from organised, institutional religion to more self-

[7] Zinnbauer *et al*, (1997), 549.
[8] Hood *et al*, (1996).
[9] Tedlock, (2005), 69 -94.

referential spiritual practices, reflected in my quantitative data. As outlined in chapter 6, I began each interview with a question that stimulated retrospective inspection of the meaning of religion and spirituality and their interrelationship (if any) from participant perspectives. Some participants linked the meaning of religion to beliefs and practices. Oran,[10] for example, an 18-year-old student identifies an overlap between the constructs,

> I think it's more or less the same thing. It's just like, almost like a modern interpretation, different jacket, same story (rec 13, September 2023).

Colin, also 18, sees religion and spirituality as interlinked but suggests that spirituality is,

> More about yourself, connecting with your inner self, your thoughts, and those around you (rec 17, October 2023).

Lucia aged, 27, no longer identifies as either spiritual or religious since her early teens. She describes religion as "beliefs and practices that people do together." She sees spirituality as something "bigger" than religion suggesting,

> It can include any religion and can something that has nothing to do with religion. You can have something from here, something from there and do your own thing, believe in what you want to believe, not something fixed (rec 01, online, June 2023).

This statement also signals the mix-and-match mentality associated with contemporary perceptions of religion discussed in 8.6 below. Sunshine, a 24 year-old student, belonging to a non-Catholic Christian denomination, and identifying as both spiritual and religious, considers religion as,

> What you believe in and practice, how you go about your day practicing what you preach. I think it's a personal definition for each individual (rec 04, June 2023).

Most, but not all of my sample described how they were brought up in a Catholic family and held Christian beliefs until their mid-teens. From an atheistic perspective, Colin, a 19-year-old student retrospectively reflects on his first break with belief in God,

[10] All names were pseudo anonymised.

> When I was young, talking to my brother, I was going on about God loves you. When my brother said, 'God's not real' suddenly my whole world just shattered.

Other participants discussed how their religious views and practices changed in their teenage years when they began to create personalised forms of religion or spirituality or alternatively developed nonreligious worldviews. The following extract from Lucia exemplifies an aggregate of this finding,

> I've had very religious parts of my life when everything made sense. I believed in the Catholic God; I went to church every Sunday; I did all these communal practices. Then, I started to be a teenager I guess, so I decided to get rid of this religious part and started to read a lot about philosophies like Marxism and we have killed God with Nietzsche. I think I made my own religion. I tried to put it not in the religious way, I created my own God (rec 01, online, June 2023).

Similarly, Adam, an 18-year-old student and Reiki practitioner states,

> I'm a Catholic but I wouldn't go to Church or anything. I'm a lot more spiritual than I am religious, big into spirituality, I do Reiki healing. Spirituality for me has a lot to do with the universe, manifestation, create what you want. It's about your own being and finding yourself. When I think of spirituality I don't think of anything like the Church or God or religion, more me and my energy (rec 20, October 2023).

A self-identified atheist, Melanie states,

> I think you can be spiritual without necessarily being religious. I think when you're spiritual, you believe in energies, something outside of yourself that doesn't quite go as far as a creator, which is something I actually found quite interesting. For a while, I kind of toyed with it a bit (rec 16, October 2023).

Probed on this issue of "toying", Melanie continues to hold her worldview despite grappling with the idea of God or creator,

> There have been times where I've been very curious about the idea of a god or a creator or something outside of the purely human. I've always stumbled at the actual hurdle of believing. The ideas all seem very interesting, lovely and very comforting, but I could never make the final leap to actually believe.

Melanie also expresses a view on the treatment of marginalised people, including women. She considers that atheism can be "quite a loaded word" in Ireland with negative connotations,

> Growing up in Ireland, my generation are fed complicated views about organised religion. I think that it can definitely be oppressive in the sense that in its rigidity, anyone that is in any way marginalised, that's going to be exacerbated by the rigidity of the structure. What I found quite difficult about the concept of organised religion is how women were treated or how, if you did not conform to the idea of good in the Church, that you were marginalised and outcast and so I think that can have serious psychological impacts for people. Because organised religion provides such a lovely community, that feeling that you are not accepted into that community is a difficult thing for many people. So I think that can definitely be a downside of it.

However, in her view, atheistic and theistic belief systems share similarities,

> Especially in countries like Ireland where societal norms and the social code is built around Catholicism, I think that's inevitable to separate yourself from it. So even though I have no religious affiliation, I think that I've a lot of similar basic tenets of somebody who goes to Church every Sunday because we were reared in the same society with the same kind of cultural perceptions and norms and expectations. So I think that they actually can be quite similar. Just the actual God bit is the only real difference.

Ria, a secular humanist who is the subject of my second case study, suggests,

> I think of spirituality not as a belief and more as a way to connect with the energy of the earth and maybe the love from my ancestors and myself as well, because I think we can be very disconnected from ourselves (rec 08, July 23).

Eve is a self-identified Catholic primary teacher in her mid-30s working in a deis (disadvantaged) school. She identifies as both spiritual and religious. Referring to a contemporary youth outlook regarding the constructs, she states,

> A lot of people say, 'I'm not religious but I'm spiritual.' To me there has to be some form of a link, they go hand in hand, to believe in a being, something that's higher. For spirituality, you're looking for something, for me it would be God (rec 02, June 2023).

Eve is somewhat pessimistic about the future of religious education in Ireland,

> I think we're losing it bit by bit; in a few years I think religion is going to go out of schools. I think we're going to be looking at a different Ireland unfortunately. It's like there's nothing there for young people, why would I go and sit in Mass? Maybe the whole system in religious education needs to be shaken up, the curriculum has changed, but not enough (rec 02, June 2023).

Similar to my quantitative findings, many participants do not see a link between the constructs. For example, Zoe, an 18-year-old student self-identifies as agnostic but expresses fascination with the concept of religion,

> I have very mixed opinions on religion. I've always been massively interested in it since I was a child. It's just like a point of fascination for me, but personally, I just can't feel the connection towards it (rec 22, October 2023).

A number of participants expressed scepticism regarding contemporary forms of spirituality. Leah, for example, a young professional in her mid-30s would "still tick the Catholicism box" on survey proformas but identifies as neither spiritual nor religious. She stopped practicing Catholicism in her late teens except for special occasions because of issues regarding the "power of Catholicism, especially its treatment of women." She no longer "bought into the story", no longer believing in "institutional dogmas." She also states that the word spirituality "never sits very well with me." Leah expresses scepticism regarding how to define spiritual practices, and whether the ambiguity regarding mindfulness, for example, blurs the line between spirituality and religion. She suggests, "True prayer is a sort of mindfulness." Her scepticism extends to New Age practices such as horoscopes and astrology "as an ordering principle underpinning belief systems" (rec 09, July 2023). Patricia, a 37-year-old schoolteacher also cautions about mindfulness as "a celebration of young people wallowing, sometimes we need a bit of tough love" (rec 11, August 2023). Derek, a 25-year-old student who self-identifies as both spiritual and religious also expresses scepticism regarding forms of spirituality and their related practices and scepticism regarding whether these forms exist at all. He considers that spirituality needs embedding in a tradition or religious structure,

> I think the danger is that spirituality can become makey uppy and be just whatever you want it to be. I think all religions are spiritual, but not all spirituality is religious (rec 21, October 2023).

Abby,[11] a 25 year-old student who self-identifies as religious only is also sceptical about spirituality trends,

> There's a bigger picture. I feel like today the world is very focused on the self, and not outward (rec 23, October 2023).

[11] I also include excerpts from Abby's narrative in theme 5, section 8.7.

A sub-theme to emerge relates to contemporary challenges to Catholicism. Some interesting data emerged from teachers in their mid-late 30s regarding these challenges. Sarah is a 30-year-old primary schoolteacher who self-identifies as both spiritual and religious views the Catholic Church as struggling to reach children and families and has experienced lost opportunities in this regard. She views casual loyalty to Catholicism as, "Keeping your foot in the door for special occasions." Sarah struggles with particular Catholic dogmas, especially its view on same sex relationships, commenting on Catholicism's view, "Its fine to be gay as long as you don't act on it" (rec 10 July 2023).

Also discussing casual loyalty to practice Patricia, a post-primary teacher states,

> I don't believe in the big fancy wedding, the big First Communion and Confirmation, and you never set foot inside the Church again (rec 11, August 2023).

Patricia, however, sees the issue of non-attendance at Catholic services because of CSA as "an excuse not to attend services" (rec 11, August 2023).
Largely similar to the views expressed by Sarah, who suggests that issues such as the view of one Bishop on the prohibition of using mindfulness in schools are indicative of the hierarchy not being in touch with a younger generation, "and to me that's why young people don't go to Mass" (rec 10, July 2023).

Theme summary and assessment of data

My assessment of these data is that young people have complex and nuanced perceptions of religion, spirituality and their interrelationship. In essence, this theme encapsulates a snapshot of the wide gamut of worldviews held by young people living in Ireland regarding the topics at play. My sample appear to constitute in Taylor's term, the 'Nova' of believing and unbelieving positions emanating from new forms of exclusive humanism, in some but not all cases replacing God's presence in the social space. It appears that many in-between hybrid positions appear to replace a clear-cut aporic (see appendix A) secular/religious binary. The issue of mindfulness emerged as a discussion point in most interviews in different contexts, with varying interpretations of its religious or spiritual value. Participants from the teaching profession at both

primary and secondary level held strong views regarding its benefits, while other participants were more sceptical of the value of mindfulness as evidenced above. Data presented here also signal participant scepticism regarding spirituality that my first case study in 8.5 below best exemplifies. This is one example of my comment earlier that themes and sub-themes sometimes 'bleed' into each other across the entire data set.

The next theme relates to subjective drift towards irreligion and fluidity of beliefs systems among young people on one hand, juxtaposed against evidence of an apparent reconnection to religion among some young Catholics. Data suggest evidence of immanence where young people appear to reject authority beyond their own experience. It appears that faith is largely hollowed-out and is now only one human belief possibility among a multitude of others. While a proportion of my sample still self-identify as Catholic, they either never attend its services, or only on special occasions and rites of passage, consistent with my survey data. The once taken-for-granted, unquestioned truths of Catholic Church teaching in Ireland (Catholic doxa, in Inglis' terms) no longer seems to resonate with young people. With one exception, it appears they no longer accept official Catholic teaching without question despite reconnecting to Catholic practice.

8.4 Theme 2: Subjective religious drift from and return to religion (incorporating case study 1)

Despite some literature suggesting indifference to religion and spirituality in the lives of young people, findings suggest that when I explored their perceptions more deeply, this was not necessarily the case. Hence, in some cases, qualitative data conflicted with my survey findings. In my view, this attests to the value of triangulation, where qualitative data add hermeneutic substance to quantitative findings. While this cohort concede that they may struggle with aspects of Catholic dogma, they largely embody the practices and dispositions of its belief system, which appears intrinsic to who they are and how they function in the world. The narrative of Trevor, an 18 year-old student who recently reconnected with God and Catholicism after a period during his adolescent life when he was ambivalent about these issues exemplifies this reconnection,

> Six months ago I started going to Mass more often, and then I got my own Bible. I started reading it and then out of nowhere I found a connection to God. Nowadays I'm reading my Bible, going to Church (rec 18, October 23).

I asked Trevor what specifically brought about reconnection to religion,

> I think nowadays that people are worshiping their own gods. It was like a recalling really. I went back to God, to find something instead of affiliating with any of these new movements. I was confused and looking in on them, there was discontent there, and then I moved back to God and that secured me. I think it's a blessing that I found the Bible and the word of God, and it's changed my life ever since (rec 18, October 2023).

Probing his comment regarding young people's tendency to worship other gods he suggested sexuality as a prime example,

> I suppose like some of the liberal movements now, people worship sexuality, they make up their own gods really.

In this context of subjective drift back to religion, the next section incorporates my first case study, which I consider an 'ideal case' (in Heimbrock's terms) that best exemplifies this significant theme relating to reconnection to religious practice.

8.5 Case study 1: Liam

The most striking example of the subjective return to Catholicism and its practices is the narrative of Liam, a 19-year-old student. He describes how he drifted towards atheism in his mid-teens because of questioning theodicy, or why God allows catastrophic events such as genocides or famines to happen,

> About 15 or 16 I was definitely not religious. And then about 17 or 18 I started reading a lot more and I suppose I came back to religion through the beauty and aesthetics of it. I realise that's not a mainstream way to come to religious belief. I wouldn't be a very mainstream Catholic, I'd have a lot of gripes with it that I'm constantly tussling with.

When I probed Liam's "gripes" with Catholicism, he referenced the CSA scandals as a contributory factor on entering primary education,

> You would have heard older adults talking about it (CSA) at home, and then you head into a Catholic school and there is a priest in the classroom. I don't think people would have put the same trust in a Catholic priest as pre-scandal children would have, because priests were untouchable at one point in Irish history. They were nearly a direct path from God, they could do no wrong. That didn't exist from the start of my education. There was an unconscious suspicion of the clergy I think from a very young age.

Probing the issue further, I asked Liam his perception of how the magisterium dealt with CSA scandals,

> I think in a huge amount of the cases they tried to sweep it under the carpet. I mean, terrible things happened, but if they had taken accountability for it, I think they would be a lot better off today - if they would say that these people are not men of God, and they are not. But ultimately they were a minority. The higher ups of the Church, the Cardinals and the Bishops explicitly siding with abusers, that was a big thing.

At this point I referenced an Irish scholar who suggested that an institution that placed so much emphasis on confessing sins had great difficulty in confessing its own,

Liam: That's exactly it, yes. One law for lay people and one law for clergy.

In the next phase of the interview I explored more deeply the influential factors on Liam's reconnection to Catholic practice and his perceptions of what a commitment to those practices entailed,

Liam: I go to Mass to experience the Liturgy, for the atmosphere and to feel closer to God. I don't go for the sake of being part of an institution. My faith is still very personal to me. A lot of Catholics would argue that there are rules to being a Catholic, but I don't know… there is something about the atmosphere of a Church. I don't know if it's architecturally or something, but I definitely get that, and it's probably what drew me back into it.

Following this, I focused our discussion on Liam's view of spirituality. I explored his views regarding how religion and spirituality interrelate,

Liam: I think spirituality is just reformulated religion. People saying they are spiritual is a consequence of the death of conventional religion. It's a kind of construction to justify putting faith in something. It's nearly taboo these days to say you're religious, I think the majority of the population are just as religious and are just as longing to find solidity in something, but they don't feel comfortable in saying its religion.

Probing Liam to expand on this point, he stated,

> I don't think anyone is truly atheist. I think everybody is going to be agnostic at the very least. The likes of Richard Dawkins and these kind of rabid atheists, I'm not convinced that they are 100% sure that there is no divine intervention. Science can only go so far. No matter how atheist they claim to be, they are always grappling with it. I think even if they are against religion, it's always going to be lingering there somewhere.

When I explored Liam's view of the "taboo" aspect of identifying as religious, he suggested,

> You'll have trendy almost hipster counter cultural people where it's nearly come full circle, and they're religious again now. But that's just for the sake of being against what's mainstream. If you say you're Catholic, the perception immediately is you must be a conservative, pro-life, anti-marriage equality, conservative Catholic. That's not the Catholicism I identify with, but that's immediately what I think a lot of people associate with it. I think our attitudes to a lot of things became complacent and arrogant, really.

Liam described how he "dabbled in other things like Buddhism and stuff like that when I was re-finding my faith." I was anxious to explore this further in light of his reconnection to Catholicism, (and the fact that so many respondents made reference to Buddhism in my free text survey data),

Liam: I think the reason why Buddhism has come out is because it's so de-centralised with no overarching institution. I think that's another big contributor to why young people are drifting away from Catholicism because it's very institutional. I think people are drawn to Buddhism because it is a very personal faith. I think it aligns with spirituality. Buddhism would be more religious than many secular practices like mindfulness and things like that, but it is just on the fringes of that category as well.

At this point, Liam articulated his view of an inappropriate contemporary application of Buddhist philosophy,

> Buddhism and other forms like mindfulness are being pushed by the corporate world - because it's saying: well the reason why you're depressed or whatever is because you're not looking after your spirituality or your mindfulness, which draws away from other serious systemic issues relating to those problems.

I then asked Liam if he found aspects of other traditions apart from Buddhism interesting or attractive,

Liam: I think there's parts of Islam that are nice, they are very ritualistic, and the community aspect. I find at a Catholic Mass, there are lots of people there for the sake of it and they are not incredibly engaged with the faith, while I feel like at a Mosque everyone is there 100% devoted to what's going on while they are there. I think that's something we don't have anymore, and maybe we never had. I think it's a misrepresentation that Ireland has suddenly got really secular. I think we were always very secular; it was just we felt obliged to go to Mass. I don't think we went from being a really devoted country to just falling straight off the cliff. It was always there, and it was a much more gradual trend, especially as the world becomes more connected.

At this stage, I explored whether Liam had any interest in, or engagement in New Age holistic practices, meditation and so forth,

Liam: No, not as they fall under the New Age category, but I think the oldest form of meditation comes from traditional Abrahamic religions. All the Christian mystics of the medieval era, St. John of the Cross and Teresa Abla – these were all entering into deep, deep periods of meditation, what they would have called prayer, but essentially it was meditating. I mean, St. John of the Cross with the dark night of the soul, that came from a place of deep, deep meditation in the presence of God. For me it's just a deeper, more engaged form of prayer.

Exploring these perceptions more deeply, I asked Liam to elaborate on his views of contemporary spiritual practices,

> I think it's a new trend, for a lot of people it's starting to become over saturated, the spirituality thing, and I think that might manifest itself in a slight trend back towards religion, towards traditional religious practice. Because I think people will start to realise that there's no point making up new stuff, when all you need is already there. It's like throwing the baby out with the bath water, so much bad has happened with religion but there is so much good to be salvaged from the ashes of it, and I think people gradually and very slowly, will start to realise that. I think it's the way our society is trending, kind of hyper individualism, because spirituality is intrinsically an individual act.

Probing Liam's views on what a commitment to Christian practice entails, he replied,

> The image of Christ suffering can be tied with a commitment of yourself, even though it's downscaled significantly obviously – all you're doing is giving up an hour to go to Mass, but it is that same theme of sacrifice or dedication.

Liam finds "peace" and "comfort" in Catholicism. He described the importance of a commitment to Jesus to his belief system and the uniqueness of Christianity,

> I think it's something that no other religion has. A God that would be so humble to put himself in the shoes of a humble carpenter and he could have easily came back as a King. He came to live among people and from an early age knew He was going to die for it. I think it's absolutely astonishing. That's what drew me back to it as well. It's just a pure beacon of goodness, I can't get away from the goodness of it.

