



## Religious experience among sixth formers

The St Mary's Centre has played a significant role in coordinating surveys of sixth-form religion in Northern Ireland. The surveys, initiated by John Greer and continued by his colleagues, present a rare opportunity to record and examine the changing significance of religious identity in Northern Ireland over five decades. A recent article written by Tania ap Siôn and published in the journal, *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* explores the data concerning sixth-formers' reports of religious experience.

John Greer conducted major surveys of sixth-form religion in Protestant schools in Northern Ireland in 1968, 1978, and 1988. John Greer's colleagues continued that research tradition in Northern Ireland in 1998 and in 2010, and extended the survey to include sixth-form students in Catholic schools. Greer's survey routinely included a question on religious experience, drawing on the approach of Alister Hardy and the Religious Experience Research Unit. The 2010 survey provided the data from around 1,500 sixth-form students which were analysed in Tania ap Siôn's study. These new data offered two main points of contrast, between students in Catholic and in Protestant schools, and between students in 1998 and 2010. The analysis preserved Greer's historic descriptive categories of religious experience styled: help and guidance, exams, God's presence, answered prayer, death, sickness, conversion, miscellaneous, and difficulty in describing.

Two main conclusions emerged from the analyses of the data, which relate to the analytical frameworks employed and the results according to denomination (Protestant and Catholic) and according to survey year (1998 and 2010).

First, in terms of the analytical frameworks employed, the results show that the basic Greer categories are still able to reflect well the reported religious experiences of sixth-formers in Northern Ireland. In addition, it is clear that being able to place the experiences into more than one category has a demonstrable effect on the results, which was also the case in the 1998 survey. The results of the 2010 survey show that placing experiences into more than one category has an affect on both the hierarchical order of categories as well as

numbers within specific categories. The most significant difference appears in the 'answered prayer' category. Here, when experiences are restricted in their allocation to just one category, only 7% are recognised as including answered prayer. However, when experiences can be placed in up to two categories, 'answered prayer' is seen to be an element of 23% of experiences. This is an important finding because it shows that around one quarter of all the described religious experiences are directly linked to God's perceived response to personal prayer.

In the analysis, each religious experience was also examined for information relating to the setting for and the frequency of religious experience. In relation to setting, only 7% of responses were placed explicitly in a religious setting, and this was slightly higher for Protestant males (6%) and females (10%) than for Catholic males (5%) and females (4%). Although such identification of experiences is considered significant because it highlights the emphasis that respondents placed on an explicit religious context for the experience, the main weakness of this category is that it did not also include specific religious practice such as prayer or asking God for help, which would have given a broader appreciation of how religious setting may be understood in relation to religious experience. Future studies concerned with analysing the content of religious experiences would benefit from exploring this area in greater depth, recognising the qualitative distinctiveness of experiences where the respondents are consciously aware of actively bringing themselves into a religious ambit either through physical location or practice. In relation to frequency, the language used in the accounts of religious experience indicate that in all cases (apart from Catholic males), religious experience was most often described as something that had happened more than once, and for a minority religious experience was something which was an everyday or ever-present reality (most often Protestant females, 10%). It is argued that this type of additional information provides a more nuanced understanding of the nature of religious experience among sixth formers in Protestant and Catholic schools in Northern Ireland, and also captures the presence of that aspect of religious experience referred to by Hardy as 'a continuing feeling of a transcendental reality or of a divine presence' in contrast with single experiences.

Second, in terms of examining the results from the perspective of denomination (Protestant schools and Catholic schools) and survey year (1998 and 2010), the following differences may be discerned. Compared with Protestant males (32%), Protestant females (34%) and Catholic males (28%), Catholic females (15%) were less likely to describe their experience of God in terms of God's presence. In addition, if these figures are then compared with the results of the previous 1998 survey, it can be seen that experiences relating to God's presence are considerably more numerous in the current study with an increase most starkly seen in the experiences of Protestant males and Catholic males.

In the current study religious experiences falling into the help and guidance category were significantly fewer than in the 1998 survey, where help and guidance was the most frequently employed category. In the 2010 survey only 26% of experiences were related to help and guidance, and the figure for Catholic females (18%) was significantly lower than the other three groups. In the 1998 survey 58% of experiences fell into the help and guidance category, with particularly high figures for Protestant females (58%) and Catholic females (80%).

The 'difficulty in describing' category was added to the eight Greer categories in the analysis of the 1998 data because of the high number of experiences falling into the miscellaneous category. However, the results of the 2010 survey show that less than 1% of experiences contained elements related to 'difficulty in describing', and the miscellaneous category remained low at 5%. This may indicate that those who chose to describe their religious experiences did not (at this level) consider it difficult in any particular way, unlike the 1998 survey.

There are, however, some results that remain broadly similar when the 1998 survey is compared with the 2010 survey. For example, religious experiences related to examination contexts continued to be higher in Catholic than in Protestant accounts, although with a sharp decrease in numbers for Protestant males and Protestant females in the 2010 survey. In the 1998 survey, examinations were a feature in the experiences of 14% of Protestant males, 14% of Protestant females, 28% of Catholic males and 16% of Catholic females. While in the 2010 survey, examinations were a feature in the experiences of 3% of Protestant males, 3% of Protestant females, 21% of Catholic males and 30% of Catholic females. A second example of results that have remained similar in the two surveys relates to the conversion category, which is employed by only Protestant males and Protestant females.

Overall, the data demonstrate that the question posed by Greer, together with the analytic frameworks proposed by Greer and developed by ap Siôn, provide an effective tool to penetrate behind the cultural significance of denominational identity in Northern Ireland to access the religious significance of this identity. Comparison of the findings generated by the research method among sixth-form students attending Catholic and Protestant schools in Northern Ireland in 1998 and 2010 offer a barometer of the changing face of the religious significance of denominational identity during the period of cultural transition. Further replication of the same research programme in 2020 is now needed to keep a clear record of the changing significance of religious identity in Northern Ireland.

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