



IRISH CATHOLIC
BISHOPS' CONFERENCE
COMHDHÁIL EASPAG CAITLÍDEACH ÉIREANN

Practice and Belief among Catholics in Northern Ireland

A summary of data from the International Social Science
Programme Religion III (2008/9) survey for Northern Ireland &
Ireland in a comparative perspective

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Introduction

The International Social Science Programme (ISSP) and the European Social Survey (the ESS) are academically-driven social surveys. They examine attitudes and beliefs in a range of topics including the media usage, occupation and income, social trust, political interests, participation in socio-political structures and other beliefs and values.

The ISSP Religion module is now in its third iteration having previously been deployed in 1991 and 1998. Currently 47 countries are members of the ISSP and each member country has a representative. It has a rotating secretariat, currently housed in Israel. The GESIS Data Archive, the ISSP's data archive, is responsible for archiving, integrating data and documentation and for the distribution of the merged international datasets for the Programme. In Ireland, the ISSP representative is the Social Science Research Centre which is a research institute of University College Dublin. The SSRC co-operates with ARK (Northern Ireland Social and Political Archive, a joint venture of Queen's University and the University of Ulster). This includes making available, on publicly accessible websites, the ISSP modules which have been fielded in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD) is the archive and distributor of the ESS. In Ireland, the National Coordinator is Dr Susana Ferreira, University College Dublin, and the project is funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities & Social Sciences (IRCHSS). The survey organisation is the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI).

This report is a follow up to the reports produced by the Council for Research & Development in recent years. It includes the most up to date data for Northern Ireland and tabulates data from the most recent ISSP Religion III survey. In these analyses, the approved design weight has been applied and a filter on respondents' current religious denomination has been run to extract only those who self-identified as Roman Catholic. The data was analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 18.

Table 1: total sample sizes and Catholic sample sizes, ISSP III and ESS4.

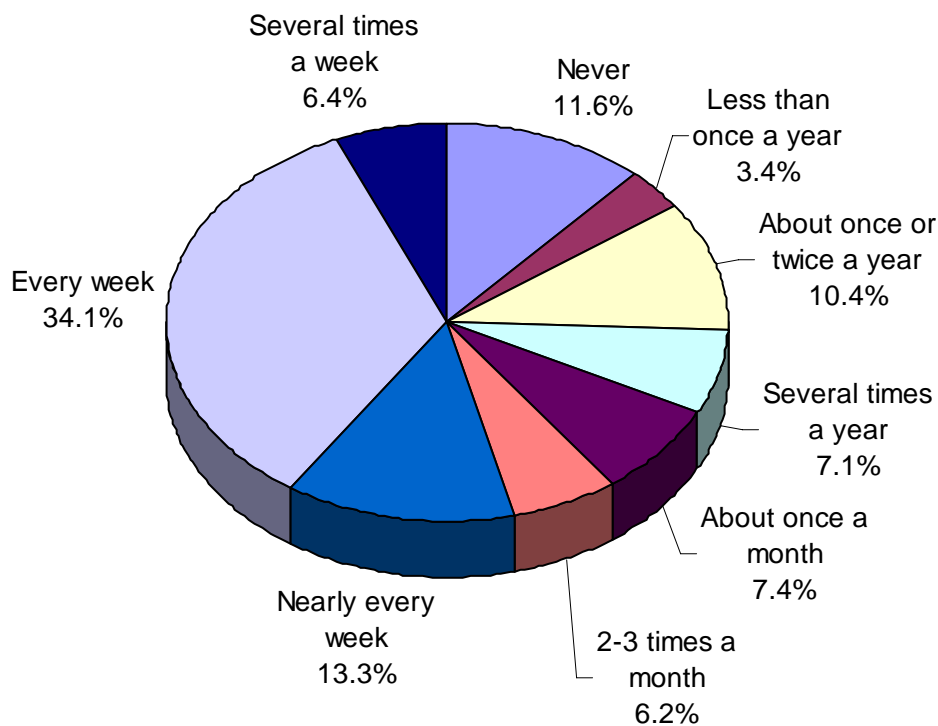
	Total sample size	Number of Catholics	Percentage of Catholics in the sample
ISSP Religion III	1094	396	36%
ESS Round 4 (NI is a region of the UK for this survey.)	58	37	64%

As NI is a region of a much larger country in the ESS, the proportion of Catholics in the NI sample is not the same as that currently in the population. As a result, the ESS data for Northern Ireland is **not tabulated here**. A combined Ireland report using ESS will be produced at a later stage.

Practice amongst Catholics in Northern Ireland

In 2008, it was reported that there had been a steady decline in the rate of decline of the proportion of Catholics in Ireland as a whole attending Mass weekly or more often. Weekly or more often Mass attendance was declining from the late 1980s but had levelled off at 64% of Catholics by the late 1990s. In 2007, the ESS data showed that weekly or more often Mass attendance in NI stood at 45% of the Catholic population. Using the ISSP data, we can see that weekly or more often attendance at Mass stands at about 40% of all NI Catholics. While this represents a decline in the proportion of weekly or more often Mass attendance, the decline is consistent with recent trends. The surveys also use slightly different categories. The chart below shows the breakdown in Mass attendance figures from the ISSP III survey data.

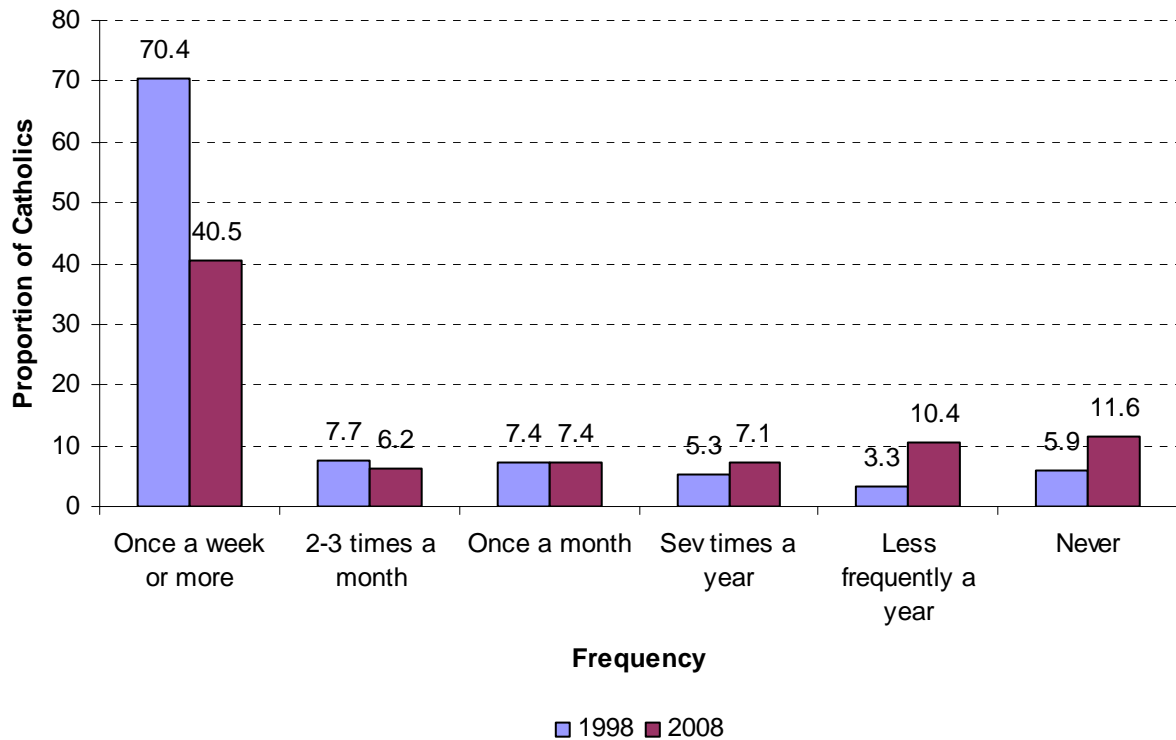
Figure 1: Attendance at religious services apart from special occasions, 2009/10. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III.



34% of Catholics in Northern Ireland attend Mass every week with a further 6% attending more often than that. Weekly only Mass attendance for NI Catholics is lower than for Catholics in the RoI. 13% attend almost every week but this is to be differentiated from those who attend once per month – 7%. A further 6% of Catholics in NI attend 2 to 3 times per month. The suggested generalised pattern of recent reports to a shift in monthly routine Mass attendance patterns seems to be reinforced in these data. Northern Catholics are monthly Mass goers compared to their RoI counterparts who are more likely to attend on a monthly basis. In 1998, 70% of NI Catholics stated that they attended Mass per week or more often. In a ten year period, the proportion of NI Catholics who attend Mass on a weekly or more often basis has declined from 70% to 40%. This represents a steep decline.