Me: Would you agree or disagree with the statement in my questionnaire that *God is everywhere and within everything?*

Liam: I would agree, yes. I think everything around you is God, everything that even isn't beautiful is God like.

The remainder of the interview focused on Liam's experiences of mysticism, AW and epiphany moments, elicited for him by the beauty of God's creation in the material world. The following extract exemplifies a recurring view from other participants regarding horizontal as opposed to vertical transcendence,

Me: You mentioned Spinoza earlier, Liam. He held the view in his writings that God and nature are essentially synonymous (*Deus sive Natura*).

Liam: Yes, Spinoza really resonates with me, in that it's the same, that horizontal view of God and the feeling that God is not somewhere far away up in the clouds. God is arm's length away from you at all times, but we just can't perceive it, it's outside our method of comprehending.

Me: Relating to something you said about science, Liam … an astronomer wrote, "Science is not only compatible with spiritualty but is actually a profound sense of spirituality" … and that's closely related to what you said about religion earlier, that science doesn't necessarily have to be a competitor to religion…

Liam: No, absolutely not. There's a lot of very devout Christian scientists who will say that their research is a lifelong effort of trying to get closer to God, trying to understand God and trying to do as best they can to know as much as they can of the unknowable. I think scientific enquiry can be a very spiritual act, an act of devotion.

Concluding the interview, I sought Liam's view regarding the major challenges facing young people in contemporary Ireland,

Liam: It's the widening gap between rich and poor, ever increasing economic crises that are going to culminate in disaster, I think, in the next couple of decades …the economic state of things for people my age is quite dire at the minute, while I'd be generally a hopeful person I struggle to see a light at the end of it now without dire consequences.

After thanking Liam for his valuable input to my study, he wished to express the following on tape,

> I think the work you're doing is brilliant. I think it's a very interesting study. I think it will bring to light that maybe spirituality and religion isn't what we thought it was, and trends, sociological trends to do with it are a lot different than initially thought.

Another participant, Abby, provided rich data on the theme of reconnection to religion and the significance of God in her life. Although there was a period of her life, from age 19 to 21 where she ceased practice, she still held core Catholic beliefs. She attributed her return to practice to a summer retreat for young Catholic people in Taizé in Burgundy, where she became "fully immersed" into religious practice. She attends Mass weekly and on college campus daily when possible. She is not interested in, or drawn towards any other religions, and fully agrees with all Catholicism's teachings without question. Abby attributes the power of prayer to decisions she made regarding a career change because of the Covid 19 pandemic lockdowns,

> So I took to prayer and a lot of just pausing and trying to find out what would best please God. I've really grown in my faith in the last couple of years (rec 23, October 2023).

Abby suggests a correlation between faith decline and rise in anxiety and depression among young people. She described how faith in God helps her in the everyday challenges of life,

> I found that without God, suffering is meaningless. But with God it's a sacrifice and it's just a kind of a different mindset that can help me get through the day, get through the bad things. I've made it here, not by own grace, but by the grace of God.

Another participant, Derek, also quoted in theme 1, described how he experienced an agnostic phase in his life from age 13-18. He also attributed return to Catholic practice to reflections during the Covid 19 lockdowns, when

he bought a Bible and began to think differently about religion. He believes in the major Catholic dogmas and makes a distinction between being religious and religions,

> I think many things are religious, like football, you go to a stadium and chant (rec 21, October 2023).

Probing his view on spirituality, he suggests that is not sufficiently embodied,

> You need the physical kneeling and praying. Embodiment is a big thing; we're getting away from that.

The issue of CSA discussed by Liam emerged in other interviews in the context of disconnection from Catholicism. A significant statement from Jarlath, a 31 year-old student exemplifies this. Despite continuing to identify as Catholic, he never attends religious services. He believes that Christianity is fading in Ireland and demarcates connection to God and Catholicism. Discussing CSA and other abuse scandals, he suggests,

> I don't think the connection to God is fading and that's why I'm saying that spirituality and religion to me overlap, but to people who may not have that view that God and the Catholic Church are two separate entities, I think that's where the idea of spirituality is growing from. People might still feel a connection to God but don't want to say it's a Catholic connection because that affiliates them to the Church that they don't want to be connected to (rec 22, October 2023).

Theme summary and assessment of data

Data elicited regarding this theme yielded interesting findings that demonstrate the fluid nature of subjective religious drift, particularly the finding that trends towards irreligious can reverse for a variety of reasons. While qualitative data affirm the irreligious trends evident in my survey data, they suggest that they are not a tsunami. It appears that not all personal narratives on religion are 'subtraction stories' in Taylor's terms. Data presented in the above theme represent trends evident in approximately one-quarter of my qualitative sample (four males aged 18-19 and one female aged 25) who described a *volte-face* reconnection to Catholicism and faith practice. In each case, this reconnection followed a period of either agnosticism or atheism in mid-teens. It appears that when this belief system change occurs the connection with God and organised religion assumes a deeper commitment to Catholic practice, which takes the

form of regular Mass attendance and, in some cases, daily Bible readings evidenced in the narratives of Liam, Trevor and Abby. The issue of CSA emerged as a sub-theme here as in other thematic contexts. Jarlath is one of many examples of disconnection from Catholicism because of the scandals and mistakes made by the hierarchy. In general, terms data relating to CSA emerged primarily from those over 30 years of age who may remember the public discourse about the scandals that emerged in the 1990s. Data also reveal a push back against New Age forms of spirituality, discussed in the next theme in the context of the creative and individualistic nature of contemporary Catholicism. Liam's view of transcendence as horizontal rather than vertical, reflective of other participant views, suggests a changing mind-set and a push back against the normative view of God. This reflects similar views expressed in the literature. For example, in thanking God for the trees, 'Big Roy's perception of God is "not someone sitting on a cloud with a big stick – it is all that is out there - nature."[12]

The next section presents data suggesting a creative and individualistic approach to contemporary Catholicism. It commences with representative data derived from free-text qualitative survey responses to the question regarding interest in, or attraction to other religious traditions, followed by interview data on the theme. One of the major findings here is the attraction to other faith systems, notably Buddhism.

8.6 Theme 3: Creative and individualist Irish Catholicism

As stated, in the (free text) section of my questionnaire, I asked respondents to provide brief qualitative answers regarding if/what they found interesting or attractive about other religions, beliefs or practices. Data reveal a variety of themes, where some survey respondents expressed interest in the practices of other religious traditions while some remained steadfastly committed to their own tradition. Data presented below reflect a sample of the many survey responses to the question posed,

[12] Big Roy, "Thank God for the Trees" in *Voicing Psychotic Experiences: a Reconsideration of Recovery and Diversity*, edited by Ruth Chandler and Mark Hayward, (London: Pavilion, 2009).

> The sense of community gained from shared religious beliefs; however, I believe the same community function could be served by something other than organized religion.

> None, although I can be interested in other practices (e.g. attendances of mosques in Islam, funeral rites in Shinto) they are not appealing to me as they are foreign to what I consider religious experience in Catholicism (free text comments).

Some respondents stated their views regarding the value that religion holds, particularly relating to the sense of community and support it brings,

> Religion in general is attractive as it provides a sense of community and belonging. Also, I believe that all religious rituals are quite transformative.

> In terms of culture and cultural products, I find religion (and diversity of religious beliefs) fascinating. In a western tradition, I think that religion can be an important support systems and religion can offer comfort in difficult times. In a sense, I am envious of those who have this relationship to religion. I also think that having strong beliefs and devotion can be inspiring (although there is also a risk here).

Some responses referred directly to Catholicism:

> The human experience that is shared through the religious lens interests me the most. The Old Testament was apparently pretty wild though, or so I'm told.

> People have greater respect for religions when they’re not Catholic.

> Although I was Baptised a Catholic it was not an everyday part of my life. Other religions and their focus on the self rather than God appeal to me more.

As stated, data reveal that Buddhism is the most attractive tradition with which to mix Christian beliefs, followed by Islam and other traditions as exemplified by the following statements,

> I find Buddhism interesting, as it is more of a spiritual way of life from what I understand.

The Buddhist's philosophy appeals to me, as it strives towards enlightenment.

> I am interested in the concept of loving kindness, which comes from Buddhism and some Taoist teachings.

> Buddhism seems more straightforward and applicable to daily living. Being Catholic is confusing, and complicated.
>
> I find the practices and beliefs of Buddhism very interesting and almost more "spiritual" than the practices of the Catholic Church.
>
> The meditative aspect of Buddhism and Hinduism is attractive, and I am interested in their beliefs in karma and care for others and the earth. I think you can apply these in your life without identifying with the religions (free text comments).

The following statements provide a sense of my sample perceptions of Islam, particularly their commitment to the practice of Ramadan,

> I find Islam to be the most interesting and fascinating religion. Muslim traditions such as Ramadan are really interesting to me because of how physically and mentally draining they are, showing how much followers of Islam believe in their God and their religion.
>
> I like Muslims practice of prayer 5 times a day.

In the questionnaire, I included an existential search for identity and purpose question *Please state why you think you are in the world?* The main themes to emerge relate to socio-biology, not knowing, and God's love as exemplified by the following responses,

> The randomness of genetics.
>
> By complete luck, the odds of me being here today are next to nothing.
>
> I don't know if any of us are here for a reason, I think it's just a happy accident that I am here.

Relating to God's love, significant statements identified the essence of why respondents thought they are in the world,

> To know love, serve God, and be happy with him in the next life as is the intrinsic purpose of human existence.
>
> To walk beautifully on the earth, barefoot, and to do it with Christ at the forefront.
>
> To let others know about Jesus - to bring others to salvation (free text comments).

In the questionnaire I asked participants if they had ever been conscious of a presence or power (whether they called it God or not) which was outside normal everyday experience. The main theme to emerge a sense of God's presence in times of difficulty and mental health challenges. Some significant statements were,

> Something good has happened in my or my family's life, against all odds. In those moments I've felt, even if our life isn't ideal and has many difficulties, God is there for us still.
>
> After a prolonged period of struggle with mental health, I felt a new breath of life, which helped me find God again.

The responses above constituted a significant theme in my follow-up interviews, where qualitative data suggest that increasingly young people assimilate beliefs and practices that originate in Buddhism, even among those who self-identify as practicing Catholics. In my view, a fascinating finding is that, despite not attending services or practicing their religion, some young Irish people are interested in and attracted to the commitment involved in the Islamic tradition of Ramadan. Evidence of this relates to the number of references to Ramadan in both the survey and interview findings despite the fact that participants do not practice Ramadan at all. They may practice transcendental meditation or other practices associated with Buddhism, but not Ramadan.

The following interview excerpts exemplify the interest in and attraction to Buddhism and Islam, evidenced in my survey data above,

Lucia: It's fashionable to find interest in Buddhism or Hinduism. It's being respectful with nature and animals.

Kate: Other religions like Muslims are a lot more dedicated and committed to their religion. Catholics don't do anything like that.

Zoe: Because Muslims are so strict on their practices and beliefs, it's completely different to Christianity in a sense because they have an explanation for it. They have the Koran that never changed. If you're a Muslim, you cannot translate the Koran. It was the literal word of God through Muhammad. But the Bible has been changed so much.

In this context, I sought atheistic perceptions of other faith traditions. Melanie, quoted in theme 1, always found Buddhism "quite interesting, a kind of more holistic tone." She continues,

> I think their general approach is quite balanced and level and very open in a way that I think other religions' approach don't offer, which I find quite appealing. I think that's why it's quite open to interpretation, which is why I find it attractive. It's just very open in a way that the very strict religious doctrines aren't - you have to believe this, you have to do that. It's a little bit more flexible.

Colin, also quoted in theme 1, articulates his perception of the effects of the CSA scandals and suggests benefits relating to a drift from Catholicism and attraction to other traditions,

> There's a stray away from Catholicism into other religions, which I don't think is necessarily a bad thing… they have only themselves to blame (for the scandals).

In terms of ethno-identity, he contrasts his experiences of moving from a city to a border town straddling the Republic and Northern Ireland, stating,

> I think lot of people still connect Catholicism to the image of being Irish, like during the Troubles. When I was living up in (names border town), one of the first questions I was asked in school was, "are you a Prod or a Catholic?" I knew the right answer. I wanted to keep my car. There's a very heavy history that comes with what side of the spectrum you're on. If you're a Protestant, some people took it very heavy.

Theme summary and assessment of data

Based on these representative extracts from both the survey comments and qualitative interviews, my assessment is that they provide significant contemporary insights into the perceptions of young people from a wide range of perspectives and worldviews. The factors involved in irreligious drift and attraction to other traditions are multifarious and nuanced. In addition to the above extracts, data suggest that while self-identifying as Catholic, a large proportion of my sample do not believe in some of the Catholicism's fundamental teachings like belief in hell or an afterlife. None of my survey respondents, for example, believed in the concept of hell. Interview data were consistent with survey data in this regard. In my view, the attraction to Buddhism and Islam and their practices is an interesting finding. It reflects findings from

previous Irish studies, for example those from the *CII* study discussed in my literature review. I return to discussion of this finding in chapter 8.9.

The next section discusses an important theme relating to a growing wellness culture in Ireland, similar to some Western cultures. Here, I also incorporate a second juxtaposing case study exemplifying the trend towards New Age spiritual practices. As most participants engaged in some form of holistic practices, my textual analysis concentrates on data elicited from particular interviews that exemplify the trend towards spirituality, not linked to religion but aimed at personal wellbeing. Here, the issue of mental health emerged frequently in discourse. This sub-theme as it relates to religion and spirituality interlinks throughout my findings, where a number of participants shared personal stories regarding struggles with mental health issues and how wellness practices mitigated these challenges.

8.7 Theme 4: The culture of youth wellness

One of my research aims was to explore whether organised, institutional religion is being replaced by more intuitional forms of New Age or immanent spirituality. Allied to this was exploring understanding of young people's search for a sense of community to fulfil social and emotional needs or sense of belonging in the absence of normative religious practice. The following interview extract exemplifies how these practices do not appear to be linked to God or religion in the context of exploring Lucia's engagement in holistic activities,

> I'm actually doing them, yoga, also tai chi, not for the religious part but for physical benefits. I also tried meditation and mindfulness when I was I was very stressed, I couldn't sleep properly, so I started mainly for mental health reasons. Now I'm going to a gym because it really helps me to disconnect. It's everything for mental and physical health.

At this stage of the interview, Lucia describes that when she began doing yoga, the trainer asked respondents at the end of the sessions to gesticulate a sign with their arms across their body (as his interview was conducted online, Lucia gestures hands in prayer at the heart and says "*Namaste*").[13]

[13] I consulted yoga teachers regarding the use of the word Namaste. One translation is "I bow to you" or "greetings to you." Yoga teachers sometimes point out that it does not make sense to

Lucia: For me that was religious, and I decided not to do that because I didn't know exactly what that meant, the context of doing it. I didn't go there for that; I went for my mental health

A significant theme to emerge was the sense of community that religion offers. Even those participants who held nonreligious worldviews conceded this sense of belonging as a benefit of religious affiliation. However, it appears that, my sample generally reject organised, institutional religion in favour of more spiritually focused pursuits and a range of holistic wellness activities. My data is replete with examples of this theme. Lucia's statement exemplifies this,

> I think a lot of young people experience depression and anxiety. But they're also addicted to their phones and the internet. People my age are very drawn to yoga retreats and go to therapy or spirituality and yoga, because we all are seeking this sense of community that I think is hard to find for young people these days, without a Church to go to.

I expand on participant perceptions of this sense of community theme later in this section, following presentation of the most important data elicited from the narrative of a secular humanist. Similar to my first case study, I consider the narrative as an 'ideal case' that best exemplifies the theme of contemporary spirituality pursuits and New Age practices.

Case study 2: Ria

This case study excerpt presents data from a long interview (75 minutes). The participant, a 26 year-old Irish professional, self-identifies as secular humanist. In my view, her entire narrative embodies the trend to contemporary forms of spirituality practices. Here, I include the most important aspects of the interview that relate to the theme under discussion. Her belief system is based on,

> Doing the right thing and looking after others and all of the values that come from most religions … look after weaker people, those more disadvantaged, don't lie, don't steal … not karma but, you will pay for the bad things that you do in a way (rec 08, July 2023).

close a class with the equivalent of "hello" or "welcome." Some yoga teachers who do not use the term inform me that they have moved away from it out of fear of cultural appropriation in that it does not honour its sacred, cultural or intended use. However, it signals a mark of respect for the practice and each person who shares in the yoga class with the teacher.

Ria engages in a range of holistic practices, and provides a sense of contemporary popular spirituality,

Ria: There's a lot of young people these days influenced by TikTok who believe in manifesting, and it's gaining a lot of popularity. I don't believe that's my religion. But some people really do. It's getting a bit out of hand. You can even go on a shopping website and basically pay someone to manifest for you, because they're very energetically aligned with the world, so that they're able to bring things in for you. There's always people taking advantage of others, whether it's a really old religion like Catholicism or whatever, or a kind of new age religion, like manifestation and spirituality. Actually, I just read an article about a woman who's really passionate about mosh pits, basically she was saying that she's atheist but when she's in a mosh pit, she feels elevated, she's connected to something bigger.

At this stage of the interview, I explored Ria's personal interest in mindfulness, yoga, astrology and so forth. I began by exploring her perceptions regarding whether if/how there was a spiritual element to these practices,

Ria: The reason I think yoga is spiritual - I mean, most of the time it's for exercise and wellbeing - but there are times at the end of yoga called *savasana*. Basically you're just lying down, and they put on holistic music, and the lights are turned off and it's a little rest after your hour of yoga. There have been many times where I've found myself getting really emotional and crying during this time. Sometimes, I don't know if that's necessarily spiritual, but I just feel like whatever way that I've worked out, I've done this yoga, and maybe my mind and my body are aligned and maybe I've released something through this exercise. I can allow myself to think about really deep things when I'm in that state and I sometimes get emotional because I feel like I'm really present, and I can really think about what truly matters in my life.

Me: Which if any of the following have you engaged with in the past year – horoscopes, astrology, fortune telling or tarot…

Ria: Oh my God! All of them! I have a really good app that I subscribe to, CHANI, and it tells me basically how the moon is affecting my birth chart and what's going on every day. I don't really listen to the predictions. But I like the meditations because they're holistic meditations. They also sometimes give you rituals that are to do with the moon and that kind of thing. I'm very interested in the moon; I feel connected in some way. That's why I'm interested in astrology.

Me: Would many of your peers be interested in that?

Ria: I think astrology has always been popular with women. Since I was a kid, all the magazines would have your horoscope. There's lots of jokes between people my age of, "you can't trust a Scorpio man, red flag," and that kind of thing. And I think it's more of a cultural, a joke almost for a lot of people my age. But some people believe that all the predictions are completely accurate and feel very strongly about star signs. I think that can be a bit self-indulgent.

