

# An exploration of current attitudes towards the Catholic Church in Ireland and the tendency towards secularisation within Irish society

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## Abstract

The objective of the study is to investigate people's views, perceptions and attitudes towards Catholicism and the Catholic Church. This research will explore the views of carefully selected members of Irish society and analyse their opinions concerning Ireland and secularisation. The design of the research invoked a qualitative approach using a semi-structured interview utilising questions which allowed participants the freedom to speak on issues they felt important. The research found that the majority of the sample was in agreement that the Catholic Church along with Catholicism has become secularised in Ireland. There was agreement also that the media and the declining influence of women has played a significant role in this development. It may be concluded that in order for the Church to survive and regain the influence and power it once held, an internal reformation in certain principles must be a top priority.

## Introduction

Ingles (2007) believed that the Catholic Church was once the backbone of strong cohesive family networks and community structures that created a sense of belonging and identity. It provided the Irish people with a certain comfort and solace and its teachings were central to the way Irish people thought. Irish Catholics were deeply spiritual people who once devoted their lives to the Church. Catholics are choosing the teachings to which they will adhere and are now bypassing the Church to develop their own relationships with God. The individualisation of society is ever present and growing. With this, the idea that the relationship between Irish society and the Catholic Church has somewhat decreased and Ireland has indeed become secularised. Has religion become less important within modern Ireland? Has the role of religion become less significant? Is there a decline in the practices and beliefs of Irish people within Irish society where traditionally and devotionally they abided by the ethos of the Catholic Church? The study will investigate current attitudes towards the Catholic Church and whether or not it has become secularised.



## Method

The research is a qualitative, data-led study aimed at understanding people's perceptions of the Catholic Church and Catholicism in Ireland and how it has become secularised.

All interviews were recorded by a HP Platinum laptop and Sony ICDBX112 Dictaphone machine. Interviews for this research project were conducted at the interviewees' convenience.

There was a significant amount of time and careful consideration taken in the participant selection process for this research project. There were a total of nine participants selected for this study.

Two pilot interviews were conducted before the actual interviews took place. This was undertaken to ensure that the interviews were not too academic and intrusive. Each semi-structured interview was conducted on a one to one basis and lasted between 40 minutes and an hour.

Thematic analysis was the method chosen for this research project. Each interview was transcribed. The transcripts were then transferred into computer software Nvivo 9 to allow for analysis of the data gained. After this a process of coding was undertaken. Once coding was complete, the researcher began analysing the data, grouping common codes together, creating themes. As a result of this, sub themes began to emerge.

## Results

Following the interviews a method of thematic analysis was conducted with the subsequent themes emerging. (a) Instilling fear into the minds of the follower, (b) The influence of the media regarding the Church, scandals and controversies, (c) Women's oppression within a hierarchical Church, (d) Morals, values and the family – the expected that was accepted and (e) Outdated or over-rated.

The majority of participants believed that these factors have had a major influence on both the Church and the attitudes of society.

## Discussion

This data-led qualitative study took nine participants from different walks of life and interviewed them on their attitudes, thoughts and perceptions of the Church and its role in Irish society.

The participants were in agreement that the power of the Church's influence on society has significantly decreased. They discussed how the negative coverage of the Church by the media has played its role in contributing to the decline. Women was a central theme with all of the participants. They were seen as the 'heartbeat' of the Church and once their involvement decreased so did the Church's authority over Irish society.

Many of the participants believed that the Church is outdated in some of their practices and beliefs. In order for the Church to regain any of its followers, a reformation from within is required.

## References

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