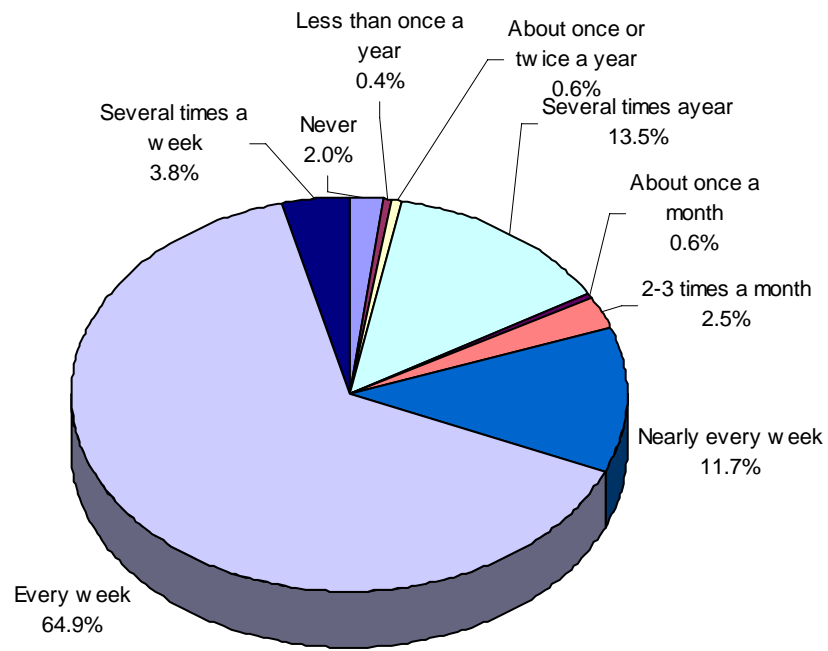
The chart below shows comparative data for ISSP II and III for Catholics in NI in respect of Mass attendance. It is hard to understand what has led to such a sharp decline in these data over time. *It should be noted that ISSP III contained an additional frequency category of Nearly Every Week and this accounts for 13% of NI Catholics.*

Figure 2: Frequency of Mass attendance in Northern Ireland, 1998 and 2008. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP II and III.



The trend toward infrequent Mass attendance is evident from the chart above where those who attend less frequently than several times per year has increased from 3% in 1998 to 10% in 2008. The percentage of Catholics attending more than once per week is also getting smaller. Perhaps this drop can be accounted for by historical trends. Looking at the data for when the respondents (all ages) were aged 11 and 12, we note that weekly attendance was much higher in their younger years.

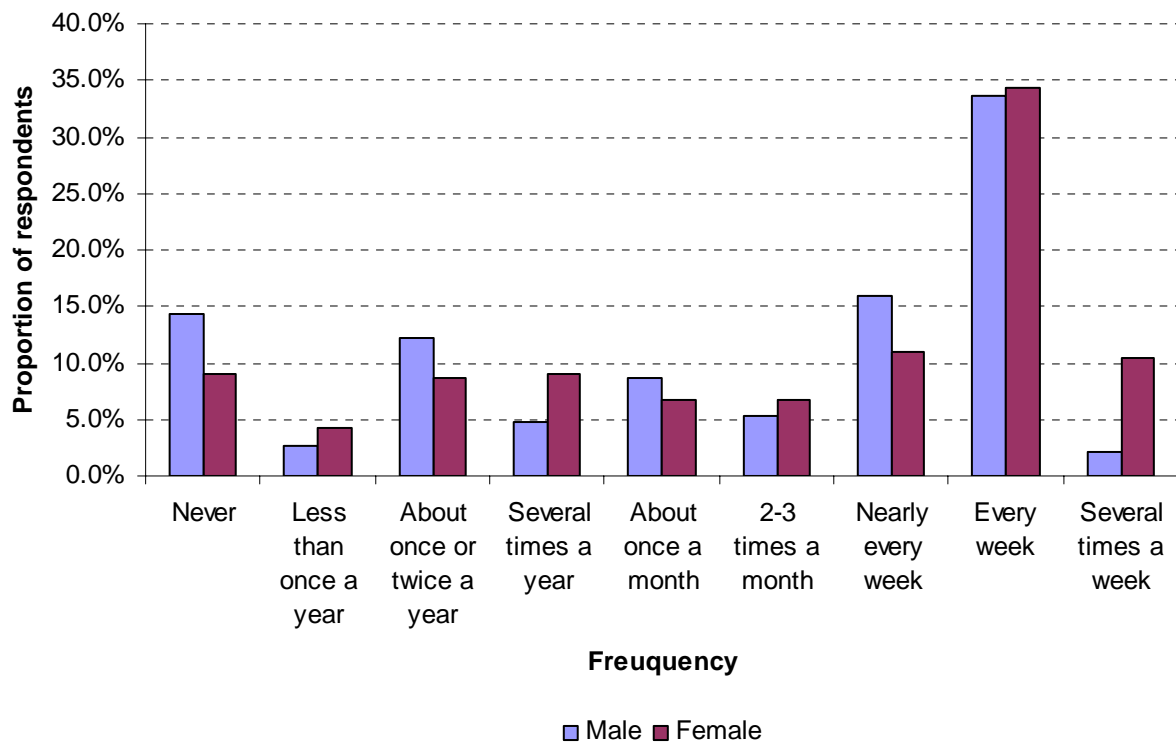
Figure 3: Frequency of Mass attendance among Catholics when aged 11/12. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III



Almost 65% of the Catholics in this sample attended Mass every week when they were aged 11 and 12 and a further 4% attended several times per week. It might be possible to speculate then that the fall off in Mass attendance for NI Catholics post-adolescence is greater than for other parts of the island of Ireland. As has been seen before in reports of this nature, the proportion of regular Mass attendees is not evenly distributed across the age range. However, this particular iteration of ISSP does not contain age based data for Northern Ireland. The following charts and graphs show how there is some relationship between educational attainment, gender and regular Mass attendance. While there is some relationship arising from the cross tabulation of these data, there is little statistical significance related to these factors.

From the chart below it can be seen that there are some differences between men and women in NI and their attendance at Mass. In particular, attention should be drawn to the less frequent attendance categories such as Several Times a Year and About Once or Twice a Year.

Figure 4: Frequency of Mass attendance by sex of respondent. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III



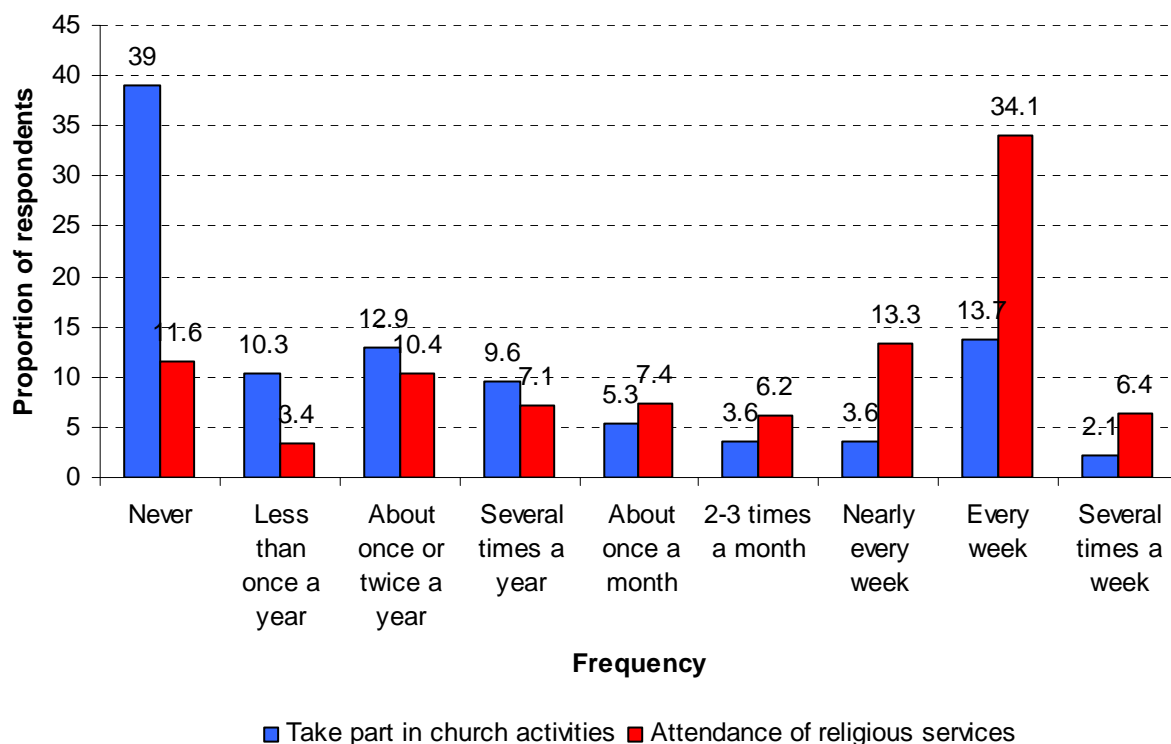
From the table below we can note some disparities in educational attainment and frequency of Mass attendance amongst NI Catholics. For brevity, some categories of attendance frequency have been collapsed and others have been omitted. Whereas 52% of those who have no second level qualification (albeit a small number) attend weekly or more often, 43% of those with a university degree do so. These are not statistically significant although there is a numerical difference.