Me: I'm probably showing my generational age, but I never engaged in any of that, but I have a very good friend my age who is almost obsessed with it.

Ria: Really? That is so interesting.

Me: Also, referring back to what you said about holism, he is very interested in Holotropic therapy. Have you heard of that?

Ria: No.

Here, I explain the psychodynamic context and theoretical background for using Holotropic therapy to induce altered states of awareness by means of alpha breathing.

Ria: I've never heard of that term, which I'm surprised about because I went travelling to South America and I heard of a lot of people doing ayahuasca. I started researching it and ayahuasca does seem interesting because you are reaching some part of your brain that you cannot reach unless you're sleeping. I think I would be too scared to do it, but I am really interested in this.

Me: Do you believe that spiritual energy can come from physical objects?

Ria: I have four crystals. I have rose quartz, which I believe is good for love. It helps you tune into that energy as opposed to it carrying that energy. And I have one crystal, which I put on my chest, it's supposed to cleanse bad energies. It might be a placebo - it probably is - but it does soothe me. I also believe that certain objects that have emotional connection can have energy too.

At another stage of the interview I explored Ria's perceptions of whether the symbolization of transcendence is vertical (heaven; God or gods) or whether it includes horizontal transcendence.

Ria: Is transcendence moving somewhere else?

Me: Standard Catholic doctrine is that when you die, your soul transcends into a non-material afterlife. Because God created the universe, you

meet Him there. So, there is often a perception out there of an old man in the sky watching you, and who will judge you when you die. Does that image hold any resonance for you?

Ria: No, not for me.

Me: Is science the creator then?

Ria: I think so, yes, as in how far we've come technologically. Yes, science, but through our collective minds.

In the context of mysticism and AW, Ria and I engaged in dialogue about situations that may have evoked these experiences for her. In my view, the following excerpt is significant,

Me: Have you ever had occasion to visit a Church? Maybe on holidays? Have you ever had an experience related to that?

Ria: I love Churches. I think they're really beautiful. There's signs about death everywhere, and the afterlife. I went to a Church once in Madrid and some kids were singing a song, and I just started crying. It really moved me. I imagined myself being in the Middle Ages and going to Church and thought, what a place that must have been back in those times. It felt like, wow, I really feel connected to something here.

At this stage, I shared a recent personal experience as an autoethnographic choice. It related to a recital by a visiting U.S. choir in the chapel of a pontifical university in Ireland that I happened upon and found spiritually moving.

Ria: Wow! Amazing.

Me: So I'm sharing that with you for the purpose of saying that for me, I connected that experience and other similar experiences to God and the sense that there has to be a creator of all this.

Ria: Yes, you're feeling something extremely out of this world precious. I can see why you'd say that's the only possible way that I am feeling this.

In the context of a question on meditation, Ria shared,

I've had moments of enlightenment where I feel like 'Ah!' I just connected to something.

Me: That's very interesting. When you have those moments, how does it make you feel emotionally, within yourself?

Ria: I feel like someone's watching over me and I feel hopeful and excited as well.

Me: And would you ever pursue that thought and wonder who or what is watching over you?

Ria: I used to really love Santa Claus. He was god for me. My dad caught me praying to him. Since I was a kid I always had this illusion of someone powerful looking after me. And maybe I turned to Santa because we were an atheist family. So then, my dad told me that Santa isn't real because I was getting bullied in school. I was devastated. But you can also threaten kids - If you don't eat your lunch, I'm going to tell Santa. It is used against you, just like God would be used against you. But it's mad that I came up with that because I was not in a religious environment at all, not even in school. Which is why I think we're just innately drawn to believing in something higher.[14]

At the conclusion of the interview, Ria returned to the aspect of our discussion regarding Churches and asked to say this,

> You know, when you said that when you went to that Church, hearing the choir and staying there for two hours and that you thought - I think that's God. I thought that was really interesting because I had never thought of it in that way before.

Returning to the theme of the sense of community that religion brings, regardless of worldviews, the following statement of atheist Melanie is significant in my view,

I often wish I was religious, and I could get over the actual believing hump just to be part of the whole community.

In this context, despite holding nonreligious worldviews, participants expressed fascination with religion as exemplified by the following extracts from Zoe, who finds spiritual connections in her love of music.

Me: What is it about religion that fascinates you?

Zoe: The way religion changes and develops over the years. At the beginning it was created to explain the unexplainable, I find that just absolutely fascinating, so interesting. I think it's important to learn about religion

[14] I consider this a very interesting point emanating from the perspective of someone who identifies as atheist, especially the point of innately being drawn to believing in a higher being. It also relates to my section on the distinction between believability and memorability regarding religion, discussed in my section on CREDS in chapter 2.6.

because although I'm agnostic, not affiliated with any religion. I still think it's so vitally important to talk and interact with other people and be respectful of their beliefs.

Zoe disaffiliated from Catholicism due to a sense of claustrophobia,

> The Catholic Church looms over your shoulder, staring over you. It affected me massively, it just felt like it was hard to breathe under it because it was telling me - you can't do this, you can't do that. You can't be like this; you have to act a certain way. I don't really want that. I don't find an affiliation with that kind of Catholic or Christian God because no questions can be asked. They've created a narrative and it's not the religion itself. It's the institution, the Catholic Church. You are made to believe that you aren't ok, that there's something wrong with you, that you need to be saved. So you're told that the way you can be good enough is through believing through faith, going to Mass and so forth.

Me: That does not work for you.

Zoe: No, it just doesn't. I can't get behind a God who would send me or others to hell, to suffer for eternity. For me, the problem isn't the actual belief system, the actual religion itself how it began with Jesus. It originated as something beautiful, something so amazing that people can look towards and hold onto and help them. But then throughout the years, it's changed massively because of the people that were running it. The Bible changed completely from when it was originally written, but people take it so literally now. But it's not the original word. How God can be also so wrathful is just so contradicting because that's not what the original God was intended for.

Me: Do you have a sense of freedom with your agnostic beliefs?

Zoe: Yes, definitely. Because there's so many different ways that you can find meaning in your own life. Music for me helps explain, whereas other people use their religion to help them explain how they feel. There definitely is a sense of freedom because you can dip in and out of different belief systems, you can go into like philosophy or even just different religions. Some parts of Christianity are beautiful, just amazing. It's more freeing rather than being under the guise of just one religion. It's just it's more freeing to just be able to do what you want to do, rather than being under strict guidelines. People use spirituality in different ways, some people use crystals or yoga or meditation for spirituality. But for me music is more like a presence, it's like a faith, but just not an institution for religion. I definitely think there is a sense of spirituality in music, and it definitely does intertwine religion and music.

Me: One philosopher, Charles Taylor suggests that when a young people attend a concert or festival, there is almost a religious quality to it in the sense that they are connecting …

Zoe: Yes, I actually completely agree with that. Just because it's not like a deity doesn't mean that it's not a form of religious or spiritual experience. When I go to a concert, it's like what other people would feel about religion. It feels otherworldly. I went to a Hozier concert[15] … Take *me to Church* is a song that completely resonated with me for my entire childhood, my whole life. When I heard it live, it was a completely outer body experience, everybody just screaming the lyrics, everybody just singing together, it felt like sort of a togetherness. It's something that's so hard to even explain now, it just felt surreal. I would definitely put that under a type of religious experience. It just felt incredible.

In addition to these pursuits, participants perceived engagement in sporting activities as a means of achieving personal wellness and spiritual wellbeing. Jason for example, an 18 year-old student, self-identifying as a secular humanist says,

> In my generation of young men, there's been a huge rise in weightlifting and an explosion in exercise. People in a selfish way want to make their bodies more attractive or to look better. The gym becomes their sort of spiritual place. Without it they would feel nothing, or they would become depressed. It's a running joke 'when I lift these weights the voices in my head go away, the negative thoughts' (rec14, October 2023).

Jason describes this as "emotional mindfulness" of spiritual importance that helps young people with their mental wellbeing. Among many participants, he expressed concern regarding young people's obsession with technology. What he terms the "toxic internet" has led to a huge rise in male loneliness because of a lack of social connection, and in his view, a wellness culture mitigates this. In this context, aspects of my data suggest that participants in the course of dialogue began to rethink how spirituality can buffer the effects of mental health challenges. Lucia, for example expressed this view,

> I want to say that you made me think about spirituality as maybe a solution to this kind of crisis (referring to mental health issues for young people). I said to you at the beginning maybe I'm not a spiritual

[15] Hozier is an Irish singer-songwriter.

> person, maybe after sitting here I will change, and that's why I was so interested in talking to you because I find interest in this.

Similarly, in the context of dialogue on spirituality, Eve stated,

> I think what you are looking at is very, very interesting, I think an avenue to explore is who people turn to when they are going through a difficult time in their life.

Theme summary and assessment of data

Data gleaned from these interview segments reached the core of one of my research aims which was to explore a growing paradigm of new forms of spirituality in Ireland, and whether participants construe spirituality in religious or secular terms, both or neither. In my assessment, the case study contributed rich data in this regard and attests to the value of triangulation. Data exemplifies how young people increasingly use online spiritual 'tinkering' (in Wuthnow's terms) to access apps for an array of 'spiritual' sources. It appears that manifesting has become something of a buzzword for young people, as many participants alluded to the term. These data suggest increasing online trends towards spiritualities as saleable objects, an important issue to which I return in section 8.9 where I discuss dangers associated with the commodification/merchandising of spirituality. These data also suggest that many young people engage in holistic practices for experiencing a sense of community that they may not find in organised religion or Churchgoing. Following Inglis, my sense is that engagement in holistic practices is a desire to be spiritual and moral. It appears that motivations for engagement in wellness activities centres on a sense of community, and the maintenance of good mental health. It also appears that participants find 'religious' or spiritual experiences in media such as music as exemplified by Zoe's extracts. This trend relates to a term used in popular culture and media literature called 'fandom', where engagement creates a powerful sense of group cohesion (see appendix A).

The next theme closely relates to those discussed above. A powerful interdisciplinary approach developed by Reinermann-Jones *et al* to the study of complex experience states using a neurophenomenological interview technique

influenced my decision to explore experiences of mysticism.[16] Initially, I present qualitative data elicited from the free-text options in the questionnaire, elided with interview data segments.

8.8 Theme 5: The evocation of AW and epiphany experiences

This aspect of my research explored precise affective and emotional aspects of religion and spirituality. The value of including this dimension became apparent during the interviews as it provided an avenue in which to explore participant's experiences using a phenomenologically enhanced approach, which yielded thick descriptions. Ralph Hood and Zhuno Chen underline how field studies have been particularly useful in providing thick descriptions of normative constraints and social support that legitimate particular forms of mystical experiences.[17] Previously conducted mixed-methods research found that religious experience was not necessarily associated with Churchgoing.[18] Decades ago, Abraham Maslow believed that these experiences did not have to be theistic, asserting that Buddhism was not explicitly theistic, concurring with Margherita Laski's assertion that people could have ecstatic religious experiences without necessarily believing in God.[19] Other qualitative studies revealed paradoxically that as institutional religion declined, the number of people reporting that they had a religious experience had doubled and that participants were inclined to borrow New Age spirituality terminology, not having the traditional religious language to express their experiences.[20] Data elicited from this theme revealed highly personal and profound stimuli to these experiences, core to the integrity of participant belief systems, embodied in the concept of love.

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[16] Reinermann-Jones *et al* used a neurophenomenological interview technique (the study of mind, experience and consciousness) derived from the philosophical traditions of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in addition to other techniques derived from the physical sciences to explore astronauts experiences of AW in simulated space environments. See, Reinermann – Jones, Sollins, Brandon, Galagher, Shaun, Janz, Bruce. "Neurophenomenology: An Integrated Approach to Exploring Awe and Wonder", South *African Journal of Philosophy*, (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2013), 295- 309.

[17] Hood and Chen, (2005), 422-440.

[18] See for example, Hay, David, "Reports of Religious Experience by a Group of Postgraduate Students: A Pilot Survey", (*Nottingham: University School of Education,* 1978).

[19] Laski, Margherita, *Ecstasy: A Study of Some Secular and Religious Experiences*, (London: Cresset Press, 1961).

[20] See: Hay, David, Hunt, Kate. '*Is Britain's Soul Waking Up*?' The Tablet. 24th June. 2000.

Melanie, for example, traces her first AW experience to a childhood visit to see her grandparents,

> My grandad was unwell, and I was watching my nanny mind him, watching them interact and there was something incredibly tender about it in a really open way, just a lovely moment of all façades being dropped. Yes, it was just a beautiful moment to witness, I sat there and went wow, there's a real connection here.

Me: It was a special moment for you…

Melanie: Yes, as I grew older and learned their life stories, I think it actually carried more weight because I could see how they built a life together, becoming part of the same person in a way. I actually ended up using it kind of as a barometer for most of my relationships. Do I have that moment where I just relax and let myself be myself? Or do I keep up the whole, polite façade kind of thing?

The theme of love is also reflected in the experience of this survey respondent,

> I think it was love. I was with my girlfriend in Amsterdam. We were wandering at night; place was very busy. Then a Church started playing a song with its bells. There was no one else around. It was just us standing on a bridge. The air felt heavy or surreal, I can't describe it. Then when the song finished we could hear and see people again, and a car drove past us (free-text survey response).[21]

Another survey respondent shared,

> These (AW) were either moments of seeing an incredible panorama or having a moment of realisation about how much I love someone and/or how happy I am to be in that moment. I don't know if at the moment I thought it is related to God, but when looking back it seems like it could not be unrelated and such amazing phenomena are intrinsic to God, in whatever form God is (free-text survey response).

Closely related to AW, I explored epiphany or revelatory moments, intuitive insights into the essence of something. Abby, whose data I included in other thematic contexts, relates a deeply personal epiphany moment that, in her view, reconnected her to Catholic belief and practice. In an earlier interview segment, she described a trip to Taizé in Burgundy, which she refers to again in the present context,

[21] In my view, the reference to Church bells is significant here.

> It was in adoration, when Jesus is exposed in the monstrance, at that summer retreat. That brought me right back. It was the absolute realisation of everything that Jesus went through in his Passion. He knew that I would draw away from him for a couple of years, and he still went through it all for me, to welcome me back in this moment. I just felt the full love of Jesus just looking at Him. I can't describe it. I felt that in spite of everything He loved me totally. I just felt immense love, words don't describe how much love I felt in that moment. Jesus was looking at me, right into me. That was an awe and wonder experience for me, and I haven't turned back since.

Two young male participants (18 and 19) shared their experiences of transubstantiation at Eucharist as eliciting AW. For example, Trevor, shared this powerful experience,

> Within the action of transubstantiation, when they change the bread and wine to the body and blood of Jesus, I feel the action happening inside me, not just seeing it, I feel like something inside me, feeling the actions.

Zoe, whose interview extracts I included in the previous theme, described AW moments evoked by ancient monuments,

> I went to the Colosseum in 2019. When I saw the Colosseum, it was just, something that you can't even really describe. You see pictures, but it's not until you're there, you fully grasp the concept. When I was there, I was like, oh my God, the Colosseum, like, the Colosseum! Like it was just, it was wild.

At this point, similar to my interactions with other participants, I shared personal experiences of AW moments as an autoethnographic choice. I shared one experience at this stage of the interview relating to the emotionality and spiritual sense I felt while being present at Newgrange, a 5,000-year-old passage tomb located in Ireland, famous for the winter solstice that illuminates the passage entrance and chamber. This resonated with Zoe' experience,

Zoe: Yes, you're in complete awe and wonder, in shock, because you're remembering the fact that people built that … for a sense for trying to explain the unexplainable, for a sense of spirituality, for God. You are in awe of the summer solstice, the winter solstice and how they all connect.

Theme summary and assessment of data

My overall assessment of these data is that awe and mysticism are awe for God, "in whatever form God is" as suggested by one respondent. Certain stimuli

appear to evoke these peak experiences, congruent with my definition of AW in my general introduction. These experiences appear to manifest in love for others and awe for God's creation of the natural world at specific moments, both special and mundane. The interviews yielded this sense of mysticism from both those holding religious and nonreligious worldviews when I provided participants with the opportunity to reflect and engage in dialogue. Participant narratives of transubstantiation (in two separate interviews) and adoration of the Sacred Heart evoking epiphany or revelatory moments are significant in the overall context of findings. In Whitmore's theological ethnographies discussed in chapter 3.8, he underscores that the spirit of Jesus Christ can enter into a person through such devotions as the Adoration of the Eucharist. I return to further discussion of these topics in chapter 8.9.

The next brief section presents an evaluation of the key findings. Its purpose is to provide a platform for a more in-depth discussion, debate challenges and critique in chapter 8.9.

