



## People still demand moral standards

Wednesday's coverage of the Irish Times/Behaviour & Attitudes Social Poll dealt with people's attitudes and opinions towards sex and relationships. The findings from that section of the poll suggested that most Irish people have adopted a relatively liberal view of sex and sexual practices, in contrast with traditional Catholic Church teachings on the subject.

Today, we explore in more detail people's feelings about religion and morality, with a view to understanding how they are coping with this aspect of their lives as the Catholic Church continues to lose its moral authority in this country.

Regardless of the extent to which people abide by the teachings of particular religions or not, it is the case that nine out of every ten Irish adults still describe themselves as members of the Catholic Church. A further five percent describe themselves as either atheist or agnostic, five percent as members of other religions (including Islam and Judaism), with two percent classifying themselves as Protestant.

The evidence is, however, that many people are associating themselves with specific religions more as a badge of convenience than as an indication of a strong spiritual affinity with those churches.

Thus, we see that just one in eight of all Irish adults describe themselves as "Strongly Religious" with just over forty percent defining themselves as either loosely religious, or not religious at all. The remainder opt for the less than committed 'moderately' religious descriptor.

More detailed analysis tells us that younger people are significantly more likely than older individuals to shun any notion of personal religious conviction. Curiously, men are twice as likely to view themselves as not religious at all, than are women. This does suggest that females are more in tune with their spiritual side than males, although why this might be so is not immediately apparent from the findings of this poll!

Roughly one third of the population now live in rural areas, with the balance resident in larger towns and cities. As was evident in yesterday's coverage of the poll, there is still a clear urban/rural divide with regard to religious conviction, and attitudes toward morality in general. This dichotomy cannot be entirely explained by way of demographic differences with, for example, the age profile of urban and rural dwellers broadly similar. A clear example of the regional divide is manifest in the fact that a small majority of rural inhabitants attend religious ceremonies at least once a week, compared with just one quarter of their urban counterparts.



These differences will undoubtedly be of interest to the social scientists, but also to our legislators and policy makers as they attempt to understand and reflect the moral character of post-recession Ireland. In an attempt to begin to understand what morality might mean to people in Ireland today, the survey participants were asked to rank in terms of moral opprobrium a list of eleven behaviours which are considered to be sinful by all of the major religions.

The results of this exercise are fascinating, with stronger levels of disapproval registered for those perpetrating financial fraud and/or lying under oath, than were expressed in relation to those guilty of drink driving. It would appear that people's moral compass has become centred around the misdemeanors of politicians, bankers and property developers over the last number of years, with people significantly less exercised about the morality of more esoteric issues such as sexual behaviour, and what are clearly perceived to be 'minor' infringements such as the illegal downloading of music or films.

Given this apparent recalibration of morality and what that might mean in the minds of Irish people, it is perhaps not surprising that the research has confirmed that there is a significant disjoint between Catholic Church teachings on core issues, and ordinary Catholics' views on the same matters.

For example, almost eighty percent of those polled are in favour of the ordination of women priests in the Catholic Church with almost ninety percent supportive of Catholic priest marriage.

While people's responses to these two questions may have been somewhat predictable based on anecdotal evidence, attitudes towards infidelity are arguably more insightful. When asked whether they would be less likely to vote for a politician if they discovered that he/she had been unfaithful to his/her partner, a significant six in ten of all people said that they would not. The message here is clear. The majority of Irish people feel that a politician's personal weaknesses do not necessarily impact on his/her ability to fulfill the requirements of that role. Again, the prevailing view appears to be that a person's private life should remain just that, with the need for higher standards in the areas of corporate and legislative governance of far greater moral import.

As an indication of our tolerance towards the practices of non-Catholic religions in Ireland, it emerges that opinion is very much divided as to whether the Islamic face covering veil, the Burqa, should be banned in public places in Ireland, or not. Again, age is a key distinguishing factor with regard to this issue. Thus, 57% of all Irish adults aged forty-five years or more believe the wearing of the Burqa in public should be banned, compared to just 42% of those under forty-five who express the same view. A quarter of those aged sixty-five years or older recorded a 'don't know' response at this question, suggesting that not everyone is fully au fait with the subtleties of this issue.



In summary, today's Poll suggests that, while there is a disparity between the teachings of the Catholic Church and the actions of its members, this can by no means be construed as an erosion of the moral fibre of society. People still demand moral standards from those in positions of authority, and we will explore in tomorrow's coverage of the survey the steps people would like our legislators to take to uphold these standards.

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