Table 2: Frequency of Mass attendance by educational attainment. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III

	Less than once a year	Annually or several times a year	About once a month	2-3 times a month	Nearly every week	Every week or more often
No secondary qualifications	3.8	13.0	3.8	4.6	9.9	52.0
CSE, GCSE or equivalent	5.0	15.0	5.0	15.0	5.0	45.0
O-level or equivalent	5.1	21.8	14.1	2.6	12.8	29.5
A-level or equivalent	4.1	28.6	6.1	4.1	20.4	22.4
Higher below degree level	0.0	8.9	12.5	14.3	17.9	39.3
Degree, university or CNAAC or diploma	3.1	21.6	4.6	4.6	13.8	43.1

The ISSP survey also points out some differences in frequency of Mass attendance and involvement in church based activities, other than attending for Mass. Respondents were asked “How often do you take part in the activities or organizations of a church or place of worship other than attending services?” and these responses are tabulated below. The graph below shows these differences using a 9 point scale for the 2008 survey.

Figure 5: Frequency of Mass attendance and taking part in Church activities outside of regular services. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III.



As can be seen, about 39% of Catholics in Northern Ireland never take part in Church activities outside of Mass. Further proportions of about 23% take part in these activities less than once or about once or twice a year. It would seem that Church involvement outside of Mass is quite limited. While 34% of Catholics in NI attend Mass every week, just under 14% actually take part in Church activities outside of Mass.

From the ISSP survey data we can also gauge gender differences in attendance at religious services when the respondent was a child. This gauges how Mass attendance amongst Catholics in NI falls off with age but also with small differences between respondents of their mother or their father attended more often when younger. Respondents are asked in two sequential questions “When you were a child, how often did your mother / father attend religious services?” The results from these two questions are below. The results are also statistically significant.

Table 3: Frequency of childhood attendance at Mass by whether or not Mother / Father attended. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III.

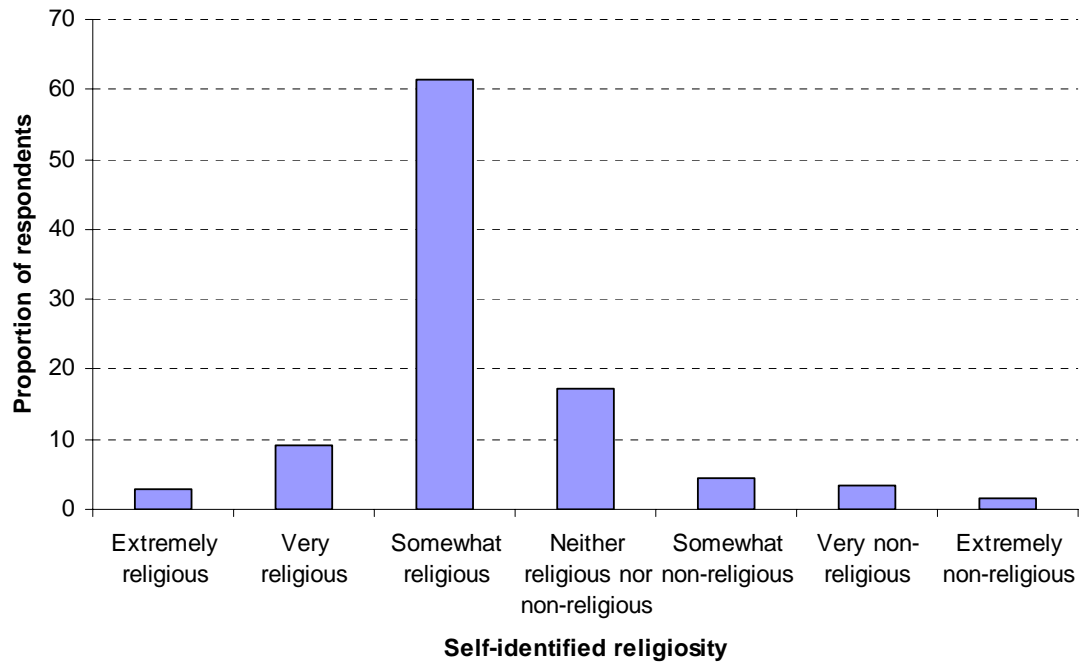
	Mother attended when I was a child	Father attended when I was a child
Never	1.8	3.4
Less than once a year	1.5	2.6
About once or twice a year	2.3	1.6
Several times a year	5.4	5.5
About once a month	0.8	1.6
2-3 times a month	12.8	12.6
Nearly every week	7.7	9.2
Every week	56.5	56.5
Several times a week	11.0	6.5
No mother or father / mother or father not present	0.3	0.5

While 3.4% of fathers never attended Mass when the respondent was a child, just over half that proportion of mothers never did. The differences for weekly Mass attendance are insignificant when compared side by side but for more frequent Mass attendance, it would seem that mothers attended more often with the respondent than fathers did in the respondent's childhood.

Self-identified religiosity and prayer

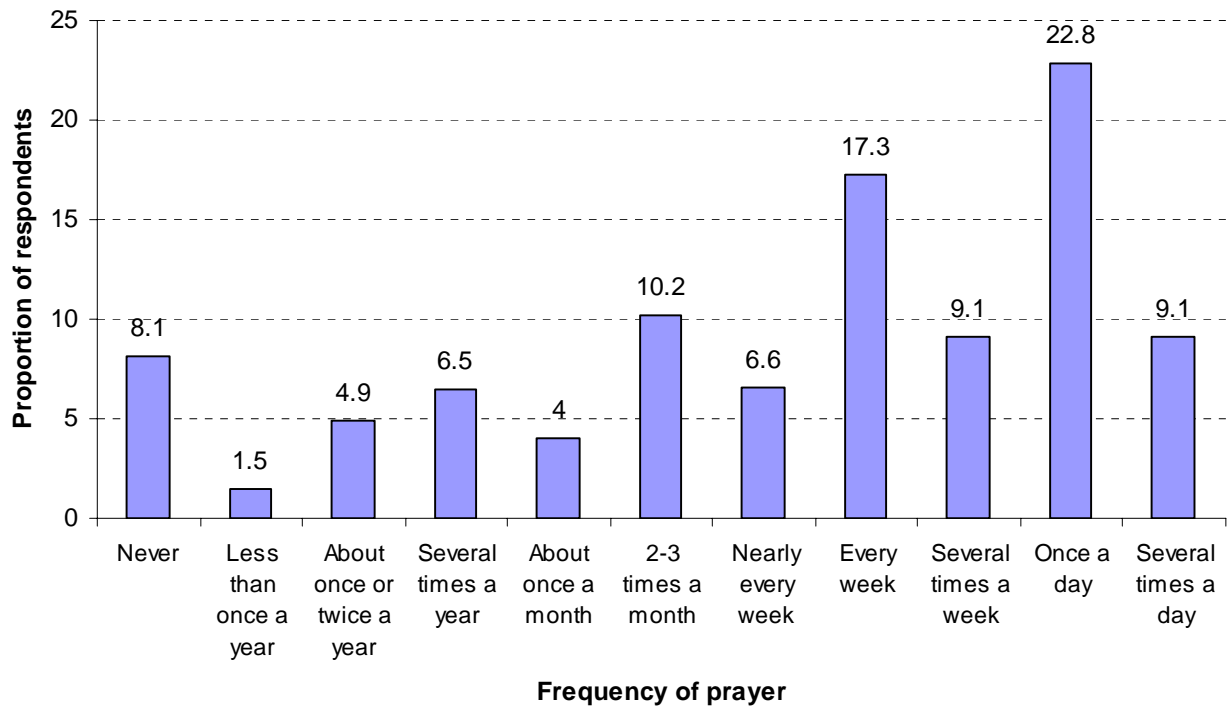
The ISSP surveys the self-identified religiosity of the respondent on a scale where the respondent is asked how religious they believe themselves to be. In round 3 of the survey, the data for Catholics in Northern Ireland is as follows:

Figure 6: How religious are you? Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III.



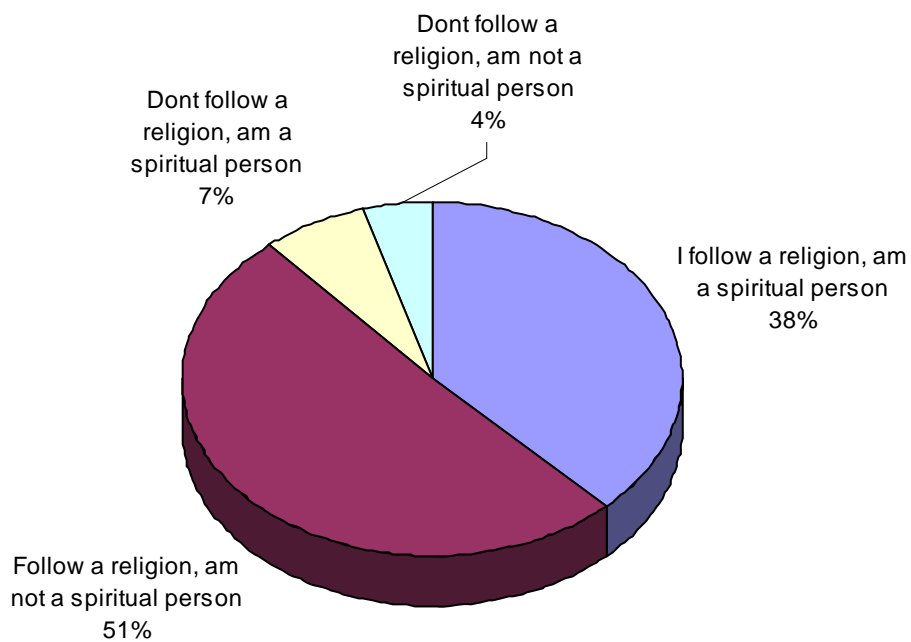
As can be seen from the graph above, just over 60% of the sample described themselves as somewhat Religious with smaller proportions selecting other categories. This is consistent with the data from the Republic as well as data across various other countries. It might be surprising to discover that almost 5% of the Catholic sample describes itself as Very or Extremely Non-religious. Respondents are also asked how often they pray and the results from this question can be seen from the graph below.