8.9: Evaluation of qualitative data

My overall approach to interviewing, establishing trust, rapport and openness using Rogerian principles facilitated a mutual learning encounter in which to expand and nuance horizons between participants and me as researcher and bricoleur. In my view, the present study deepens the trajectory of extant scholarship and provides a more complete understanding of what Josef Corveleyn *et al* suggest fascinate all researchers in the field: the relationship between humanity and what transcends it[22] from the perspective of a younger Irish demographic. Extant literature reveals that scholarly focus on institutional commitment as an indicator of religious decline has inordinately dominated discourse. Scholars such as Hervieu Léger and Rodney Stark argue that rather than this type of analysis, the focus should shift to exploration of new ways in which people are becoming more spiritual,[23] the precise aim of my thesis. In line with previous international research, the suggestion emanating from data

[22] Corveleyn, Josef, Luyten, Patrick, Dezutter, Jessie, "Psychodynamic Psychology and Religion", in *The Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality,* (2015), 94 – 117.
[23] Hervieu-Léger, (2000), Also Stark, Rodney, Bainbridge, William Sims, "Towards a Theory of Religion", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 19 (2), (1980), 114-28.

was that, in search of the deep and the real, young Irish people are finding meaning, purpose, ritual and communities not necessarily in organised/institutional religion but in new spiritually oriented ways. In my view, this a sign of the times - the complex, multivalent nature of Ireland's post-Catholic religious and spiritual landscape. In general terms, these data reflect concepts discussed in earlier chapters, particularly Davie's *Believing without Belonging,* and *Vicarious Religion* coupled with Ammerman's *Belonging without Believing*. It appears that young people increasingly assemble an individualist religious outlook, in Davie's term *a la bricolage*, pulling together different threads from the staggering number of ideologies and faith options competing for their attention. Data also cohere with Davie's concept of diffusive Christianity (see appendix A), where some participants distance themselves from Catholicism as their ancestral church while simultaneously retaining some nominal ethno-identity ties with it.[24] Here, I concur with Abby Day's assertion that nominal religious affiliation, where people privately believe in God and other spiritual phenomena despite not attending communal services is not an empty category but is culturally meaningful in a postmodern Irish context. Data reflect the extent to which Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular now compete with an array of spiritual marketplace options and choices, increasingly driven by social media outlets and peer influences. Overall, these qualitative data cohere with my survey findings and previous research findings on the transition from traditional Irish Catholicism to new typologies, especially creative/individualist, and that a younger generation in Ireland do not commit to the traditional norms and practices of the traditional Catholicism. It appears that my samples increasingly choose between different beliefs, teachings and practices and mix ingredients from other religious traditions with non-Catholic beliefs and practices. With some exceptions, these Catholics choose which beliefs and practices to adhere to and which to ignore, mixing these with non-Catholic belief systems and New Age spiritual and holistic practices. Data suggest a spectrum of inward and outward religious orientations as defined at the outset of my study. They accord with the view that the deobjectification of religion means that increasingly in a post-Christian period, people are less

[24] Davie, (1994).

embedded in religious traditions than before in their social construction of reality.[25] Charles Taylor suggests that of no previous generation was this true.[26] The overall picture suggested by my triangulated data is that contemporary Ireland is now fully post-secular and westernised, analogous to other European countries, Canada and Australia. The state of affairs resembles a Habermasian shift in consciousness in the way young Irish people, like some of their European counterparts, think about religion's post-secular public role (see appendix A). Data reflect Berger's argument that secularity and religion are not mutually contradictory in the experience of most individuals. He argued that people make choices about their religious identities, challenging Church relationships and boundaries that were once secure, pushing for greater democratisation. Berger suggests,

> Since pluralism means that individuals put together their religious beliefs like a child uses Lego pieces to construct an idiosyncratic edifice, it is not surprising that some of the ensuing constructions look a bit odd.[27]

It is evident that contemporary life poses particular challenges for young people, particularly angst (in Heideggerian terms), or anxiety about being-in-the-world. There has been an exponential rise in self-reported anxiety among young people, particularly since the Covid 19 pandemic. What differentiates this form of anxiety is that the perceived existential threat is real and not imagined (usually a symptom of generalised anxiety disorders). It appears that young people engage in wellness activities to enhance their mental health in this scenario. Some interesting juxtapositions emerged, especially regarding perceived benefits of religious affiliation contrasted with disaffiliation benefits that appear to imbue a sense of freedom. According to Patton, qualitative enquiry seems to work best for people with a high tolerance for ambiguity.[28] Thus, there are antinomies, juxtapositions and some contradictions and paradoxes evident in my data that explores complex constructs, which, in truth, defy simple clear-cut analysis.

[25] Berger and Luckmann, (1966).
[26] Taylor, (2007).
[27] Berger, (2014), 57.
[28] Patton, (1990), 24.

The next section explores data findings more deeply, and based on them, I reflectively suggest a juxtaposition of what I term 'two Catholic Irelands.'[29]

8.10 Discussion and reflections: a tale of two Catholic Irelands

As alluded to in my general introduction, I read data findings theologically through the prism of Tracy's major works, mindful of his argument for formulating a model for doing theology by establishing appropriate criteria and procedures. My approach coheres with his argument that research in theology should employ an explicitly transcendental or metaphysical mode of reflection when determining the truth-status of the results of investigations into the meaning of human experiences. As stated, the theme of human experience is one of Tracy's concerns in the context of the "sources" of fundamental theology as "philosophical reflection" in the search for adequate criteria and modes of analysis, and the ensuing task of critical correlation.[30] It also embodies his argument that pluralism impels theologians to recognize insights outside traditional theological source material such as the social sciences, while prizing a theological method that respects the irreducible nature of pluralist thought. Tracy argued that theological analysis of experiences of contemporary life should not be allowed to assume a descriptive and implicitly prescriptive force without rigorously empirical social-scientific support. Here, he agreed with the need to employ some form of ideology-critique in social science, philosophy *and* (his emphasis) theology. Hence, he suggested that all claims for the praxis over theory must allow empirical social-scientific analysis to check theories against the prevailing concrete situation.[31] From a life-meaning perspective, Tracy's views expressed in *The Analogical Imagination* relates to the meaning and perceptions that young people attach to existence, the meaning of self as human in the world and of God.

A major theme elicited was belief fluidity and the subjective drift away from and, in some cases, return to religion and religious practices. Data suggest that similar to some European and North American cultures, young people in Ireland

[29] The term 'two Catholic Irelands' in this context contrasts my life-long experiences of Irish Catholicism with contemporary perceptions based on my data.
[30] Tracy, 1975), 64-90. Tracy intended to author another book on Practical Theology following his *Analogical Imagination*, but this did not materialise.
[31] Tracy, (1981), 75.

are not abandoning religion altogether, but increasingly adopting a mix and match mentality to religion in a rapidly transforming cultural and religious landscape and spiritual marketplace. Here, it is important to take cognisance of the dynamic as opposed to static repositioning potential of worldviews. In this context, through a series of ethnographic portraits, James Michael Nagle explored disaffiliation experiences among American secondary school students who migrate beyond the influence of the Catholic Church.[32] Highlighting the complexity of issues for these young adults, Nagle's study revealed how many who disaffiliated maintained a religious worldview and practice. Nagle uses the term "liquid modernity" to describe a,

> Viable space at the edge of affiliation … where a faithful but critical praxis can continue outside the established boundaries of religious communities.[33]

He posits that insights gained from extra-ecclesial experiences (as is the case here) provoke "testing what is good and moving beyond what is not."[34] The number of my study participants who shared personal stories of transitioning from particular worldviews, both theistic and atheistic, especially from mid-teens to early adulthood, exemplifies this point in a contemporary Irish context. Although some participants construed the notion of religion as a social affair as beneficial and important, data suggest that public expression of religion appears to be giving way to individualised private spheres. It appears that participants who continue to engage in organised communal religious practice do so in a piecemeal fashion. This trend reflects Bruce's view that occasional attendance at religious services is related to nostalgia and tradition coupled with the relative absence of secular ceremonies that confer the same degree of solemnity and seriousness."[35] Data suggest that Hervieu-Léger's argument that a patchwork belief mentality may render the formation of believing communities impossible, and that modern communities are less capable of maintaining a collective chain of memory as a source of meaning are important future channel markers. In this scenario, no authority defines or imposes an external norm upon the individual

[32] Nagle, James Michael, *Out on Waters: The Religious Life and Learning of Young Catholics beyond the Church*, (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2020).
[33] Nagle, (2020), 119.
[34] Nagle, (2020), 119.
[35] Bruce, (2011).

in spiritual matters in her view. My data reflect this point, suggesting a break in the normative link to past Catholicism and the shift from obligation to consumption. My qualitative data suggest that Catholicism remains important culturally even if participation is minimal where a majority of my sample are largely inactive members.[36] For them, belonging to Catholicism is still an important ethno-identity marker as opposed to a religious membership. Even those Catholics in my sample who appear indifferent to religion appear to retain a casual loyalty and emotional tie to the old religion. Public expression of religion appears to be giving way to individualised private sphere[37] forms of spiritual expression among a significant cohort of my sample, where participants largely no longer take for granted the worldview into which they happen to be born. It appears from some responses that irreligious trends exists because of rejection of an *a priori* commitment to a Catholic dogmatism no longer construed as relevant. Importantly, this does not necessarily entail rejection of God among my sample, but rejection of organized religion. Here, it is important to reiterate the point made in my general introduction regarding 'no religion' adherents as a misunderstood population, and indeed the apparent contradiction, as Tara Burton points out, of identifying as S*piritual but not Religious* and yet identifying with a given religion.[38] This begs the question as to what religion is, and what constitutes sacralities in the worldviews of young people. Burton argues that ticking a box does not tell you what a religion is, rather what society considers a legitimate and institutionalized form of one. Based on data, my conjecture is that there is no such thing as not having a religion, which I consider an inherent part of being human. Following John Caputo, my view is that there is a fundamentally religious quality to human experience itself, whether as he suggests, one subscribes to one of the institutional faiths or belief in the God of one of the traditional confessions, or whether one is an atheist vis-à-vis the several theisms.[39] There is a deeply religious element within us all, a part of

[36] This finding is congruent with findings from Irish statistical data and previous studies, notably those of Inglis, Ganiel and Andersen discussed in chapter 1.
[37] Casanova, José, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.) 1994.
[38] Burton, (2022).
19. This apparent contradiction is evident in my findings, for example, as I will outline in my discussion of findings.
[39] Caputo, John D, *What to Believe: Twelve Brief Lessons in Radical Theology,* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2023).

being human. Following de Souza, I view religion as an innate human construct, generated by a person's spiritual nature as my definition at the outset suggested. In my view, there is no human life without 'religion', which takes different forms for different people. As co-researcher, I fused horizons on this issue with some participants. This point is reflected in data elicited from those in my sample who self-identify in the 'no religion' category in survey proformas. Derek, for example, is representative of many participants who shared my view that a conjunction of the term 'no religion' is impossible when he stated, "I completely agree, I absolutely agree" (rec 21, October 2023). Data suggest a yearning among young people who identify as nonreligious for some anchor in life meaning beyond the material world, often sought in new age forms of spirituality practices. In this regard, Karen Armstrong suggests,

> Religion was not something tacked on to the human condition … the desire to cultivate a sense of the transcendent may be *the* defining human characteristic.[40]

Armstrong postulates that the human experience of transcendence emanates from the core of human existence. In her view, this yearning for the absolute is a natural aspect of being human and not always recognised as relating to the divine, as in Buddhism. In this regard, my sample appear attracted to and attempt to embody the Buddhist philosophies of *metta* (loving kindness), the *kuruna* or compassion, care for the other and for eco systems. Irish theologian Joseph O' Leary argues that when we connect a Christian concept with a Buddhist one,

> Scholarly attention to this subtlety and complexity may sometimes have to be sacrificed or suspended - in an act of hermeneutic violence - so that the two concepts can interact in mutual deconstruction. Throwing a Buddhist cat among the Christian pigeons, or vice versa, we set up a hybrid way of thinking, aiming not at a synthesis of the two traditions in their historical identity but at finding new religious or spiritual bearings for today.[41]

Discussing mystical theology, Evelyn Underhill encapsulates the essence of the search for meaning and transcendence from a Western Christian perspective,

> Their (human family) one passion seems to be the prosecution of a certain spiritual and intangible quest: the finding of a 'way out' or

[40] Armstrong, Karen, *The Case for God: What Religion Really Mean,* (The Bodley Head, 2009), 19.
[41] O'Leary, (2019), 143/4.

> 'way back' to some desirable state in which, they can satisfy their craving for absolute truth.[42]

Hervieu-Léger's point regarding the self-referential nature of individualised spirituality emerged strongly in my data, and contra Andersen's findings, my data suggest that a significant number of a younger demographic have moved to new expressions of immanent spirituality. Both my quantitative and qualitative data suggest that forms of self-referential spirituality are replacing traditional faith communities and institutionalised religious practices for some young people. In this regard, Voas's point regarding the fuzziness of, and what counts as religious belief is relevant here. If, as he suggests, belief relates to accepting the existence of a higher power or ultimate moral order as opposed to knowledge of specific articles of faith and knowledge of basic Church doctrine, the proportion of my sample who considered themselves nonreligious would be much less. The key point here is that the apparent irreligious drift among young people in Ireland is not necessarily away from God but from organised, institutional religion, congruent with James White's point alluded to in my general introduction. Wittgenstein, who grappled with, and was fascinated with religion despite identifying as atheist, argued that people adopt or lose their faith not because of arguments for or against the existence of God but because of experience, or ways they live their lives.[43] In this context, O' Leary argues,

> Religions are false and valueless when they are not in accord with reality itself … indeed the whole point of religions is to bring us into contact with this reality in its deepest and most universal sense.[44]

According to Michelle Dillon, the typical, self-identified Catholic is now one who disagrees with Church teaching on sexual and other issues while continuing to remain Catholic. In her view, they illuminate the post secular reality: the (partial) failure of secularism (to displace faith), *and* (her emphasis) the secularization of religion. Dillon argues that the persistence of Catholicism as a meaningful religious tradition is largely because many Catholics are empowered

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[42] Underhill, Evelyn, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, (1993), 3.
[43] Cited In Tallis, Robert, Williams, Rowan. "Science, Stories and the Self: a Conversation between Raymond Tallis and Rowan Williams." In: *Religion and Atheism-Beyond the Divide*, edited by Anthony Carroll and Richard Norman, (Routledge. 2017), 3-24.
[44] O'Leary, Joseph S. *Reality Itself: Philosophical Challenges of Indian Mahāyāna*, (Chisokudō Publications, (2019).

to hold together faith, reason and lived experience, and thus to interpret and own Catholicism in ways at odds with official teaching.[45] Analysing the difference between Irish and American Catholicism, Dillon argues that the latter has been more resilient than Irish Catholicism when faced with the forces of modernisation, secularism and individualization and the priest sex abuse crisis.[46] David Martin also argues that being Catholic in modern Irish society does not carry assent to a certain kind of logic based on natural law or inferences from dogma.[47] Decades ago, Lindbeck suggested that authority claims made by Churches to dictate a certain code of behaviour does not sit easily in modernity where the modern mood is antipathetic to the very notion of communal norms. He suggested that the mere idea that becoming religious might on occasion seem,

> Alienating and oppressive, an infringement of freedom and choice, a denial of creativity, and repugnant to all the most cherished values of modernity.[48]

Philosopher John Cottingham believes that what is central to human life is not reaching an intellectual decision, but the adoption of a framework of understanding and praxis.[49] For life meaning, Cottingham prizes the practices of spirituality stemming from the Christian tradition, not in virtue of allegiance to complex theological dogmas but in the virtue of a passionate commitment to a certain way of life.[50] In this context, my data suggest that an overall sense of moral good and value pluralism is associated with participants' sense of spirituality. These findings suggest that respondents appeared to perceive spirituality more in terms of moral uprightness, holism, inner peace and meaning. Value pluralism appears to embrace a sense of all that is good, for example an interest in eco-spirituality, where contemporary forms of spiritual practice draw their central reference point from an awareness of and desire to improve ecological relations. In that regard, Melanie's narrative was replete with examples of this point and is representative of data gleaned from other

[45] Dillon, Michelle, *Postsecular Catholicism: Relevance and Renewal*, (NY: Oxford University Press, (2018), 20.
[46] Dillon, Michelle, "The Difference between Irish and American Catholicism", in *Are The Irish Different*? Edited by Tom Inglis, (Manchester University Press, (2014).
[47] Martin, David, "Secularisation and the Future of Christianity", Journal *of Contemporary Religion*, 20 (2), (2005), 152.
[48] Lindbeck, (1984), 77.
[49] Cottingham, John, *On the Meaning of Life*, (London: Routledge), 2003, 90.
[50] Cottingham, 2003, 91.

participants. Additionally, her view regarding atheistic morality coheres with Baggini's suggestion referenced in my literature review that no *a priori* link exists between being a positive or negative person in atheism, and that atheists can be more sensitive to aesthetic experience, more moral, or more attuned to natural beauty than theists can. However, value pluralism engenders two opposing perspectives. One view sees it is an ineliminable or key element of personal and interpersonal life, where religious diversity is natural and good, accommodating a postmodern way of finding life meaning. Modern pluralist societies like Ireland accommodate a situation where not everyone is simply secular and non-religious. In this regard I concur with David Ford's view that there are multiple forms of modernity, some more publicly religious than others, with a variety of ways of being simultaneously religious (and, I suggest, spiritual) and modern. Our society, in Ford's view, is not simply religious or simply secular; it is complexly and simultaneously multi-religious and multi-secular, with many hybrids.[51] This complexity is evident in my data where forms of marketplace spirituality increasingly compete with organised religion to fill a void in the pursuit for life meaning and sense of community for young people. Postmodernism does not adopt a totalizing or oppressive exclusive attitude towards belief in transcendence. Instead, it considers the holding of these beliefs as one option among many others. The opposing view sees pluralism as generating problems of incompatibility of different religious beliefs in the same society, affecting not only Christianity but also all religious traditions. As Berger argues, it is an empirical societal fact experienced by ordinary people, a social situation in which people with different ethnicities, worldviews, and moralities live together peacefully and interact with each other amicably.[52]

I regard Ganiel's concept of extra-institutional religion as an important cultural development in Ireland, particularly in view of Irish political theorist Claire Mitchell's assertion that religion remains one of the central dimensions of social difference on the island.[53] In this context, I argued potential benefits to religious

[51] Ford, David F. Broader, *Deeper, Further: Engaging with Religions in the Twenty-first Century*, The Bevir Lecture, (Eton College, United Kingdom, 2014).
[52] Berger, (2014).
[53] Mitchell, Claire, "Introduction", In: *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland: Boundaries of Belonging and Belief*, (Ashgate, 2006), 1-21

disaffiliation.[54] My sense from data is that issues such as religious conflict or denominational divisions are anathema to contemporary youth culture. I also consider that Turpin aptly describes Ireland's religious and spiritual landscape in his analysis of the country as being 'Ex-Catholic.' This is one view that suggests the emergence of a new model of the good, and secular, Irish person that is being rapidly adopted in Irish society."[55] The concept closely resembles the term 'emotionology' (see appendix A). Regarding holistic practices, data reflect Taylor's argument outlined in chapter 1.2 that they are a spiritual quest to construct ontological meaning and significance more deeply. In that context, Heelas and Woodhead emphasise the increasing importance of individual religious experiences in addition to a subjective turn to satisfying spiritual experiences, which people could not find in traditional institutional Churches,[56] reflected in my data.

The malevolent influence of modern social media emerged as a concern for many participants, particularly regarding the influence of science and technology on Ireland's religious/spiritual landscape. In the context of Feminist Theology, Sheila Briggs addresses the issue of what she terms "techno-science" to replace the phrase 'science and technology' in popular culture, basing her views to some extent on the work of Elaine Graham.[57] Briggs concludes that our material existence is incomplete, permeable to the nonhuman, nonorganic, and entangled with the divine.[58] In this context, Liam sees science as a spiritual act – an act of devotion. Arguing that science is not only compatible with, but is actually a profound source of spirituality, Carl Sagan states,

> When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of

[54] Based on the overall sense of moral good and value pluralism referred to above, I argued that despite disadvantages, positive benefits may accrue from irreligious trends, for example the diminution of sectarianism as a pernicious form of racism in Ireland. See, Mc Bennett, Padraig. "Increasing Irreligious Trends Among a Younger Demographic in Ireland: Are There Potential Benefits?" *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 23:4, 2023), 365-81.
[55] Turpin, (2022).
[56] Heelas and Woodhead, (2005).
[57] Graham, Elaine, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, (2002).
[58] Briggs, (2012), 101.

> life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual.[59]

Discussing technology in the context of environmental ethics in *The Self-Exposure of the Classics to and in the Situation: the Ideal of Dialogue*,[60] Tracy states,

> Less graphic, perhaps, but in the long run more liberating and more frightening is Heidegger's insistence that technology and its attendant technical reason have become the very framework (*Gestell*) of our time.[61]

Tracy outlines that for Heidegger himself, the framework is none other than a monstrous provocation of nature whereby we rob ancient *techne* of its true vocation, its classical intrinsic relationship to nature (*physis*) and to *poesis*.[62] Tracy asserts,

> Surely we must attend to Heidegger's critique of the crisis – a critique whose violent yet controlled energy in both expression and thought bears classic force.[63]

Of particular concern, is what some scholars term the commodification of spirituality evident in my data, which Jeremy Carrette defines as "the process through which persons, values, and practices are perceived, treated and valued as commodities or saleable objects"[64] Similarly, I suggest the term 'merchant' spirituality as equally descriptive of this phenomenon which I define as,

> Emerging online social spaces where the spiritual practices of Eastern traditions are increasingly repackaged and commodified as objects of merchandise by untrained people masquerading as gurus for the purpose of commercial gain.

David Lyons, for example, whose views of modern perceptions of Jesus I discussed in my literature review, is among other scholars who are sceptical about the commodification of spirituality as opposed to religion.[65] This issue was identified by many participants, evident, for example in my second case study in

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[59] Sagan, Carl, *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark.* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996).
[60] Tracy, (1981), 101.
[61] Tracy, (1981), 101.
[62] Heidegger, Martin, "The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays," edited by William Lovitt, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), cited in Tracy, (1981), 367 n 43.
[63] Tracy, (1981), 353.
[64] Carrette, Jeremy R., "Objectification and Commodification", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion,* (2018), 739-753.
[65] Lyons, (2000) 136-7.

the context of Ria's view of the detrimental aspects of modern social media. Other participants, for example Abby and Liam, expressed scepticism regarding online spirituality trends and an inward focus on the self. Veling discusses this issue in the context of Levinas' work, suggesting,

> Much of today's "popular spirituality" goes in search of something that will give our lives a deeper sense of meaning that will fulfil our desires that will absorb our fragmented, isolated selves into a larger, more integrated whole.[66]

He underlines that for Levinas, this is reflective of an existential need that is too tied to the self and what the self lacks, rather than a desire that reaches beyond the self toward the other.[67] Veling underlines,

> To be an "I", to secure my identity, to feel my own authentic subjectivity – this, for Levinas will only lead us circling back to the Same. The subject is always trying to secure its identity in terms of itself. According to Levinas, however, we need to start elsewhere, outside ourselves, "outside the subject."[68]

Veling shares anecdotes of his own teaching of Levinas' texts, commenting on how his class often "bristles" in the face of the priority Levinas gives to responsibility rather than freedom, obligation rather than choice, self-giving rather than self-agency, passivity rather than assertiveness, "exterior-to-me" rather than "interior-to-me." We bristle, suggests Veling, because Levinas rubs against our cultural habits. In effect, we find ourselves protesting, "What about me?"[69] Veling outlines how back in 1974, Liberation Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote,

> Rediscovering the other means entering his own world. It also means a break with ours. The world of inward-looking absorption with self … is not only interior but is socio-culturally conditioned; To enter the world of the other … with the actual demands involved … is to begin … a process of conversion.[70]

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[66] Veling, (1999), 280.
[67] Levinas, Emmanuel, Kearney, Richard, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas", in *Face to Face with Levinas*, edited by Richard A Cohen, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 31.
[68] Veling, (1999) 280.
[69] Veling, (1999) 280.
[70] Gutiérrez, Gustavo, "Liberation, Theology and Proclamation", in *Theology of Liberation, Concilium*, edited by Claude Geffré and Gustavo Gutiérrez, 6/10 June (1974), 59, cited in Veling (1999), 276.

Veling sees Gutiérrez's words resonant with what has come to be known today as our postmodern situation. He questions where theology should turn in its conversation with the cultural "mood" of postmodernity. According to David Tracy, it should turn around, and face the other,

> The turn to the other is the quintessential turn of postmodernity itself. It is that turn, above all, that defines the intellectual as well as the ethical meaning of postmodernity. The other and the different come forward now as central intellectual categories across the major disciplines, including theology …part of that return to otherness … is the return of biblical Judaism and Christianity to undo the complacencies of modernity, including modern theology.[71]

To turn around, to face the other, according to Veling, is the conversion required of theology. He suggests that one of the reasons Levinas wants to refocus our attention toward the face of the other is his concern that we have enclosed ourselves in a world of "immanence." In other words, according to Veling, we have reduced everything to being-in-the-world, and we no longer know how to speak of transcendence, the voice of otherness, the desire of infinity, the revelation of God who is otherwise than our being-in-the-world. He wants to speak against the complacencies of an age that thinks itself free of everything that is other than itself and beyond the embarrassment of a relationship with an unknown God.[72] According to Tracy,

> Surely, on the central question of transcendence, this ethical route to the Absolute Other only by way of the interrelationships of human others is Levinas' most original, and most daring, and for Jewish and Christian theology, both promising … and controversial move.[73]

The discussion points above prompted self-reflection on the juxtaposition of what I term 'two Catholic Irelands.' It is important to state that my intention here is not to polarize good spirituality and bad religion or vice-versa but to present reflections that juxtapose two cultural eras. My reflections contrast my experiences of Catholicism when I was a similar age to the demographic of the

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[71] Tracy, David, "Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity", *Theology Today*, 51 (1), 1994.
[72] Levinas, Emmanuel, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" in Peperzak, Adriaan, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1993), 96.
[73] Tracy, David, "Response to Adriaan Peperzak on Transcendence" in *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, edited by Adriaan Peperzak, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 194.

present study against the current state of affairs. At that historical juncture, Ireland was largely considered both a perfect society and the most Catholic country in the world in what was perceived as an enchanted era. Catholicism's influence and authority permeated almost all aspects of Irish religious and social life. It was a form of life that had to be accepted in Wittgenstein's terms. In my view, Inglis aptly captures this authority in Foucaldian terms,

> In the most subtle and yet penetrative form of power, the supervisory eye of the Church was internalized in the minds and hearts of Irish Catholics.[74]

An enduring personal memory from this era relates to the sectarianism that led to actual paramilitary violence during what was colloquially known as 'the troubles,' in Ireland, where, as Bruce suggests,

> Bad religion had bad social consequences … society read the troubles as what happens when people take any religion too seriously.[75]

Writing about the Irish Catholic Church a decade ago, then Archbishop Diarmuid Martin considered that it had become conformist and controlling not just with its faithful, but also with society in general.[76] Regarding its self-understanding he stated,

> All I can say is that anyone who might have thought that Catholic Ireland was anything like a perfect society must now be very disillusioned.

Archbishop Martin's demythologising of the historically perceived enchanted nature of Catholic Ireland reflects my personal experience. For too long the Catholic Church felt that it was safely ensconced in Irish society. Following Ganiel, I consider religious diversity in a post-Catholic Ireland as a gift for celebration, rather than a burden that requires toleration. Ganiel quoted a 62-year-old Catholic woman's view of a younger generation that in part reflects my own view,

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[74] Inglis, (1998), 211.
[75] Bruce, (2014), 19.
[76] Martin, Diarmuid, "A Post-Catholic Ireland? Renewing the Irish Church from Within", America: the Jesuit Review, 17th March 2014. Adapted from an address presented as the Russo Family Lecture at the Fordham Centre on Religion and Culture in New York on April 24, 2013.https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2014/03/17/post-catholic-ireland-renewing-irish-church-within accessed on 10th January 2024.

> Personally I think they are an awful lot more Christian … there isn't the same keeping up appearances bit. They are much more honest with each other. I don't have any fears for their spiritual health.[77]

Ganiel outlines that rather than trying too hard to entice a younger generation back into the institutional Church, this woman expressed her view that "the Holy spirit would see it right," adding that the institutional Church was largely irrelevant to her own spiritual life.[78] Following Berger regarding the erroneous portrayal of the enchanted nature of earlier generations, my view is that the contemporary world is not as disenchanted as often portrayed. In the context of atheism, Pasquale and Kosmin, for example dispute the disenchantment of modernity, postulating that at an individual level most people's worldviews remain enchanted to varying degrees, although in increasingly informal, selective and personalized ways in the absence of organized religion.[79] Catholicism's influence slowly eroded since the 1970s. Monopoly over Irish morality began to fade, and, as Inglis suggests, has all but disappeared.[80] Referencing the effects of the CSA scandals, Archbishop Martin underlined the continuing demoralizing effect on the entire Irish Church.[81] Some scholars consider that these scandals have irreparably damaged the Church's reputation.[82] Whereas the younger, millennial age group demographic may have no direct experience of the public discourse regarding these scandals, parental or other family mentor influences may have shaped their perceptions about Catholicism. This period was, as one scholar suggests, the Church's dark night.[83] Turpin argues that those who purport to have no religion in Ireland base this identification on a moral critique of the Church and its failings.[84] Vincent Twomey notes that some no religion adherents often tend to be virulently anti-Catholic.[85] Some scholars see disconnection of personal faith from the

[77] Ganiel, (2016), 7.
[78] Ganiel, (2016), 9.
[79] Pasquale and Kosmin, (2013), 451-467.
[80] Inglis, (1998).
[81] It is important to state that a very limited number of clergy were involved in the abuse scandals, and that the majority of priests carried out, and continue to carry out their work in direct witness to the word of Jesus Christ.
[82] See for example, Donnelly, (2000), 12-17, also, Donnelly and Inglis (2010), 1-19.
[83] Mannion, Gerard, *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism: Evangelii Gaudium and the Papal Agenda*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
[84] Turpin, (2022),
[85] Twomey, (2003), 19.

institutional Church resulting from these scandals.[86] Brian Conway, however, denotes that secular trends are evident among a younger demographic who have little or no experience of a pre-scandal Church.[87] Conway suggests,

> It is difficult to see how the Church could be rescued from growing cultural indifference, even hostility, towards it.[88]

According to Derek Scally, for some Catholics it appears that the once Catholic majority is now a "modest, even mocked minority."[89] Brendan Hoban compares the Church's response to CSA revelations as erecting a scaffolding when the building has already collapsed. Hoban suggests that ongoing change in Irish Catholicism is now a permanent reality. He argues that a first step is to accept this reality, and that dealing with change means "living in the grey," accepting and embracing difficult questions that have no ready-made black and white answers, dealing with ambivalence in a culture of modernity. He suggests that the focus now needs to be on intellectual rigour and on a communicable theology that connects with the lived experience of people.[90] In my view, the aftermath following a series of official government inquiries into allegations of various forms of abuse such as the Ferns,[91] Ryan, Murphy, Cloyne, Mother and Baby, Magdalene laundry and so forth have contributed to the seismic changes in the religious landscape that are now apparent. The Ryan report, for example, investigating abuse of children in mostly Catholic Irish institutions, described it as systemic, pervasive, chronic, excessive, arbitrary and endemic.[92] The dithering, half-measured hierarchical response to the scandals was one of institutional defensiveness, which as my data suggests, does not sit well with

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[86] Ganiel, (2017), 6.
[87] Conway, Brian, "Irish Catholicism: Where Has it Been and Where is it Going?" in *The Study of Religions in Ireland, Past, Present and Future,* edited by Brendan Mc Namara & Hazel O' Brien, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).
[88] Conway, (2022), 142.
[89] Scally, Derek, *The Best Catholics in the World: The Irish, The Church and the End of a Special Relationship*, (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 352.
[90] Hoban, Brendan, "Another Beginning?" Association of Catholic Priests, August (2019), https://associationofcatholicpriests.ie/another-beginning/
[91] Government of Ireland, The Ferns Report, https://www.lenus.ie/bitstream/handle/10147/560434/thefernsreportoctober2005.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y. (Stationery Office, Dublin, 2005), Accessed on 12/092020.
[92] 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/ Accessed on 12/092020.

those in the upper age group of my demographic who are more aware of the scandals era.

In his analysis, Archbishop Martin suggested that the signs of youth participation in the Irish Church are limited to conservative young Catholics. He expressed scepticism about whether this is where the future of the Church lay, suggesting that many of these movements of young, more traditional Catholics are very limited in numbers and make few inroads into the lives of their peers.[93] History has shown, however, that religion, like spring, has an endlessly fecund nature. Despite the picture painted by scholars of Ireland's contemporary landscape, the chapter highlights research that indicates some reconnection to organised, institutional religion among young Catholics, which is a key finding in the present study. Despite the evidence of reconnection to religion, I share Archbishop Martin's scepticism regarding the limited influence that conservative young Catholics can exert in future religious trends. However, McKinney suggests that these young Catholics, confident in their faith are those that have the potential to participate in future leadership roles of Church life.[94] Andersen's scepticism regarding whether more individualized attachment to Catholicism will be sufficiently strong to maintain a collective memory is also a point of reflection. I consider that both Ganiel's and Andersen's findings are indicative of the ebbing and flowing nature of the religious change tide referred to earlier, despite Ganiel's caveat that religiosity may relate to opposing ethno-cultural identity reasons.[95]

In chapter 3, I referenced Reimer-Barry's argument that empathetic listening challenges other methodologies in Catholic ethics where thick description precedes normative reflection. The next brief section discusses empathetic listening and dialogue in the context of important and timely discussions on Synodality and Vatican 11 from different Catholic and other Christian perspectives. The section coheres with Browning's idea of doing Practical Theology through dialogue and conversation alluded to earlier. The views discussed are articulated in *Synodality and the Recovery of Vatican11: A New*

[93] Martin, (2013).
[94] McKinney, (2023), 342.
[95] Ethno-cultural identity in this context refers to Catholicism largely being synonymous with being Irish, while Protestantism is synonymous with being British.

Way for Catholics. Collectively, the contributors suggest that synodality is a search for a new paradigm - a new way of being Church, and a "new way for Catholics."[96] They see synodality as part of an era change and search for meaning in the contemporary world that characterises a major strand in the thinking of Pope Francis.[97] The metaphor of journey is central to the Pope's ecclesiological vision in the third millennium, where dialogue and listening are paramount.

8.11 A way forward - embracing the gift of diversity through listening and dialogue

Decades ago, Richard McBrien outlined the special configuration of principles within Catholicism that constitute its distinctiveness from other Christian Churches. These include its emphasis on tradition, its regard for reason, its analogical imagination, and its universality including a 'both/and' rather than an 'either/or' approach to Christian faith and practice.[98] He argues that Catholic social teachings need to recognize and respect the legitimate diversity and pluralism that characterizes the universal church and especially the autonomy of local Churches. McBrien asserted that the Church must emphasize that its social teachings apply not only to the world beyond the Church, but also to the Church itself, grounded in the principle of sacramentality. In other words, it must practice what it preaches, especially in matters of social justice and human rights.[99] In his first encyclical *Lumen Fidei* Pope Francis stated,

> Theology is more than simply an effort of human reason to analyse and understand, along the lines of the experimental sciences. God cannot be reduced to an object. He is a subject who makes Himself known and perceived in an interpersonal relationship[100]

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Pope articulated appreciation of the scholarly efforts of theologians to advance dialogue with the world of cultures and sciences, but

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[96] McKinney, Stephen J, O'Loughlin, Thomas, Tóth, Beáta, (editors), *Synodality and the Recovery of Vatican11: A New Way for Catholics*, (Dublin, Messenger Publications 2024). This book has its origins in conversations within the UK Catholic Theological Association (CTA).

[97] See: Hall, Sean E, "Revolutionary Theology, Era Change and Synodality" in *Synodality and the Recovery of Vatican11: A New Way for Catholics*, (2024).

[98] McBrien, Richard P, *Catholicism,* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 3 -17.