Figure 7: Frequency of prayer among Catholics. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III



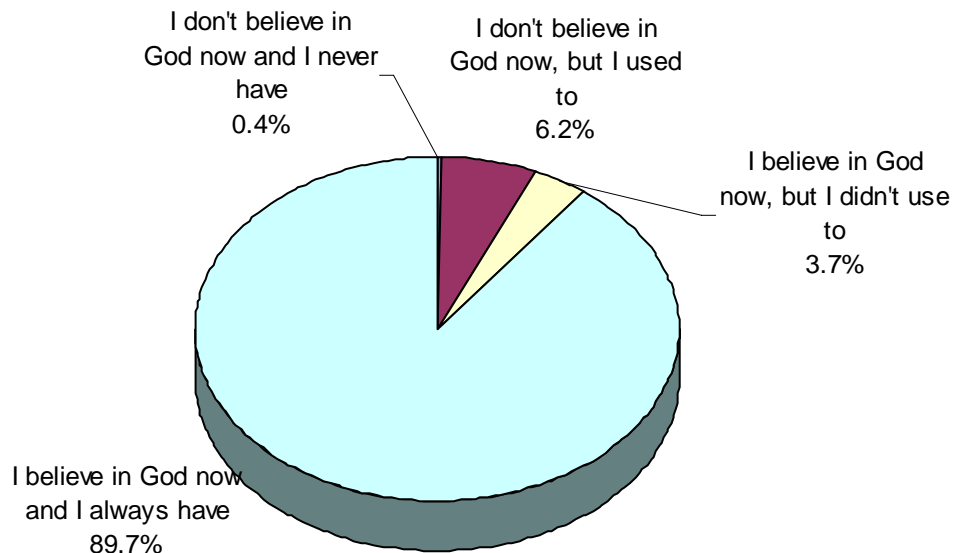
Amongst Catholics living in Northern Ireland, the majority pray every week or once a day. Prayer is a persistent practice amongst Irish Catholics despite the fall off in Mass attendance. About 8% of NI Catholics never pray at all. Respondents are asked to choose from a list which presented statement describes them best. Furthermore, they are also asked which statement is closest to their own views. The first is a measure of expression; the second is a measure of affinity to a view more generally. The chart below shows the ways in which NI Catholics express their religiosity.

Figure 8: Percentage of Catholics in expression of their beliefs. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III.



Just over half of them state that they follow a religion but that they are not a spiritual person, with a further 38% stating that they follow a religion but that they are a spiritual person. 11% of NI Catholics do not follow a religion according to these data. 82% of the respondents furthermore stated that there are basic truths in many religions but only 13% stated that there is truth in only one religion. 5% believe that there is very little truth in any religion. At this stage, it might be suggested that between 5 and 10% of NI Catholics do not believe themselves to be religious or that there is very little truth in any religion.

Figure 9: Consistency of belief in God among Catholics. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III



The chart above shows how the respondent's faith has changed over time and is some measure of temporal belief. Almost 90% of the NI Catholics in the sample state that they believe in God now and that they always have. Just under 4% of the sample stated that that they believe in God now but not always. However, only a very small proportion of the total sample never believed in God and still no longer believe in God. This points to a continuity of faith despite the figures presented above. The survey goes on to ask about further aspects of belief of the Christian faith (and some of other faiths which may have prominence in an Irish setting) and these are summarized in the table below.

Table 4: Various aspects of Christian and other belief among Catholics. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III.

	Christian beliefs				Other beliefs		
	Belief in life after death	Belief in heaven	Belief in hell	Belief in religious miracles	Belief in reincarnation	Belief in Nirvana	Belief in supernatural powers of deceased ancestors
Yes, definitely	49.1	56.5	38.4	38.5	8.7	7.2	9.7
Yes, probably	35.3	33.5	32.4	40.4	18.8	15	17.1
No, probably not	9.6	7.3	19.6	16.3	38.6	40.3	34.8
No, definitely not	6	2.8	9.7	4.8	33.9	37.6	38.4

As can be seen from this table, belief in life after death is congruent with a belief in Heaven with no striking differences across the categories of rows. Belief in Hell is much less likely given that about 38% are definitely sure that it exists contrasting with over 19% who think that it probably does not. A majority of Catholics do not believe in reincarnation and Nirvana. About 10% of NI's Catholics do believe in the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors.

Within the ISSP, further understandings of respondents' faith are also found. They are asked to provide agreement or disagreement with a series of statements relating to their understanding of God, their life and ways of connecting with God. Among the Catholics in Northern Ireland, a number of features can be discerned and these are seen in the table below.

Table 5: Agreement or disagreement with various statements in describing their faith. Base: NI Catholics. Source: ISSP III.

	There is a God who concerns Himself with every human being personally	There is little that people can do to change the course of their lives	To me life is only meaningful if God exists	In my opinion, life does not serve any purpose	Life is only meaningful if you provide the meaning yourself	I have my own way of connecting with God without churches or religious services
Strongly agree	31	7.4	13.7	0.9	9	9
Agree	42.1	22	27.2	3.6	37.5	37.5
Neither agree nor disagree	15.4	11.3	33.8	10.6	25	25
Disagree	8.9	44.4	20.4	48.2	21.6	21.6
Strongly disagree	2.6	15	4.9	36.7	6.8	6.8

About 42% agree that God concerns Himself with every human being personally. A further 31% of the sample strongly agrees with this. A relatively similar proportion also agree that life is only meaningful if you provide the meaning yourself. At the same time, Catholics in NI are divided on agreement or disagreement as to whether God’s existence makes life meaningful. 27% agree with this statement compared with 20% who disagree with this statement. Seen in the light of other practices tabulated above (the switch to less frequent Mass

attendance and the relative importance of daily prayer), it might be said that Catholicism in Northern Ireland is relatively individualistic in practise.

44% of NI Catholics disagree that there is little that people can do to change the course of their lives indicating a relatively high proportion that have a strong belief in self-determination. Life is only meaningful if you provide the meaning yourself is also the pre-eminent position among the sample with almost 7% strongly disagreeing with the statement.

Catholics in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in a comparative cross-national context

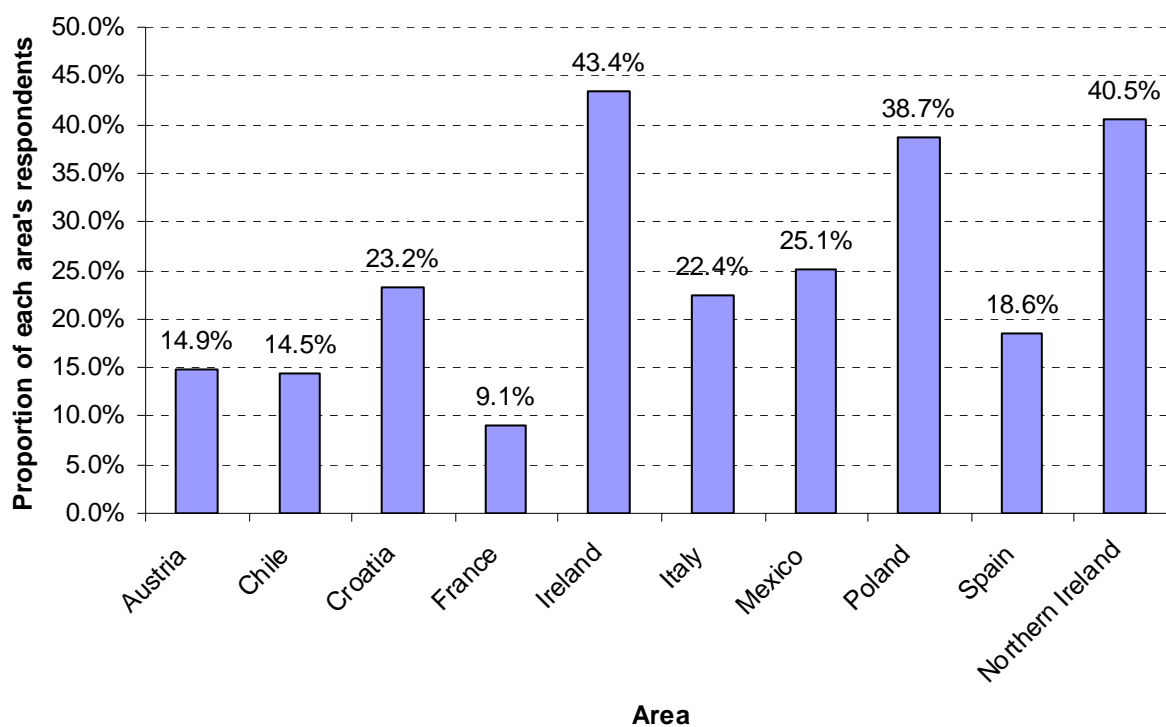
The International Social Science Programme surveys allow for national and cross-national comparisons using the same questions and methods. In this section of the report, Catholics in Ireland (RoI and NI) are placed in a comparative context for selected variables. These include frequency of prayer and practice, attitudes to various social values and how beliefs are expressed. The ten chosen countries / areas are:

Austria	Chile
Croatia	France
Ireland	Italy ¹
Mexico	Poland
Spain	Northern Ireland

Practice and prayer

Looking at the data for frequency of practice and prayer amongst the Catholics in these areas, we can note some patterns across the countries and areas. The graph below shows the proportion of each area's Catholic population who attend religious services (i.e. Mass) every week or more often. Amongst these data, we can note that Ireland has the highest proportion of Catholics (43%) attending at this frequency with NI a close second at just over 40%. Ireland has historically shown higher than European-average Mass attendance rates. Almost 39% of Catholics in Poland attend weekly Mass and the next highest proportions are seen in Mexico and Croatia.