[99] McBrien, (1994), 959 – 963

[100] Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, (Vatican: The Holy See, 2013).

advised them not to be content with a "desk-bound theology."[101] In these encyclicals, Pope Francis clearly prizes a practical approach to theology that involves open dialogue with people in the real world – a dialogue in which people are honest with each other in adult-to-adult conversation, (which Pope Francis terms *parrhesia*) which, according to one scholar is not a particular strength of the Catholic Church across history.[102] Hence, the importance of a community moving towards consensus by means of a patient and disciplined listening to young people. Watkins suggests that one of the most challenging aspects of Pope Francis's call to a synodal way of being Church is his insistence that the process should be as inclusive as possible.[103] Dogmatic theologian Beáta Tóth outlines a "pilgrim hermeneutic" in Pope Francis's teachings. She emphasises that listening is more than simple hearing, carried out with the Augustinian notion of "the ear of the heart."[104] The concepts of listening, dialogue and inclusivity regarding *all* (my emphasis) God's people is well exemplified by Watkins research on marginalised communities, for example regarding how academics and people with disabilities began to respond to each other.[105] In addition to persons with disabilities, those who are on the margins include the poor, migrants, the divorced and remarried, people in polygamous marriages, victims of caste-based discrimination, the socially marginalised (for whatever reason) and LGBTQ+ people. Watkins suggests an "edgy-synodality" to conceptualise the places of less-heard voices and experiences, including these marginalised narratives,

> Not of exotic others, but as central, and, in their own ways, authoritative in conversations of discernment.[106]

Watkins sees these convictions as the ways in which the Holy Spirit "unconfined by the Church's own delimitations of herself, seeks to lead all people into God's

[101] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, (Vatican: The Holy See, 2013), 133.
[102] Hall, (2024), 106.
[103] Watkins notes that the use of the language of Church is fraught. In the context of the present study, Church refers to the Roman Catholic Church, but similar to Watkins, it does so in a way that reflets the ecumenical and extensive sense of 'Church' described in *Lumen Gentium*, See Watkins, (2024), 83, n. 7.
[104] Tóth, (2024), 171.
[105] This is in the context of a two-day colloquium on disability theology and practice organised by the CTiP Network.
[106] Watkins, (2024), 76.

life and truth."[107] She suggests that if we want to know more fully, what God is doing in God's world we need to attend to the diversity of places of grace, including those on the peripheries of, or even clearly outside, the Church's organisational bounds.[108] Watkins suggests that this insistence is rooted in a theological conviction of the ways God acts in the world, a basic premise of Practical Theology research as discussed. Pope Francis clearly wishes young people to be involved in the synodal journey, whether on the margins of society or not. His vision of synodality is a "dynamic communion" or communication with each other, a concept emphasised by political theologian Anna Rowlands.[109] McKinney also argues that those who feel marginalised from the contemporary Catholic Church are those who are divorced, in co-habituation, in same-sex relationships or those who identify as LGBQTi. In his view, these factors, allied to wounds caused by the scandals and abuse of power, and to perceptions of voicelessness in a largely male dominated hierarchical church, can lead to disengagement.[110] Irish theologian Gerry O'Hanlon also emphasises the importance of listening - attending to the sense of the faith, and the life-experiences of all the people of God and working together humbly and cooperatively to discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit and putting God's will into practice.[111] O'Hanlon argues that reform that springs from an encounter with Jesus Christ is "qualitatively different from reform springing from a systems management and organisation horizon alone."[112] He suggests that in a synodal Church,

> Decision-making is decentralised, the voice of all is listened to, and a process of discernment rather than a simple command and obey model is used.[113]

Ashley Beck proposes that Catholic Social Teaching (CST) can contribute significantly to the synodal process and theological renewal because it is a way

[107] Watkins, (2024), 71.
[108] Watkins, (2024), 71. She notes that "outside" in this context is not identical with "outside the Church", See 83, n. 8.
[109] Rowlands, Anna, *Towards a Politics of Communion,* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 167-168.
[110] McKinney, (2023), 339.
[111] O'Hanlon, Gerry, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis,* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2018).
[112] O'Hanlon, (2018), 59.
[113] O'Hanlon, (2018), 93.

of *doing* (my emphasis) theology that is based on dialogue.[114] He quotes from the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*,

> The Church journeys along the roads of history together with all of humanity. She lives in the world, although not of the world (cf. Jn 17:14 0-15).[115]

Beck argues that the culture of dialogue entails a true apprenticeship and a discipline that enables us to view others as valid dialogue partners, to respect the foreigner, the immigrant and people of different cultures as worthy of being listened to. In my view, these are contemporary equivalents of Levinas's widow, orphan and beggar, deserving of the kind of gesture that Levinas terms ethical. In this context, Michael Kirwan makes some illuminative points regarding "the theological responsibility of the non-theologian." Kirwan suggests that the Church, "slow to read the signs of the times, and persistently wrong-footed by advances toward social equality, seems to be forever catching up."[116] He argues that such issues as the debate around women's ordination, pronouncements on gender and sexual morality, the scandal and shock and the

> Spectacular mishandling by ecclesial authorities (of the CSA crisis) are rooted in the inability to take seriously the voices of the 'two cities': both theological and secular wisdom, whether taken from sociology, psychology, or jurisprudence.[117]

In this context, he references Casanova's insistence on a theologically sensitive social science that pays due respect to the two cities. Kirwan cites Casanova's idea of the "theological responsibility" of the non-theologian to bridge the "ugly broad ditch" between social and ecclesial morality."[118] Kirwan apportions CSA as but one of a number of open wounds, the consequences of which have yet to be fully addressed.[119] Advocating a "positive euphemistic theology",[120] Kirwan argues that it will be the antithesis of the Church's "evasive, spiritualised,

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[114] Beck, Ashley, "The Synodal Pathway and Theological Renewal" in *Synodality and the Recovery of Vatican11: A New Way for Catholics*, (2024), 121-134.
[115] *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (London: Continuum, 2004), section 18, quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, 3, cited in Beck, (2024), 132.
[116] Kirwan, (2024), 139.
[117] Kirwan, (2024), 139.
[118] Casanova, José, "The Church in the World: Secular Morality and the Challenge of Gender", (Georgetown University, 2013), cited in Kirwan, (2024), 139.
[119] Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris*, n.4.
[120] Kirwan describes euphemistic theology as avoiding the full truth of what could or should be said, See Kirwan, (2024), 142-143.

inappropriate, or simply absent" disclosure about the scandals.[121] He cites Marie Keenan's analysis of the crisis from the discipline of therapy, which concludes with a call for a critical theology, and a radical overhaul of Church structures.[122] Keenan locates the CSA problem not solely in individual pathology, but also the coalescence of a perfect storm of systemic factors including perspectives on sexuality and power relations.

Although my study is non-missional or evangelically focused, it embraces the synodal themes in its approach to doing theology, combining a theologically sensitive social science (in Kirwan's terms) to focus on listening and dialogue with young people, presenting their views for the purpose of adding scholarly knowledge. According to Reimer-Barry, by starting with the lived experiences of particular people, instead of magisterial teachings or divine revelation,[123] ethnography can situate Catholic ethics in the complex contexts of the everyday person's struggles of Christian discipleship.[124] She sees the importance of empathetic listening as a shift in the locus of authority in the research setting where an opportunity presents itself to honour the uniqueness of each participant's story.

The next section discusses mitigation factors employed to offset limitations and challenges to my research design, including Gadamer's suspicion of method and his assertion that any perspective offered by a method imposes limitations and boundaries.

8.12 Study limitations, strengths and potential for postdoctoral development

There are methodological limitations as well as strengths in any research design, countering the sometimes-misleading research fantasy that the final, well-honed linear text appeared more or less as expected with few problems in either process or construction. Lincoln and Guba's assert that there is no single methodological "truth." All truths are partial and incomplete, so there can be no single

[121] Kirwan, (2024), 146.
[122] Keenan, Marie, *Child Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organisational Structure,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), cited in Kirwan, (2024), 139.

[123] I adopted this approach in the present study.
[124] Reimer-Barry, (2011), 99.

conventional paradigm, to which scholars might ascribe.[125] As Bennett *et al* suggest, all research is impure and imperfect with no finality in any kind of theological endeavour.[126] Identifying the limitations of methods generally, Swinton and Mowat suggest that the questions emerging from within the plausibility structures of any particular method will allow the researcher to access a limited amount of knowledge that the method's questions will elicit. They argue that becoming embedded in a particular perspective can blind researchers to the limitations enforced on them by that perspective.[127] Triangulation, allowing several interdisciplinary perspectives to complete a broader picture helped mitigate limitations of the present study. According to Flick,

> Once the debates in qualitative research about the right (or wrong) methodological approach have calmed down and if the social justice-related issues continue to become more and more complex, triangulation may become a kind of standard in qualitative research. This can be explicit – that several perspectives on an issue become required in calls for proposals or PhDs – or implicit. Then it would become some kind of routine in the field. Triangulation will become more important if single methods themselves become less important.[128]

The main benefit of triangulation in the present study was to establish quantitative measures of data related to the topics, which formed the basis of qualitative exploration. Phase one yielded a relatively high response rate that contributed substantial and interesting grounding raw data, thus my questionnaire achieved what it set out to achieve. The research decision to seek general descriptives only proved correct, as some respondents did not complete the questionnaire.[129] Entering caveats regarding survey data generally, Voas references European opinion polls that show high levels of belief, not merely on religious or quasi-religious ideas, but also on aspects of secular supernatural. Voas asserts that is far from clear that these beliefs make any difference to the

[125] Lincoln and Guba, (2000), 163-188.
[126] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 31.
[127] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), 110.
[128] Flick, Uwe, "Triangulation", in The *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 5th edition, edited by Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications, 2018), 458-9.
[129] This would have restricted the statistical power of any potential analyses and therefore generalisability of the quantitative results had I sought to make findings generalizable to other contexts.

people claiming them. He underlines how studies on polling show that people are prepared to express opinions about almost everything, whether or not they have any knowledge or interest in the topic.[130] As evidenced by my discussion of findings, triangulation elicited rich data that added hermeneutic substance to the survey data. Data collected in qualitative research are longer, more detailed, and more variable in content.[131] There are challenges to qualitative research generally but particularly hermeneutic phenomenology. Qualitative research is not a fixed method that researchers simply apply to situations but rather an evolving and shifting dialogical approach or attitude.[132] As outlined, hermeneutic phenomenologically oriented research is not bound by the structured stages of a method, and criteria to ensure rigorous qualitative research are insufficiently developed to specifically evaluate phenomenologically oriented research of the traditions such as Heidegger or Gadamer. Additionally, no scholarly agreement exists about the language used to describe the credibility of hermeneutic phenomenology or one universal set of criteria to assess its presence. Other specific challenges inherent in Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology mostly relate to understanding and interpretation, which Gadamer believed bind together. Because interpretation is always an evolving process, a definitive interpretation is likely never possible. John Caputo argues that reaching understanding and meaning is tentative and dynamic in the hermeneutic endeavour, necessitating using a hermeneutic circle to trace the researcher's movements in the process.[133] The Gadamerian concept of prejudices is also an important consideration.[134] According to Gadamer, as a hermeneutical task, understanding includes a reflective dimension from the very beginning.[135] Gadamer discounts any possibility of performing the epoche (bracketing), an objective/neutral stance where the researcher suspends their scientific prejudice and preconceptions in an attempt to look at the phenomenon as it is. In other words, we are presenting a perspective that assumes our pre-understandings or prejudices to be necessary in order for us to make sense of the

[130] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), 161.
[131] Patton, (1990), 183.
[132] Ward, (2012), 7.
[133] Caputo, John D, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
[134] Gadamer, (2013), 279-380.
[135] Gadamer, Hans-Georg, (2008), 41.

world. Hence, reflexivity was a requirement throughout the present study. Cohering with hermeneutic philosophy, phenomenologically enhanced interviewing required me to acknowledge the historicity and social influences on my own experiences before and during interpretive description of my participant's experience. This is where the value of autoethnography was important. Autoethnography contests the stance that research conduct involves a neutral, impersonal and objective stance, rather it acknowledges and accommodates the reality of subjectivity and emotionality on research, the plurality of worldviews and different assumptions of the world, a core epistemological underpinning the present study. Regarding Gadamer's method suspicion, Taylor underscores Gadamer's remedy for this is,

> Not to jump out of the range of human meanings altogether, and try to take things in through a bleached, neutralized language of social science.

He argues that such an approach just bolts the door against new insights. Taylor suggests that by allowing ourselves to be challenged by the ways they fail to fit into our recognized range of meanings that we can begin to discern how this range has to be broken open and transformed if we are to understand them.[136] Thus, I consider that the strengths of Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology to my research quest outweigh any perceived limitations. It enabled me to transcend my horizons to meet the horizons of others. My research has the potential to contribute understanding to the significant topics at play in contemporary Ireland. It comes from clear background work, establishing its potential value, connected to intra/interdisciplinary fields of scholars. The methods used are robust and clearly thought through to engage with the research question. I have committed to attending my research findings openly and honestly, even when some of my data contradicts my fundamental assumptions about life and God. I am honest about the limits of the methods, knowledge and insights used and gained. In this regard, my study is realistic and modest, cognisant of what I could achieve at doctoral level. It is a first step/phase with limitations in addition to strengths. Being realistic about its limits is fundamental to honesty, which provides the basis for trustworthy integrity.

[136] Taylor, Charles, "The Impersonal Order," In: *A Secular Age*, (2007), 286, and 279-297.

I consider that there are important, creative possibilities with my research that can be developed at postdoctoral level, applying Rolfe *et al*'s reflective model of '*what*', '*so what*' and '*now what*.'[137] The '*what*' relates to what the data elicited from the present study informs us about the current state of affairs of religion and spirituality in Ireland as perceived by a sample of young people. The '*so what*' addresses the question regarding the meaning of these data. According to Stephen Pattison, the '*so what*' question is our litmus test of the appropriateness of our scholarship.[138] Pattison argues for more observation and exploration of aesthetic objects, congruent with Veling's argument for '*what if*' instead of '*so what*.' For Veiling, the imaginative process-employing mystical, prophetic and spiritual inheritance in order to envision new possibilities for theological thinking, social engagement and ecclesial practice requires a poetic turn to more creativity in Practical Theology.[139] The '*now what or 'what if'* (in Veling's terms) entices the potential to develop further areas of Practical Theological exploration from the present study. In general terms, theological endeavours are 'healing work' that seek to enhance and increase human wellbeing. In my view, Practical Theology in particular is a highly ethical endeavour in its focus on doing theology in a quest to make things better and strive for social justice. The discipline, concerned as it is with outcomes and accountabilities relating to the good and human flourishing, becomes part of constructing a value-laden moral worldview by bringing the subjects/objects of research into being. It involves affirming or questioning worldviews and practices because contemporary experience, including experience of the divine, is diverse and complex and not a simple, linear matter as my data suggests. Practical Theology provides another 'take' on this. The guiding principle for many Practical Theologians has been to undertake work that makes a practical difference to the life of Church and world.[140]

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[137] Rolfe, Gary, Freshwater, Dawn, Jasper, Melanie, *Critical Reflection in Nursing and the Helping Professions: A User's Guide*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).
[138] Pattison, Stephen, *Seeing Things: Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts*, (London: SCM Press, 2007), 8.
[139] Veling, Terry, "A Reserve of Vitality: Poetics and Practical Theology" in *Catholic Approaches in Practical Theology*, edited by C. Wolfteich and A. Dillen, (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), 127.
[140] Bennett *et al*, (2017), 154.

There are other potential areas of development of the present study. Based on data derived from a number of interviews I suggest the potential for conduct of a Systematic Theological study, incorporating Tracy as a major Christian theological voice and centred on the doctrine of Providence. Research questions might centre on questions such as 'where God's grace can be found', 'where revelation is encountered', 'what Divine revelation is', 'the extent to which Divine revelation is accepted by young people' and 'perceptions of how the Holy Spirit may be at work in the quotidian of their lives. Influenced by my experience of conducting Practical Theological research, I consider that potential exists for a mixed-method, interdisciplinary study of marginalised people and those dealing with mental health challenges using a *Multilevel Interdisciplinary Paradigm* (MIP).[141] Emmons and Paloutzian first proposed this umbrella term, allowing researchers to compare research findings with those outside their particular field of study.[142] Scholars such as Francis and Village, Swinton and Mowat among others have conducted research around issues of wellness, depression, marginalised people and so forth. In my view, an *MIP* approach might explore existential perceptions about God who's 'Being' or his perceived absence from Being in the context of mental health challenges is an issue. Conduct of such studies may potentially develop the starting point, which the present study provides.

The next chapter summarises and concludes my thesis, highlighting the benefits and rewards of using a practical theological approach in the present study.

[141]Paloutzian, Raymond F., Park, Crystal L, "Recent Progress and Core Issues in the Science of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality", in *The Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, edited by Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, (The Guildford Press, 2015), 22.
[142] Emmons and Paloutzian, (2003), 377-402.

Chapter 9: Thesis Summary and Conclusion

This thesis attempted to provide a nuanced analysis of spirituality as a concept that transcends traditional religious boundaries. Alister Mc Grath's encapsulates the essence of empirical theology in his assertion that if the Church is to remain an authentically and distinctively Christian community,

> It must be subjected to empirical study to ascertain whether its attitudes, values, and practices are indeed distinctive – and identify courses of action to ensure that its identity is safeguarded and appropriately embodied.[1]

Charles Wood suggests that questions such as how we understand events theologically, if and how God is involved in the course of daily life, in the natural world around us and how He is related to what goes on and so forth are unavoidable.[2] Doing Practical Theology, my thesis set out to occupy a research gap in the academic study of religion and spirituality in Ireland by reading the 'signs of the times', in Veling's terms, alluded to in my general introduction. Hence, I presented findings to enable readers to contextualize my research approach and to understand the connection between research design and outcome.[3] Young people living in Ireland increasingly live within communities with different religious and spiritual worldviews and associations. In that sense, my study is concerned with the contemporary "social imaginary," in James Smith's terms.[4] Thus, my data are timely and relevant, especially in light of the synodal process currently underway, as discussed. My research attempts to capture what theologian John Hick refers to as a "religious, but not confessional, interpretation of religion (and I argue spirituality) in its plurality of forms."[5] Ethnographically, it explored diverse worldviews and emergent social contexts and perspectives as they relate to religion and spirituality with a specific focus on the self-attribution and meaning of *Spiritual but not Religious*. In this regard,

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[1] McGrath, Alister E, "The Cultivation of Theological Vision: Theological Attentiveness and the Practice of Ministry", In *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, (2012), 123.
[2] Wood, Charles M, "Providence", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Systematic Theology*, edited by John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrance, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91.
[3] Ajjawi and Higgs, (2007), 612.
[4] Smith, (2014), 26.
[5] Hick, John, An *Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 1.