Figure 10: Weekly or more often Mass attendance among Catholics. Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III

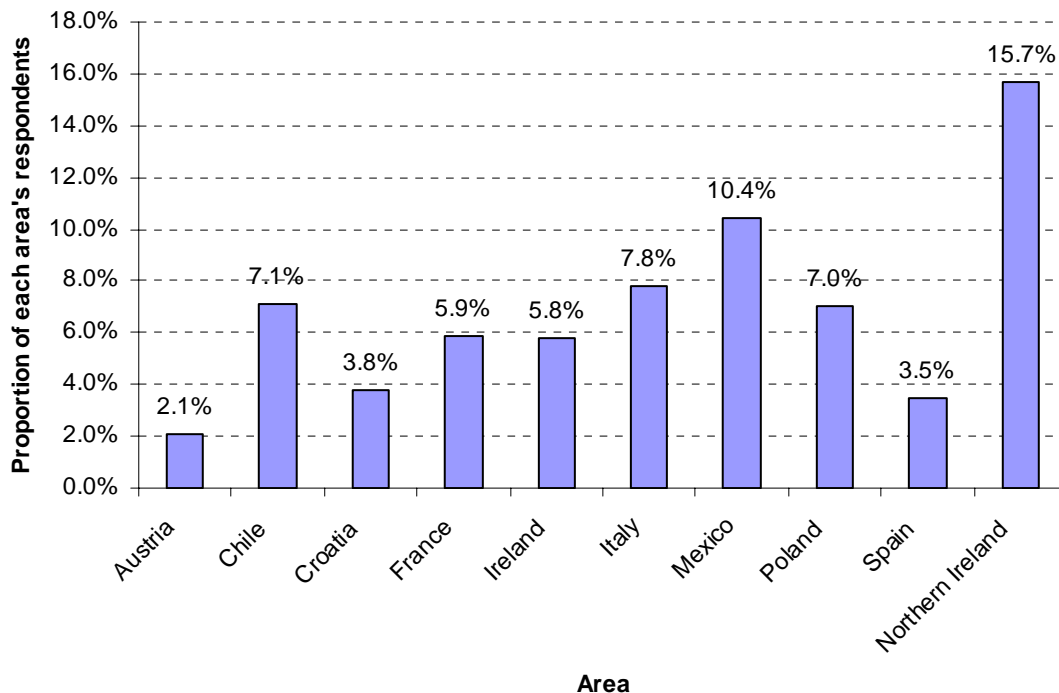


¹ Italy had two rounds of fieldwork, 2008 and 2010. Consequently, all of the Italian data is displayed as an average of the two surveys.

Lower proportions of Catholics in Austria, Chile and Spain are also recorded. Higher proportions of Catholics in these areas attend Mass a few times per year when compared with Ireland, Northern Ireland and Poland.

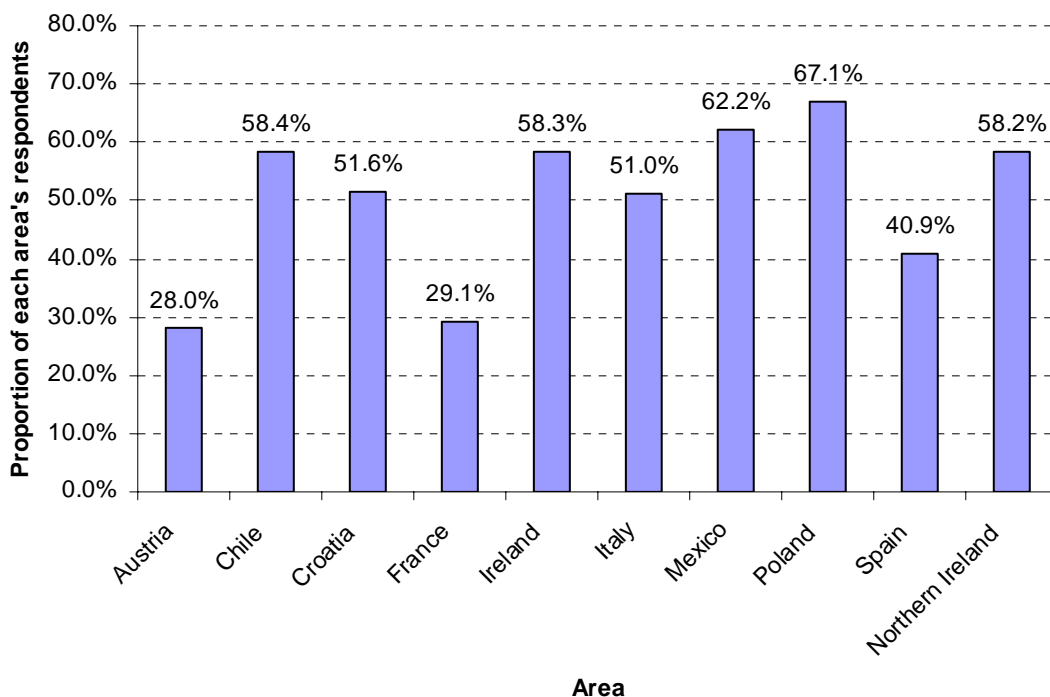
Taking part in Church activities outside of Mass, there are broadly similar patterns, although with remarkably lower proportions of Catholics. The graph below shows the proportions in each area who take part in such activities weekly or more often.

Figure 11: Weekly or more often engagement in Church activities among Catholics. Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III



Of interest here is the much higher proportion of Catholics seen to be engaged in Church activities on a weekly or more often basis in NI compared with the other areas. Almost 16% of Catholics in Northern Ireland do this compared with just under 6% of Catholics in the Republic. 10% of Mexico's Catholics engage in Church activities weekly or more often with just 2% of Austria's doing so. The Republic's figure for weekly engagement with Church activities other than Mass is amongst the lowest in the dataset. Turning to the data on frequency of prayer in these areas, we can see that weekly or more often prayer maintains its popularity for Catholics across these countries. The graph below shows the geographical trends for this practice.

Figure 12: Weekly or more often prayer among Catholics. Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III

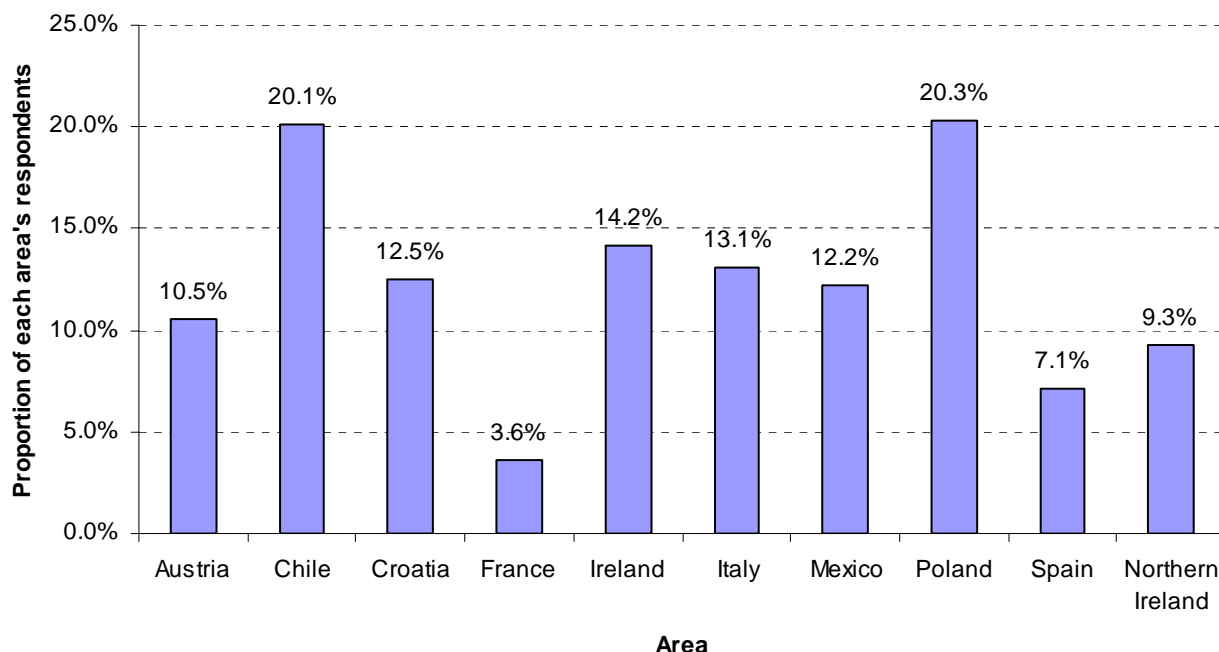


While 58% of the Republic and NI's Catholics pray weekly or more often, 68% of Poland's Catholics do. In Chile, where weekly Mass attendance was low, prayer retains a central feature of the faith there. In France where fewer than 1 in 10 Catholics attend Mass weekly, almost 30% of them pray weekly or more often. 23% of Austrian Catholics and 21% of Spanish Catholics never pray at all. Catholics in Poland and Mexico pray daily in the highest proportions – 33%.