Tracy's *Analogical Imagination*, in my view, contributed both theological richness and a fine instrument and lens through which I read my data and findings through the prism of Practical Theology. Following Fulkerson, theological reflection does not solely begin with the application of a doctrine or theme but also with other issues not limited to Christian discourse. Not focusing on a particular religious denomination or community, my approach cohered with the view discussed in previous chapters of how hermeneutical approaches clarify processes of religious communication and interpretation, acknowledging the wide spectrum of religious and spiritual worldviews. Because the object of Practical Theology is not biblical or historical, but present religious praxis, I employed empirical, mainly interpretive methods, cohering with van der Ven's assertion that no one single methodological approach achieves conceptual dominance, as there is no single religious praxis. It also study accords with Practical Theology's belief that in all creative work, it is within practice that knowing lies.[6] In essence, it applies to the inner-theological extension of theological methodology by using the tools of the empirical sciences, directly aiming at answering theological questions. As a practitioner, I am committed to postmodern sensibilities and the approaches to social and theological research that these sensibilities imply. By exploring younger demographics' perceptions of the country's post-Catholic religious landscape and spiritual marketplace, it provides solid data that can potentially make a difference, where interested stakeholders may respond to these issues. As stated in my general introduction, the demographic from which my sample is drawn will shape future religious and spiritual trends in Ireland. These trends will continue to affect changes at macro societal level. My experience of interviewing participants suggests that, whereas God and institutional religion are not necessarily hot topics of conversation among young people, they are nonetheless very interested and in some cases heavily emotionally invested rather than practiced in the concepts of religion and spirituality. This finding appears to contrast with the perception suggested by some literature that God or religion have little relevance to modern youth culture. Evidence of this is the fact that a number of participants wished to articulate on tape that they found the dialogic nature of discussion of these topics both timely,

[6] Bennett, *et al*, (2018), 31.

interesting and enjoyable. Deriving no material benefit from participation, participants expressed a high degree of interest in the study and its findings when complete. They considered the study as a timely and relevant exploration of important issues relating to them and made great personal efforts to accommodate the interviews.[7] Hence, there is an ethical imperative to continue to disseminate findings to relevant stakeholders through conference presentations and publications, ensuring articulation of the voices of these participants regardless of worldviews held.[8] Research not disseminated to others can never hope to make a significant impact. There was a spiritual sense to many (but not all) the interviews, embodying the assertion identified in the Practical Theological literature that theological interviewing needs to be sanctified to some extent, not a requirement of purely social scientific research. In this context, Watkins contends that in the process of transcription and data analysis ethnographic researchers are collecting witnesses not only to what happens and what people think about it, but simultaneously, and necessarily, to "an embodied theology, and to the workings of grace, the Spirit … in what is happening."[9] Swinton and Mowat argue that knowledge generated by Practical Theological research can increase our knowledge and understanding of God and thus enable us to live more loving and faithful lives.[10] This promotes new theological insights and spiritual growth arising from learning encounters with others and otherness.[11]

In my view, the overarching umbrella term *qualitative research*, combining ethnographic and Practical Theological methods in a spirit of hospitality and mutual respect were appropriate approaches to explore my topics. Qualitative research is one way in which we can begin to look behind the veil of 'normality'

[7] For example, one interviewee was unable to attend for interview as he was travelling abroad for summer vacation but emailed his availability on return and set aside a full day to accommodate my interview. A second interviewee needed to attend to a work commitment at an allotted time, but subsequently took an afternoon off work to complete the interview. In addition, one interviewee, called into work at night on an appointed evening of an interview, rescheduled her availability the following morning having worked a night shift.
[8] I have presented aspects of my study to various national and international conferences such as the EENA, CTA and other theological gatherings.
[9] Watkins *et al*, (2012), 177.
[10] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), vii.
[11] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 54.

and see what is actually going on within situations.[12] Using this approach was a *sine qua non*, as a normative text-based theological approach alone could not elicit the raw data required. This made ethnography a theological necessity here. In short, to understand why Christian Churches appear to be losing young adherents in Ireland, I viewed the state of affairs simultaneously through both theological and social/cultural lenses. Thus, I explored contemporary perceptions of religion and an apparent new paradigm of spirituality on the basis that understanding requires viewing the current Irish landscape through both lenses. In my role as a data subject and bricoleur, I reflexively factored in experiences inflected by my past that are relevant to data co-production. Following Tedlock, closeness, subjectivity and engagement replaced distance, objectivity and neutrality in my study.[13] Because Practical Theology is concerned with reflecting theologically on human experience and the complex dynamics of particular situations, I became critically aware of how the assumptions, beliefs and practices of my worldview guide my perception and action. My methodological approach cohered with the view that a rigorous empirical theology required some statistical analysis to help triangulate findings. From an ethical perspective, in my view, Levinas' work resonates in contexts outside theology and philosophy. For example, some gestalt psychotherapists[14] use his work as philosophical underpinning of their therapeutic approach. His work also relates to my autoethnography and reflexivity section in the context of Barbara Calafell's 'intersectionality of the 'I and we' where she writes,

> A vulnerability, love, and care that allows us not only to see our reflection in the "I", but also in the "we" that may be based in the otherness that is not our own.[15]

Empirical, Practical Theological research holds many rewards as outlined throughout my thesis, particularly in areas of Christian ethics, social justice and giving voice to the marginalised. Whitmore, Reimer-Barry, Graham, Watkins, Veling and other theological ethnographers are exemplars of this approach. Meredith McGuire underlines how theological research on the practices,

[12] Swinton and Mowat, (2006).
[13] Tedlock, (2005), 467.
[14] Gestalt psychotherapy is an approach that focuses on present as opposed to previous experiences when dealing with issues such as trauma, notably post-traumatic stress disorder.
[15] Calafell, (2013), 11.

experiences and expressions of religion and spirituality does not seek renewal but understanding embodied practices theologically.[16] Swinton and Mowat assert when used in the service of God, this research genre holds potential for developing faithful practices and transforming understandings.[17] To paraphrase Bennett *et al*, theological discourse using Practical Theology cultivates a sensitivity to,

> The signs of the sacred in the here and now … to draw nearer into the presence of the sacred and to find truer, better ways of inhabiting a reality sufficed by the transcendent.[18]

The essence of theology is a search for faith seeking understanding. In the final analysis, as Ward suggests, "understanding as an ecclesial act is both theological and social/cultural because of Christ."[19] Despite methodological complexities and challenges, future Practical Theological/ethnographic research can continue to engage meaningfully with the social sciences for the benefit of communities. As Swinton suggests, "the reflexive fusion of horizons between theology and ethnography … is vital for a Christian ethnography."[20]

In her discussion of how she came to ethnography, Vigen underscores how she gained insights from within embodied persons very different to herself. Important for her was "a conversion to the other, to learn and labour with others."[21] Scharen and Vigen argue that ethnographers do not need to be "all-seeing" or "all-knowing" in order to offer up relevant and illuminating insights about what is true or relevant. These scholars argue that they can offer up as valid and impartial – but no less true or significant – perceptions they gain, listening thoughtfully to others, and reflecting on their own lives, emotional responses and internal biases.[22] For methodological credibility and spiritual humility, they suggest that researchers have to be "gutsy" enough to check out their own assumptions and be open to being surprised, wrong from what they learn in the ethnographic field. They suggest that close, attuned observation and

[16] McGuire, Meredith B, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, (Oxford University Press.) 2008.
[17] Swinton and Mowat, (2006), 132.
[18] Bennett *et al*, (2018), 78.
[19] Ward, (2012), 3.
[20] Swinton, (2012), 85.
[21] Vigen, (2011), 7.
[22] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 69.

the meticulous recording of data are the bread and butter of both quantitative and qualitative methods. They outline how the difference in ethnographic/qualitative methods is that the researcher does not stand as far apart from the research subject or assume the same kind of objectivity. Following these theologians, rather than a passive observer, I also take on a collaborative "witnessing role,"[23] where as an ethnographer I am not the sole authority. Following Scharen and Vigen, this is where I divest from being the "author" and "expert" to actively listening to my participants as full human subjects, rather than research objects.[24] Rather, as they suggest, the ethnographer owns his/her assumptions, biases, hopes, and concerns as part of the process, open to the "messy contradictions" that ethnography will reveal.[25] For example, intriguing research suggesting that even people who do not profess a belief in God often report anger at God exemplifies the complex nature of the emotionality related to the constructs discussed above.[26] Congruent with my study's PAR approach, the concept refers to "being both researcher and participant and capitalising on the duality as a source of insight."[27] As bricoleur and in a Gadamerian sense, I reflexively opened these insights to the potential for critical arguments from different participant worldviews that may potentially became fused. Become the apprentice, I received data from the 'other' in a joint endeavour of co-production. This spirit of humility is important. As Fulkerson suggests it is a "de-centring," or humble recognition that all knowledge's are infused with the fallibility of experience requiring some redemptive unsettling.[28] Finally, as Wood asserts, there is no occasion when God is irrelevant.[29] Combining theology and social sciences is a process of journeying together with respect and acknowledgment of disciplinary autonomy. When used in the service of God and all humanity to make things better, in the diversity of places of grace, whether inside or outside the organised institutional Church, a theologically sensitive social science (in

[23] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 23.
[24] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 22.
[25] Scharen and Vigen, (2011), 26.
[26] Park, (2015), 357.
[27] Streubert *et al*, (2011), 460.
[28] Fulkerson, (2011), xiii.
[29] Wood, (2007), 91.

Casanova's terms) and secular wisdom in such pursuits, in my view, is surely a spiritual act, an act of devotion.

Appendices

Appendix A: Glossary of terms and definitions not used in main text

Aporia: An irresolvable contradiction between religion and the secular.[30]

Atheologies: The broader assemblage of ideas that unbelief is one component of.[31]

Category: A class or group of things possessing some quality or qualities in common.[32]

Culture: Knowledge, morals, beliefs, law, emotionology, art, and customs associated with a human population at a particular time and in a particular place.[33]

Cultural Transmission: The passing on from one person, group, or generation to another of a cultural element.[34]

Diffusive Christianity: Distancing from one's ancestral church while retaining some nominal ties with it.[35]

Embodied Cognition: The influence of the body and emotions on human cognition.[36]

Emotionology: The attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains towards basic emotions and their appropriate

30 Mandair, Arvind, "Postcolonialism", in The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven. Engler, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 191.
31 Lee, (2013), 596.
32 Casadio, G "Historicizing and Translating Religion", in The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion, 2006), 47.
33 Corrigan, J, "Emotion", in The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion, 2006), 521.
34 Hammer, O, "Tradition and Innovation", in The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion, 2006), 736.
35 Davie, (1994).
36 Geertz, A.W, "Cognitive Science", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, (2006), 106.

expression; ways that institutions reflect and encourage these attitudes in human conduct.[37]

Fandom: A form of collective interpretation of popular culture that created a powerful sense of group cohesion.[38]

First-/Second-Order Objects: Scholars distinguish between texts or discourses that are objects of study for them (first-order objects) and scholarly texts about those objects (second-order writings about first-order objects).[39]

Habitus: The learned set of preferences or dispositions by which a person orients to the social world. It is a system of durable, transposable, cognitive schemata or structures of perception, conception and action.[40]

Intuitive/Intuition: The reception of sensory data, either natural or supernatural, to a mind, prior to any cognitive processing.[41]

Modernity: The ensemble of particular sociocultural norms, attitudes and practices that arose in post-medieval Eurasia and that have developed since, in various ways and at various times, around the world.[42]

Nova (the) Taylor's term for the multiplication of believing and unbelieving positions emanating from new forms of exclusive humanism replacing God's presence in the social space.[43]

Numinous (Experiences): An awareness of a Holy other beyond nature with which one is felt to be in communion.[44]

Postmodernism: Incredulity towards grand narratives' or metanarratives.[45]

Post-Secular: A critical stance towards areligious and anti-religious modes of secularity usually associated with Jürgen Habermas, who saw post-secularism

[37] Stearns, Peter N., Stearns, Carlos Z, "Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards", *The American Historical Review.* 90, (4), (1985), 813-36.
[38] Sullivan, J, *Media Audiences: Effects, Users, and Power*, (London: Sage), 2013.
[39] Martin, C, "Experience", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, 2006), 538.
[40] Bourdieu, (1977), also Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Logic of Practice.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).
[41] Martin, (2006), 538.
[42] Casadio, (2006), 47.
[43] Taylor, (2007), 531.
[44] Hood and Chen, (2005), 348-364.
[45] Lyotard, Jean-Francois, *The Postmodern Condition,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xx1v.

as a shift in consciousness in the way Europeans think about religion's public role.[46]

Religious belief and self-descriptor instruments referenced

USA – General Social Survey (GSS), ARIS,[47] PEW.[48]

UK – British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA).

World Values Survey (WVS).

Europe – European Values System (EVS)

European Social Survey (ESS). Established in 2001, this instrument is an academically driven social survey designed to chart and explain the interaction between Europe's changing institutions and the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations. Established in 2001, the ESS charts and explains the interaction between Europe's changing institutions and the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations. Methodologically, the ESS provides better analysis of religion than most general-purpose surveys, covering the areas of affiliation, practice and belief.[49]

Secular: Part of a cluster of ideas including the 'profane', the 'sacred', and the 'secular.'[50] Secular does not have connotations of radical opposition to the sacred. The term secular (along with the corresponding French term *laicité* and its derivatives) has more than one sense, and many different meanings (polysemy).[51]

46 Habermas, Jürgen, "Notes on Post-Secular Society", New Perspectives Quarterly, 25 (4), (2008), 17-29.
47 Kosmin, B.A., Keysar, A. American Religious Identification Survey 2008, (Hartford CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, 2009).
48 Pew Research Centre, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Religion among the Millennials, 2010. Retrieved from http://pewforum.org/Age/Religion-among-the-Millenials.aspx. Accessed on 06/12/2022.
49 Affiliation refers to current or past identification with a religion. Practice refers to frequency of attendance at religious services, frequency of private prayer. Belief refers to self-related religiosity and the importance of religion in respondent's life. The ESS contains a set of items on involvement in Church or religious organisations (membership, participation, volunteering, and friendship). Voas excluded these from his analysis because they show little systematic relationship with each other or with the other variables of the ESS. His assertion is that national culture may have a strong influence because considerable numbers of people volunteered or made donations or vice versa. (Voas, 2008), 156.
50 Markus, Robert A, Christianity *and the Secular*, (University of Notre Dame Press., 2006), 3.
51 Taylor, Charles, "Polysemy of the Secular", *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 74 (4), (2009), 1143-1166.

Secularization Thesis: Removing sectors of society and culture from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.[52]

Social Differentiation: The process where social life is divided into semi-autonomous spheres with their own character and rationale, e.g. between phenomena deemed 'secular' or 'religious.[53]

Tradition: The transmission of cultural traits by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction.[54]

52 Berger, (1969), 107.
[53] Mellor, P.A.Q. Shilling, C, "Social Theory", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, (2006), 250.
[54] Casadio, (2006), 47.

Appendix B: Expansion of Levinas discussion

John Wild states that ever since the beginning of the modern philosophical movement, disciplined attention has been paid to various patterns of human experience as they are lived through in the concrete. Philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty attempted to find a general philosophical position that can do justice to the experience without reduction or distortion. Wild apportions Heidegger as the only contemporary thinker who has formulated a total ontology that claims to do justice to the stable results of phenomenology and to the living existential thought of our time, citing *Being and Time* as a highly original contribution to philosophy. However Wild points out that Heidegger's work is marked by one-sided emphases which are open to serious question.[55] Wild acknowledges that without the philosophic developments of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Levinas's formulation of a general position against Husserl's transcendental idealism and Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy would have been impossible. Wild argues that Levinas's masterpiece is far reaching in its phenomenology of the other and of the pattern of experiences. Levinas apportions Heidegger's *Being and Time* as one of the stellar books in the history of philosophy, particularly his extrapolation of the concept of Being, clearly defining philosophy in relation to other forms of knowledge as "fundamental ontology."[56] Prior to Heidegger's work, Levinas had sought to present Husserl as having solved the ontological problem of Being; the question of the "*status* rather than the *quiddity* (Levinas emphasis) of beings."[57] Levinas considers the most striking feature of Heidegger's phenomenology as,

> The intentionality animating existing itself, and a whole series of "states of the soul," which, before Heideggerian phenomenology passed for "blind," for simple contents.'[58]

Levinas finds Heidegger's later work less convincing, stating, "There is in Heidegger's late philosophy an impossibility for power to maintain itself as

[55] Wild, (2003), 11.
[56] Levinas, Emmanuel, "Heidegger", In *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo.* Translated by Richard A. Cohen, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 37-8.
[57] Levinas, (1985), 39. Quiddity in philosophy refers to the inherent nature of someone or something.
[58] Levinas, (1985), 40.

monarchy, to ensure its total mastery."[59] However, he does not attribute this to Heidegger's political engagements, although he admits, "he has never been exculpated in my eyes from his participation in National-Socialism."[60]

The face as opening to the infinity of the Other

Levinas discusses ethics and the face in the context of nudeness and vulnerability. He suggests that the relation "with the face, with the absolutely other", is maintained without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity."[61] He suggests that "The face resists possession, resists my powers ... the face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge."[62] The idea of infinity, revealed in the face, does not only require a separate being: the light of the face is necessary for separation. The face is an opening to the infinity of the Other. It is at the same time the visible and the invisible face, neither true face nor mask. In its absolute vulnerability, it expresses itself especially through its defenceless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent.[63] Levinas asserts that murder alone lays claim to total negation – since it claims the total negation of a being.[64] Infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face – in this face is the primordial expression, is the first word: "you shall not commit murder."[65] In short, "the epiphany of the face is ethical."[66] This is the resistance of what has no resistance – the ethical resistance. According to Robbins, the ceding of *place* to which one must yield, referred to in my introduction is "my place in the sun." *Place* (Robbins emphasis) also denotes the *Da* of *Dasein*, Heidegger's term for man insofar as he asks the question of the meaning of the being of beings. Levinas asks, "Is not the *Da* of my *Dasein* already usurpation or violence with respect to the other? To cede one's place to the other is, thus, not only to interrupt – on a primordial level – the self's tendency "to persist" or "to persevere" in its being, it is also to assert the anteriority of the question of the other to Heidegger's

[59] Levinas, (1969), 275.
[60] Levinas, (1969), 275.
[61] Levinas, (1969), 197.
[62] Levinas, (1969), 197/198.
[63] Levinas, (1969), 199.
[64] Levinas, (1969), 198/199.
[65] Levinas, (1969), 199.
[66] Levinas, (1969), 199.

question of the being of beings.[67] Levinas' views on theodicy and a focus on responsibility for care of the Other rather than metaphysical efforts to justify the divine are highly significant. For Levinas, Auschwitz and the Holocaust are paradigms of the universal problem of evil - of "useless suffering."[68] Goodman cites Levinas' interpretation of a puzzling statement in the Talmud "When plague strikes a town, a man should never walk in the middle of the road, because the Angel of Death is in the middle of the road, for since he is authorized [to strike] he conceals himself [at the side] as he walks." Levinas suggests,

> … Evil surpasses human responsibility and leaves not a corner intact where reason could collect itself. But perhaps this thesis is precisely a call to man's infinite responsibility.[69]

[67] Robbins, (2001), 23.
[68] Katz, Steven T, "Emmanuel Levinas", in *Wrestling With God: Jewish Theological Responses During and after the Holocaust*, 2007), 451.
[69] Goodman, (2017), 477.

Appendix C: Valandra's guidelines on reflexivity[70] and identifying pre-understandings relating to the hermeneutic circle (background, co-constitution, and pre-understanding).

Starting point: Understanding is the first condition of hermeneutics, requiring the fundamental suspension of my own prejudices. The hermeneutical situation centres on my prejudices (i.e. present horizons) for openness to the world of research participants. These self-reflective questions are:

- What do I already know about these topics? – Immersion in a Catholic habitus in addition to theoretical constructions derived from the study of theology shape my understandings.
- How do I know what I know? - I need to become the apprentice.
- How have my personal and professional experiences shaped what I know? (Personal autobiography) - Experiences of mental health morbidity in young people involving loss of spiritual connection.
- What assumptions, biases, attitudes and beliefs shape my construction of this idea? - I base any negativity towards Catholicism on issues of abuse and cover-up, prioritising the interests of the institution over the needs of victims.
- What am I passionate about regarding these topics/ideas? - I am passionate about exploring the perceptions of young people without prejudgments regarding the meaning of spirituality to them.
- How are my life experiences shaping the design of this study? - I hold theological convictions about God's actions in the world. I believe that spirituality is an intrinsic part of religion. I believe that one can find God's grace everywhere and in everyone, that evidence of Divine revelation is everywhere, and that the Holy Spirit is at work in the everyday, in the sacred and the secular.
- How do I attempt to bring reflexive awareness to bear on my prejudices (present horizons)? - I achieve this by the processes of autoethnography and reflexivity.

Hermeneutic circle: gaining understanding through dialogue with participants

How has the conduct of interviews enabled more understanding of religion and spirituality among young people? - The interview questions posed

[70] Valandra, (2011).

enabled space for participants to think and reflect on their views and to consider other worldviews. Theoretically, we come to a new understanding of my topics of religion and spirituality that sheds light on the limitations of our previous understanding.