Social values

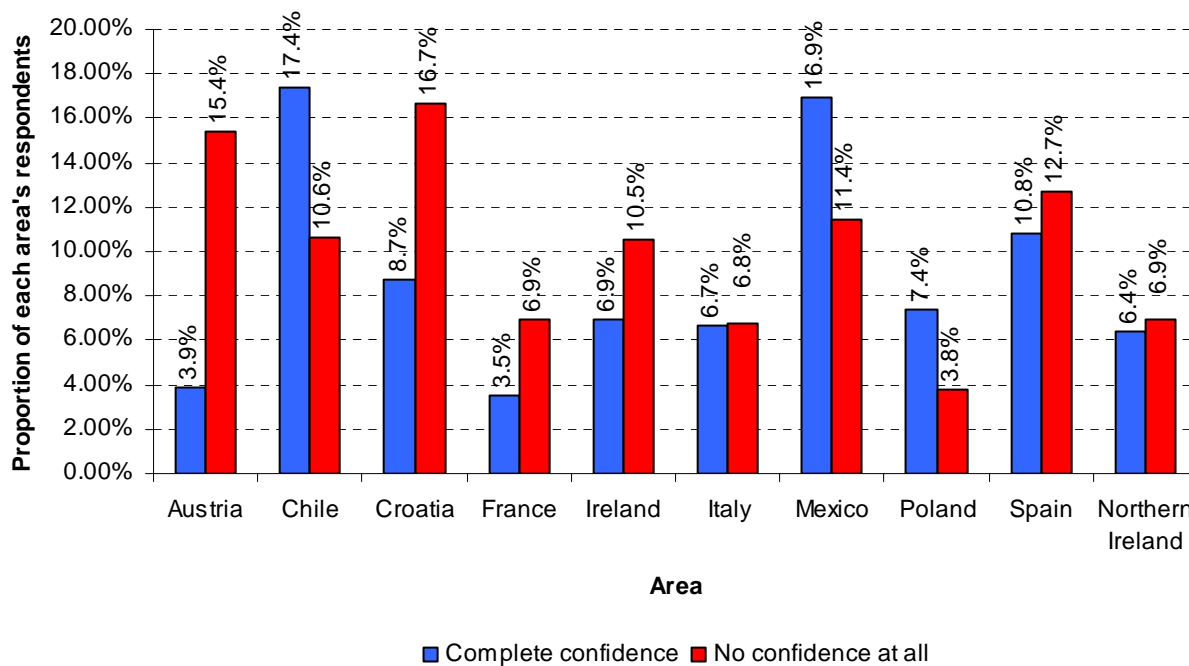
While the measurement of people's statements of values are undoubtedly influenced by local circumstances, a cross-national comparison of a number of attitudinal questions is possible using the ISSP data. In the graph below, we can see how Catholics in each area's sample respond to one of these statements. Respondents are presented with the statement 'Do you think that churches and religious organizations in this country have too much power or too little power?' We can see from the graph below the proportions of those who chose the Far Too Much Power option. While this is the extreme end of the scale presented to respondents, it does provide some measure of an anti-institutional position. The highest proportions of Catholics believing that churches and religious organizations have far too much power are to be found in Poland and Chile. Given the data presented in the previous, these data might be surprisingly high. Poland has one of the survey's highest proportion of Catholics attending weekly Mass and yet 1 in 5 believe that churches have far too much power. 14% of Catholics in Ireland believe they have far too much power and 9% in Northern Ireland believe so. Amongst Catholics in France, where Mass attendance is low, just fewer than 4% of Catholics believe that churches have far too much power.

Figure 13: Believe that 'churches and religious organizations in this country have too much power' among Catholics. Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III



Another part of the dataset worthy of comparison is to examine the level of confidence in the same churches and religious organizations. We cannot assume that the churches that these Catholics have in mind means the Catholic Church, but it gives a fair approximation of the levels of confidence in the institution across many areas. The graph below the shows the results of the question 'How much confidence do you have in churches and religious organizations' and those who stated that they had No Confidence At All and Complete Confidence.

Figure 14: No Confidence At All and Complete Confidence in 'churches and religious organizations'. Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III

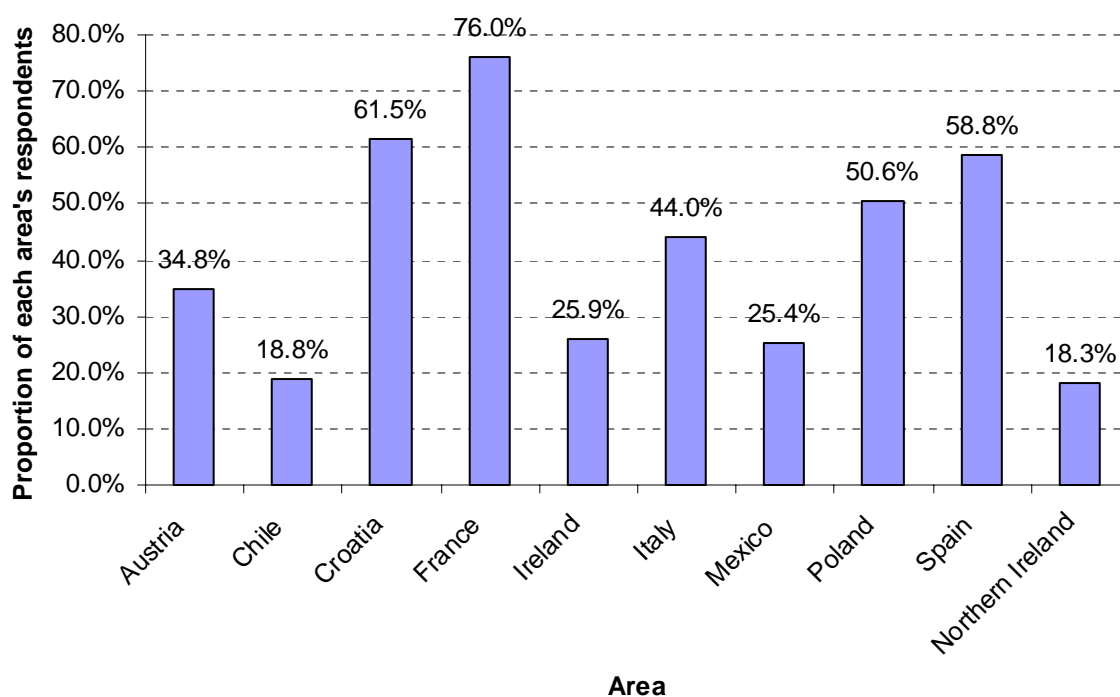


As can be seen, the highest levels of no confidence amongst Catholics in the churches and religious organisations can be seen in Croatia and Austria. Spain and Mexico also have large proportions of

Catholics expressing on confidence. Confidence among Catholics in Ireland is lower in the Republic (about 10% stating No Confidence) than in Northern Ireland where just fewer than 7% express No Confidence. Amongst those Catholics who expressed Complete Confidence, the highest proportions are to be found in Austria and Croatia again. About 7% of Catholics in the RoI and about 6% of those in NI expressed complete confidence in churches and religious institutions.

Finally, in this section we can examine the data for three measures of social values amongst Catholics in the areas. Respondents were presented with a series of statements and asked to tick a box that best represented their view from Always wrong, Almost always wrong, Wrong only sometimes, Not wrong at all. Firstly, respondents were asked ‘Do you personally think it is wrong or not wrong for a woman to have an abortion if there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby’. The graph below shows Not Wrong At All responses among the Catholics in area’s sample.

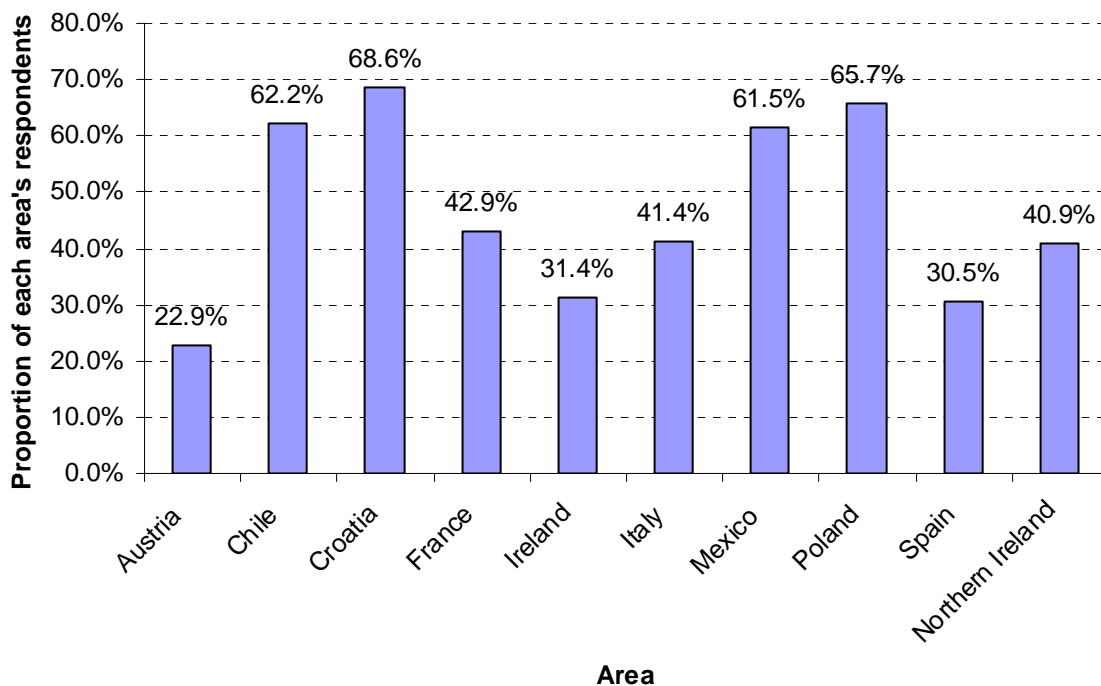
Figure 15: 'For a woman to have an abortion if there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby' is Not Wrong At All. Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III



As can be seen above, 76% of Catholics in France chose that it was not wrong at all compared to just over one quarter of Catholics in the RoI and just under 1 in 5 of Catholics in Northern Ireland. 58% of Catholics in Spain felt that it was not wrong at all for a woman to have an abortion if there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby.

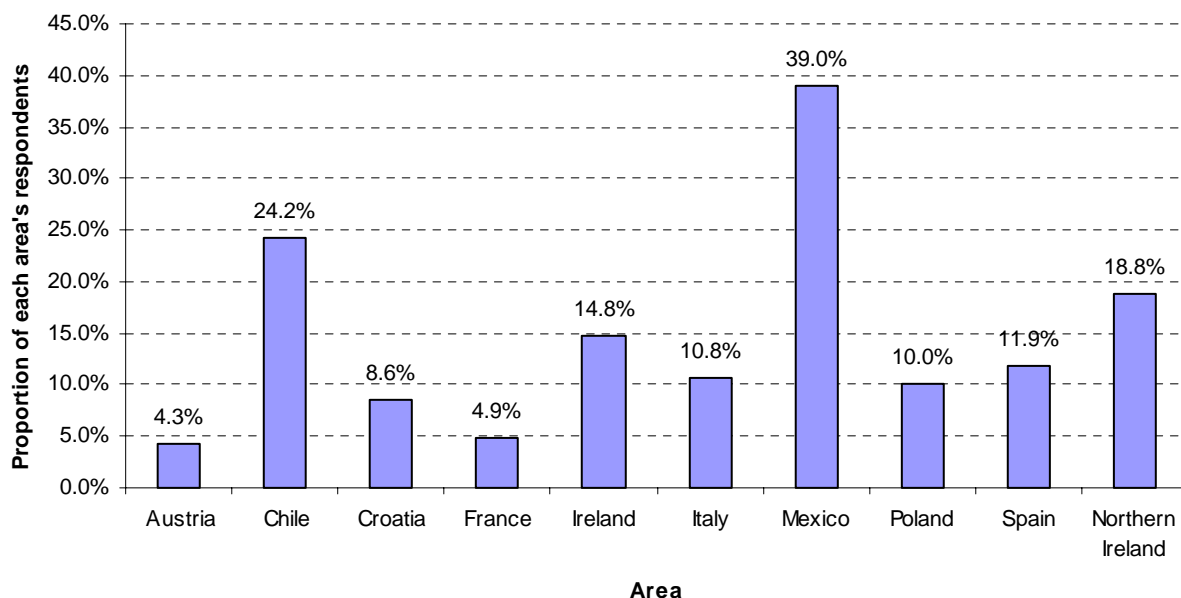
Secondly, respondents were asked verbally ‘what about sexual relations between two adults of the same sex, is it...’ and then asked to choose from the range of opinions above. The chart below shows the responses across the areas under examination in this report.

Figure 16: 'Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex' is Always Wrong. Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III



31% of Catholics in Ireland felt that it is always wrong compared with almost 41% of Catholics in NI. The areas with the highest proportions of Catholics stating that it is always wrong are Croatia, Poland and Chile. Respondents were also presented with the question 'Do you think it is wrong or not wrong if a man and a woman have sexual relations before marriage?' The chart below shows the respondents' Always Wrong choices in relation to this issue.

Figure 17: 'A man and a woman having sexual relations before marriage' is Always Wrong. Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III



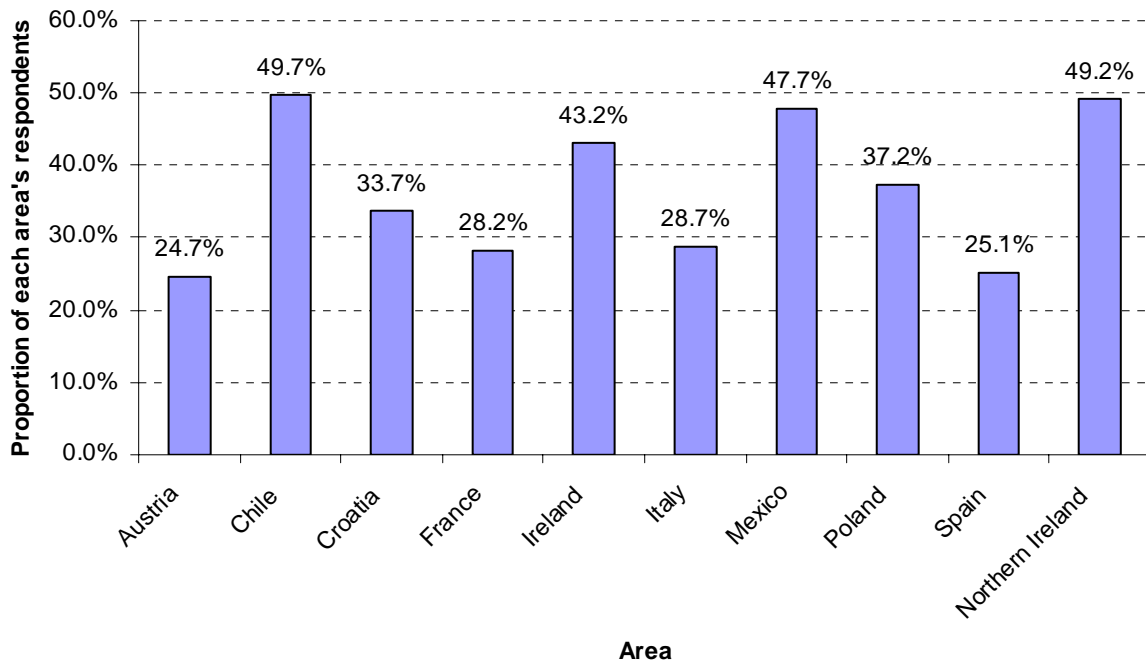
As can be seen, Catholics in Mexico are most vehement in this regard with 39% of them believing that sexual relations before marriage is always wrong. About 15% of Catholics in the Republic of Ireland believe it is always wrong and about 1 in 5 Catholics in Northern Ireland believe this to be

so. There is no clear pattern amongst these attitudinal data when you compare the different areas from the ISSP survey. The following might be said however: Catholics in Ireland are not so concerned about sexual relations before marriage but concerned about the abortion of a child with a strong chance of a serious defect.