What aspects of the interviews led to a meeting of horizons?

The concluding part of most interviews facilitated new mutual understandings of the concepts based on the preceding dialogue.

Appendix D: Field notes

These notes were handwritten either following the conduct of particular interviews or when undertaking data-analysis about my field observations and reflections.

Aim: To merge the domains of lived experience and recollected memory of time spent interacting in the field with time spent alone in reflection, interpretation and the essence of interview interactions for recall during data-analysis.[71] This facilitates clarity and accurate recall of field interactions to assure reliable interpretation of interviewee data.[72]

Method: Immersion in the data, listening closely to the audio transcriptions, comparing them with the transcripts and field notes to identify significant statements. Using field notes helped capture aspects of specific interviews that led to either a meeting of horizons or other observations of note relating to specific themes. Integrating lived experience and recollected memory of time spent interacting in the field with time spent alone in reflection, interpretation and analysis as suggested by Tedlock.[73]

Example 1: First interview conducted online, the respondent gestures hands in prayer at the heart and say "*Namaste"* This gesture signifies that participant did not want to make any connection between yoga and religion (rec 01, June 2023, online). Written on 15/06/2023.

Example 2: End of interview discussion where I express conviction about how God acts in the world, identify as Catholic but express reservations about certain dogmas. Field note states "Interview ends with a meeting of horizons."[74] (Rec 20, October 2023). Written on 03/10/2023.

Example 3: Reflection on meeting of horizons: "… when you said that you feel… that when you went to this church and you were hearing the choir and you were there for two hours and that you thought, well, I think that's God. I thought that was really interesting because I had never thought of it that way, but there's… yes, I think that's interesting…" (Rec 08, July 2023). Written when simultaneously listening to audio and reading transcription of this interview, February 2024.

[71] Tedlock, (2005), 472.
[72] Barroso, (2010), 85-99.
[73] Tedlock, (2005), 679.
[74] Statement taken from my field notes written on 3 October 2023 following interview.

Example 4: Reflection on post-interview interaction, listening to audio of interview on emerging theme reconnection to religion. (Rec 23, October 2023). Reflection on post-interview interaction written on 06/10/2023 – This interviewee attributes meeting me to partake in my study to the will of God and the Holy Spirit. She gestures her hands in prayer and says, "Praise the Lord."

Example 5: Reflection on interview interaction, field note written on 27/09/2023. "This 19 year-old participant drew my attention to rosary beads that he was wearing on his wrist. He attributes recovery from an addiction to reference to the beads." (Rec 13, 27/09/2023).

Example 6: Reflection on interview interaction, field note written post-interview on 15/08/2023: "Participant had volunteered for interview but subsequently received a job offer and went inter-railing for the summer. He emailed me on return to indicate he was now available for interview. He travelled by train from the midlands and set aside the day to accommodate the interview. Field note ends, "Interview ends with a meeting of horizons." (Rec 16, August 2023).

Example 7: Reflection on interview interaction, field note written post-interview on 06/010/2023. "Participant had volunteered for interview but was called in to work last night. When I was waiting for the first interview to arrive at 9.00 am, she emailed me to say she would be available at 10.00am. She stated that she was very interested in my study and did not want to miss the opportunity to partake. This interview (Rec 24, October 2023) provided rich data."

Appendix E: Audit trail summary

The purpose of this appendix is to summarise my rationale for key research decisions in a manner that provides credibility, transparency and rigour throughout, allowing other researchers trace my research steps and not solely how I arrived at conclusions based on my data.

Choice of research question/conceptual framework

Extant, mainly survey data demonstrates a growing trend towards irreligion and a growth in spiritual pursuits among a younger Western demographic, under-researched in an Irish context.

Choice of typology

I used the two-by-two typology for empirical consistency with previous scholarship on the constructs.

Ethical framework:

Underpinned by the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, my obligation to research participants emanates from a fundamental obligation of respect for the other. My research processes demonstrate adherence to the major ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence nonmalifence and justice.

Rationale for intra/interdisciplinary literature review

As no research exists in a vacuum, I needed to study the constructs from various disciplinary perspectives because of the socio-theological issues at play that are not solely the preserve of theology.

Choice of paradigms, methodology, methods

In line with research literature, my concern was how the combination of methods could add dimensions to my study. A rigorous empirical theology requires some statistical analysis; however, this analysis plays a subordinate role to qualitative exploration. Mixed-methods facilitated viewing the phenomena from different paradigmatic lenses where qualitative approaches can add hermeneutic substance to grounding quantitative data. Although Practical Theology is usually concerned with ecclesial issues, I consider non-

congregational research contexts (such as the present one) as equally epistemologically, ontologically and ethically relevant to the exploration of a range of theistic, extra-theistic and non-theistic worldviews.

Sampling strategy

Quantitatively and qualitatively, I use a predominant random sampling strategy because my target study group are not homogenous.

Autoethnography and Reflexivity

Coherent with Gadamerian hermeneutics and the subjective nature of Practical Theology, I am a data subject as well as bricoleur, active and reflexive in the process of data generation, where heuristic influences and discipline-related theoretical conversations may shape my subjectivity. I acknowledged that a theological lens shapes the primary reflective dimension of my epistemological and methodological assumptions based on a conviction of how God acts in the world. Awareness that all research is to some extent autobiographical, I included autoethnography and reflexivity as guiding principles throughout my study.

Data collection: qualitative interviewing

As ethnographic/phenomenologically inspired interviews are the most appropriate way to achieve dense or thick descriptions, I used an in-depth interview approach to achieve essences until data saturation occurred, congruent with Gadamerian hermeneutics.

Qualitative data analysis

I used structured data analytic procedures to adhere to accepted academic conventions blended with a framework that specifically coheres with Gadamer's central tenets of pre-understandings, hermeneutic circle and fusion of horizons to ensure rigor while maintaining trustworthiness. I presented associated synthesising material (codes, categories and so forth) in a thematic manner. I clearly outlined the steps followed in thematic analysis, which involve initial 'free' higher and lower coding, emerging categorization of meaning units, which I distilled into themes and sub-themes.

Findings

I presented my findings in a manner that accords with academic conventions, incorporating significant participant statements, longer extracts and two case studies to exemplify the nature of participant perceptions, relating them to extant literature.

Appendix F: Higher and Lower Codes

Higher Codes	**Lower Codes**
Meaning of religion	Perceptions of overlap with spirituality.
Meaning of spirituality.	Perceptions of overlap with religion.
Religion as privately or publicly expressed.	
Advantages of religious affiliation. Disaffiliation.	Community integration.
Advantages of religious disaffiliation.	Freedom.
Growing irreligion.	Declining institutional religious practice. Attendance for special occasions only. Declining belief in Catholic dogmas.
Mix and match approach to religion.	Growing interest in Buddhism and Islam. Attraction to Muslim practices, especially Ramadan.
Importance of Catholicism for ethno-identity.	
Growth in interest in spirituality.	Seeking a sense of community: Formation of new communities of group identity. Spiritual manifesting. Going against God. Sexuality.
Belief fluidity: Fluctuations in religious beliefs from early adolescence to late 30s.	Parental and peer influences on religious beliefs.
Clerical sex abuse scandals.	Effects on belief systems.

Growth in wellness culture/holistic practices.	Challenges of technology. Perceptions of science versus religion. Mental and physical health benefits.
Interest in new age and holistic practices.	Yoga and mindfulness. No connection to religion.
Awe and wonder and mystical experiences.	Love. Nature. Perceptions of horizontal transcendence. Music. Eco spirituality.
Cultural scaffolding.	
Morality of nonreligious worldviews.	
Images of Jesus Christ.	
Orthodox Catholic beliefs and critique of new age spirituality	
Science as a competitor to religion.	

Appendix G: Preliminary identification of first-order and second-order codes/constructs

First-order participant codes/constructs.	Second-order (researcher horizons) constructs (integration).
Spectrum of religious and spiritual worldviews	Perceptions of Religion, Spirituality and Spiritual but not Religious Self-Identification.
Critique of new age spirituality	Subjective Religious Drift and Revitalization of Religion.
Perceptions of religion and spirituality	The Culture of Youth Wellness: Seeking a Sense of Community.
Advantages and disadvantages of organised, institutional religion (Catholicism)	The Evocation of Awe and Wonder Experiences.
Spiritual but not religious self-identification	Natural Theology: God and Nature Perceived as Synonymous.
Creative Catholicism	Technology, Spirituality and Religion.
Belief fluidity	The Potential for Religion – Crossing the Boundary to Belief.
Experiences of awe and wonder	Extending the Value Base of Spirituality for Life Meaning.

Appendix H: Interview guide

Opening Questions

- Please, in your own words, what is spirituality?
- Please, could you please recount a situation when you had experiences of something spiritual?
- What do you link to the word 'spirituality' today?
- In your own words, what is religion?
- Please, could you please recount a situation when you had experiences of something religious?
- What is your view of the interrelation between religion and spirituality?
- Which of the following comes closest to describing your personal self-identification? (Two-by-two typology on Google Forms survey).
- In your view, is religion a private or public affair?
- If you pray or reflect/contemplate on the meaning of life, what form does this take?

Views on Catholicism and national identity

- Do you believe that Catholicism is still an important part of the Irish way of life?
- How often do you attend services?
- Do you consider Catholicism as an ethnic and cultural as opposed to a religious membership?
- What (if anything) do you find interesting or attractive about other religions, beliefs, or practices?
- What mistakes (if any) has Catholicism made in recent decades?

Questions on holistic practices.

- Which, if any, have you participated in? (List from Google Forms survey).
- Do you believe that activities/practices have any connection to religion?
- Do you believe that activities/practices have any connection to spirituality?
- What motivated you to participate? (List from Google Forms survey).
- Could you recount a situation, if any, when you were conscious of a presence or power outside normal everyday experience? Please, could you describe the experience?

Questions on mystical experiences and AW

- Have you ever experienced AW?
- (Probe - If not, explore spiritual emotions such as love, joy, happiness, the good and the beautiful).
- (Probe Exploring the mundane – do you perceive sacredness in the everyday mundanity of life: studies, job, family, relationships?
- Have you ever engaged in horoscopes, astrology, fortune telling, tarot, consulted a psychic? (List from Google Forms survey).

Questions on Life meaning.

- (Probe - changes brought about by advancing science and technology affect most areas of human life including belief systems).
- In your view is there incompatibility between the findings of the natural sciences and the truth claims of revealed religion.
- In your view, what is the telos (ultimate aim) of a human individual's life? (Probe vertical and horizontal transcendence).

Concluding questions:

- Is there anything you would like to add or say about religion or spirituality in Ireland?
- Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Appendix I: Interview consent form

I have read the participant information sheet describing the nature and purpose of the research project and agree to take part.

I understand the purpose of the research project and the nature of my involvement in it.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified, and my personal information will remain confidential.

I understand that I will be digitally audio recorded during the interview and that I reserve the right to terminate the recording at any point of time during the interview.

I understand that data will be held confidentially, in a secure location on a DCU Google drive folder. It will not be kept on any other electronic device or other media. Confidential shredding on completion of the study will destroy any hard copy file.

I understand that I may contact the Data Protection Officer, Mr. Martin Ward (data.protection@dcu.ie Ph.: 7005118 / 7008257) if I require further information about the research. I may also contact the Research Ethic Committee in Dublin City University if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research: The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail rec@dcu.ie

I have read the 'Plain Language Statement' (or had it read to me).	Yes/No
I understand the information provided.	Yes/No
I understand the information provided in relation to data protection.	Yes/No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study.	Yes/No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions.	Yes/No
I am aware that my interview will be audio digitally recorded.	Yes/No.

The researcher has informed me of the arrangements to protect my confidentiality and pseudo-anonymity.

I have also been made aware that confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law, i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions…Yes/No.

The researcher has informed me of the arrangements regarding the retention/disposal of data generated for this research Study. ……...Yes/No.

Signed ---------- (Research Participant).

Date ……

Appendix J: Ethics approval.

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

Padraig Mc Bennett
School of Theology, Philosophy and Music

Dr. Joseph Rivera
School of Theology, Philosophy and Music

22nd June 2022

REC Reference: DCUREC/2022/104

Proposal Title: **Exploring the Changing Religious Landscape of Ireland:Case Studies in Younger Demographics.**

Applicant(s): Padraig Mc Bennett & Dr. Joseph Rivera

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to expedited review, DCU REC is pleased to issue approval for this research proposal.

DCU REC's consideration of all ethics applications is dependent upon the information supplied by the researcher. This information is expected to be truthful and accurate. Researchers are responsible for ensuring that their research is carried out in accordance with the information provided in their ethics application.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Melrona Kirrane

DCU Research & Innovation
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Dr. Melrona Kirrane
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

Appendix K: Data transcription confidentiality agreement

Virtual Office Solutions
Cartown, Termonfeckin, Drogheda, Co. Louth, Ireland

Tel: 041-9883333
Email: info@vos.ie
Web: www.vos.ie

Client Confidentiality Agreement

THIS AGREEMENT is dated **27th February 2024**

Parties

(1) Virtual Office Works Limited (trading as "Virtual Office Solutions") with registered number 554476, and a registered office address at Cartown, Termonfeckin, Drogheda, Louth, Ireland (hereinafter referred to as the "**Data Processor**" or "**VOS**").

(2) **Padraig McBennett, Final Year Doctoral Student,** with an address at **School of Theology, Philosophy and Music, All Hallows Campus, Dublin City university, Drumcondra, Dublin 7** (hereinafter referred to as the "**Client**").

Purpose

The purpose of this Agreement is to set out the terms under which VOS is willing to undertake data processing and other related contract assignments as requested by the Client.

Scope of Agreement

This Agreement applies to all data processing and other related contracted assignments, carried out by VOS, or sub-contractors as may be engaged by VOS from time to time (the "**Sub-Contractors**"), in relation to data provided to VOS by the Client (the "**Data**"). Such activities shall be referred to as "**Data Processing**".

Co-ordination

Responsibility for the day-to-day coordination and management of Data Processing rests with the Data Processor, who may delegate some or all of these responsibilities to the Sub-Contractors if appropriate. The Data Processor should be the primary contact in the case of technical or security problems or other issues directly related to the Data Processing.

Security

The Data Processor will, as far as is reasonably practicable, take all appropriate security measures against unauthorised access to, or alteration, disclosure, or destruction of the Data and against its accidental loss or destruction. For the avoidance of doubt, the Data Processor shall at all times strictly comply with all relevant legislation relating to data protection, including the General Data Protection Regulation which is effective from 25th May 2018.

The Data Processor shall make every reasonable effort to ensure that the office technology is fully password protected and not accessible by any third party.

It is the responsibility of the Data Processor to ensure that anti-virus checks are completed on a regular basis and that any potential problems identified are reported immediately to the Client.

The Data Processor shall promptly report to the Client any breaches of, or unauthorised access to, the Data as soon as they become aware of it and shall outline the steps to be taken to rectify the breach. The Data Processor shall take prompt and proper remedial action against any breaches of, or unauthorised access to, the Data.

Confidentiality and Data Protection

In the absence of prior written approval, the Data Processor is not authorised to disclose to any third party, other than the Sub-Contractors, any information whatsoever regarding the Data, the Client, the Client's employees or the Client's customers ("**Confidential Information**"). Confidential Information does not include information that is, or becomes public information other than as a result of the information being disclosed in breach of this Agreement, or information that is known to the Data Processor before the date it is disclosed to the Data Processor by the Client, or is lawfully obtained by the Data Processor from another source, in either case, through no breach of confidentiality of which the Data Processor is aware. The Data Processor may disclose Confidential Information to the extent required by law, by any governmental or other regulatory authority, or by court or other authority of competent jurisdiction provided that, as far as it is legally permitted to do so, the Data Processor gives the Client as much notice of the disclosure as possible.

All Confidential Information, copyright and other intellectual property rights belong to the Client. The Data Processor is not permitted to make a copy, summary or abstract of any documentation belonging to the Client without obtaining prior written permission from the Client.

Upon completion of the Data Processing, the Data Processor will retain the Data for a period of 14 days, or such other period of time as is agreed between the parties. On expiry of this period, the Data Processor will destroy all files, in whatever form, unless otherwise instructed by the Client.

Sub-Contractors

The Data Processor is responsible for ensuring that the Sub-Contractors are bound by the terms of this Agreement and are aware of their obligations under this Agreement.

Termination

This Agreement may be terminated at any time by either party, for any reason, by providing the other party with one week's notice.

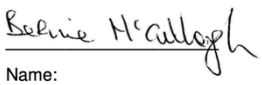
All obligations in relation to security and confidentiality, including data protection and intellectual property rights, will continue after termination of this Agreement.

Entire Agreement

This Agreement constitutes the entire agreement between the parties and supersedes all previous discussions, correspondence, negotiations, arrangements, understandings and agreements between them relating to its subject matter.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF the parties hereto have executed this Agreement the day and year first written above.

Signed by:



Name:

For and on behalf of

VOS Office Works Limited

_____

Name: **Padraig McBennett**

Final Year Doctoral Student

School of Theology, Philosophy and Music

DCU

T: 087-7513712

E: padraig.mcbennett2@mail.dcu.ie

Appendix L: Rogerian and Gadamerian phenomenological convergence

Although psychotherapy and hermeneutic phenomenology are not homogenous as philosophies or disciplines, Rogerian and Gadamerian concepts share points of conceptual convergence in my view. Rogers postulates that in the process of psychotherapy the individual becomes more open to experience, which he views as the opposite of defensiveness. He outlines that psychological research has shown that if the evidence of our senses runs contrary to our picture of self, then that evidence is distorted. In other words, according to Rogers, "we cannot see all that our senses report, but only the things that fit the picture we have.'[75] He argues that a safe relationship increases openness to experience replacing defensiveness or rigidity, where the individual becomes more openly aware of their own feelings and attitudes as they exist at an organic level. The person becomes more aware of reality as it exists outside of himself, instead of perceiving it in preconceived categories. He is able to absorb the evidence in a new situation, as it is, rather than distorting it to fit a pattern, which he already holds. This increasing ability to be open to experience makes him, in Roger's view, more realistic in dealing with new people, new situations, and new problems. He considers that this means "his beliefs are not rigid, that he can tolerate ambiguity. He can receive much conflicting evidence without forcing closure upon the situation."[76] Hence, I consider that Rogerian interaction is similar to the freestyle nature of phenomenological interviewing. It overlaps with the basic openness to experience they both share.

[75] Rogers, Carl R, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, (Houghton Mifflin Company: Boston, 1961), 115.
[76] Rogers (1961), 115.

Acknowledgements

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