Expression of beliefs

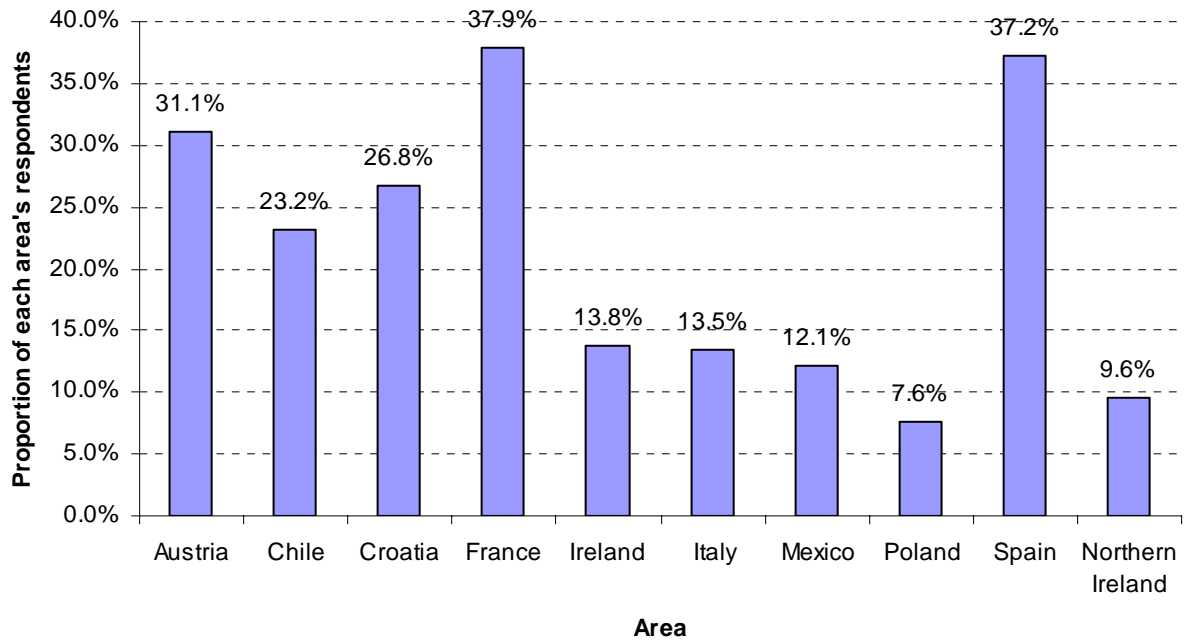
Finally, a cross-national comparison between the expression of beliefs between the areas in the dataset is examined. In this subsection, respondents are presented with a series of beliefs and asked to mark their reactions from a list Yes definitely, Yes probably, No probably not and No, definitely not. This is a means of gauging an expression of various forms of people’s beliefs in Catholic doctrine. It is simplistic and subject to very individualised expressions being aggregated grossly but again, provides some measure of cross-national comparison. The first measure is a belief in life after death and the graph below shows the responses for those who thought that Yes Definitely came closest to their belief.

Figure 18: Belief in life after death - Yes, definitely. Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III



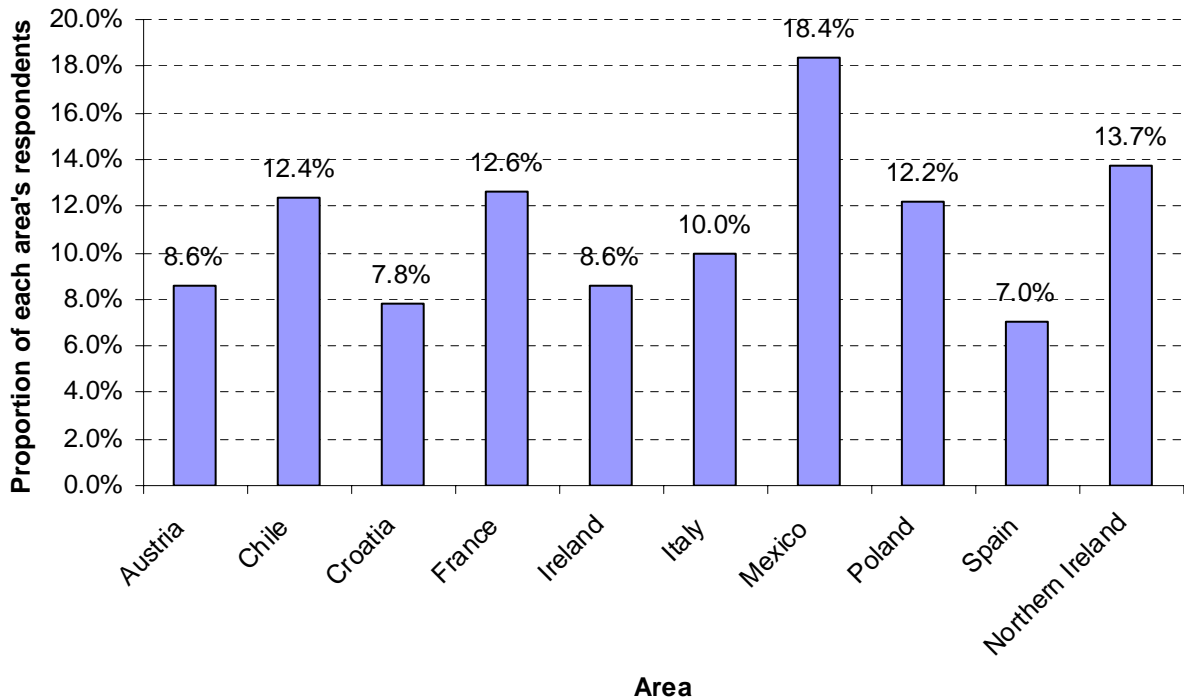
Catholics in Chile, the Republic of Ireland, Mexico and Northern Ireland definitely believe in a life after death in the highest proportions. Catholics in Austria and Spain are not so definite. The next graph shows the proportions of Catholics who definitely do not believe in Hell. We can see that Spain France and Austria have the highest proportion of Catholics definitely not believing in Hell.

Figure 19: Belief in Hell - No, definitely. Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III



Respondents were presented with a further series of statements and asked to provide their level of agreement on a five point scale. Respondents were presented with the statement, as above, 'To me life is only meaningful if God exists'. The graph below shows how the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland compare with the other areas about those who indicated that they strongly agree with this statement.

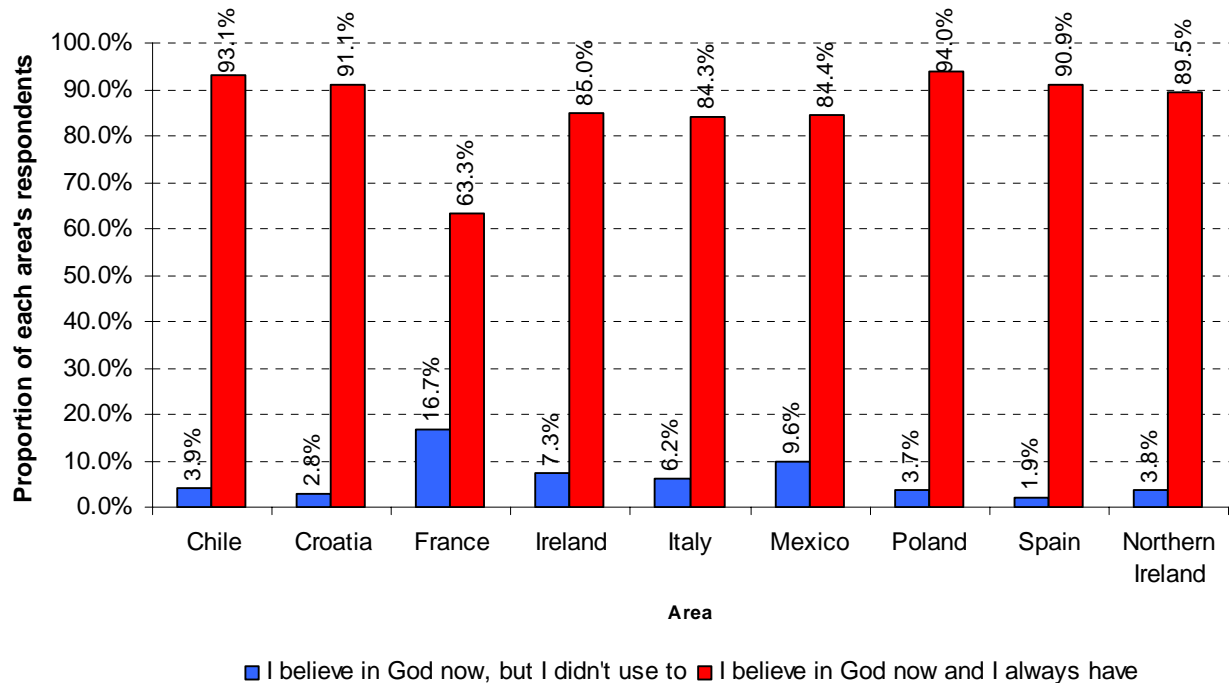
Figure 20: to me life is only meaningful if God exists - Strongly agree. Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III



From the graph, we can see that almost 14% of NI Catholics strongly agree with this whereas about 9% of Catholics in the Republic do. Among the Catholics in Mexico, this attitude toward their faith seems to be particularly strong. Respondents were also asked the question 'Which best describes

your beliefs about God?’ and presented with an array of four statements: I don't believe in God now and I never have, I don't believe in God now, but I used to, I believe in God now, but I didn't use to and I believe in God now and I always have. Amongst the samples of Catholics from the areas under examination here we can see that there is a consistency in their faith across time.

Figure 21: 'Which best describes your beliefs about God?' Base: All Catholics. Source: ISSP III



France is the only area where a belief in God now and always have had such a belief falls below the 8th percentile. This consistency of belief across time holds up amongst the samples of Catholics in each of the areas, bar France. The levels of this consistency are marginally lower in the Republic when compared to Northern Ireland.

- ENDS -

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