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Looking for signs of the presence of God in Northern Ireland: religious experience among Catholic and Protestant sixth-form pupils

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Looking for signs of the presence of God in Northern Ireland: religious experience among Catholic and Protestant sixth-form pupils

SUMMARY

A sample of 2,359 sixth-form pupils (between the ages of 16 and 18 years) in Northern Ireland (1,093 attending seven Protestant schools and 1,266 attending nine Catholic schools) responded in 1998 to Greer's classic question 'Have you ever had an experience of God, for example, his presence or his help or anything else?' Religious experience was reported by 29% of Protestant males, 29% of Catholic males, 39% of Protestant females and 38% of Catholic females. Compared with earlier data these figures reveal a particularly marked decline in reported religious experience among Catholic females (64% in 1981, 56% in 1984, 61% in 1992 and 38% in 1998). The content of the reported religious experience is analysed and illustrated within nine descriptive categories characterised as: help and guidance, exams, God's presence, answered prayer, death, sickness, conversion, difficulty in describing, and miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Empirically-based research into religious experience was given a vital new stimulus in the United Kingdom in 1969 when Sir Alister Hardy established the Religious Experience Research Unit in Oxford (Hay, 1982). Hardy was particularly interested in recording and analysing the kind of responses generated by the following question.

Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?

When this question was broadcast through the secular press Hardy was overwhelmed by the quantity and quality of the responses which were sent to him in Oxford. By the end of the 1970s the archive at the Religious Experience Research Unit contained over 4,000 accounts (Hardy, 1979:1) and many of these accounts had been grouped into useful categories. Hardy, formerly professor of zoology at Oxford University, saw his role now as that of the natural historian, collecting and classifying specimens, somewhat like a Victorian naturalist laying down the factual basis for the theories of twentieth century biology.

Drawing on the accounts of religious experience within the archive of the Religious Experience Research Unit, Timothy Beardsworth (1977) and Edward Robinson (1977a, 1977b, 1978) began to draw the attention both of the academic community and of the wider public to the widespread persistence of religious experience in what was otherwise thought to be an increasingly secular social context. Inspired by Hardy's original question, David Hay and his colleagues began to quantify through social surveys the prevalence of what the archive could only illustrate through qualitative evidence (Hay and Morisy, 1978, 1985; Hay and Heald, 1987). For example, Hay and Morisy (1978) found that 36% of the population responded to the Hardy question in the affirmative.

One of the early major conclusions to emerge from the Hardy archive concerned the importance of religious experiences during childhood and adolescence in shaping an affirmative response to the Hardy question. Edward Robinson's (1977a) *The Original Vision* concentrates specifically on the religious experiences recorded in these earlier years of life. Robinson was impressed by the number of reports which began with a very clear recollection of childhood, as illustrated by the following examples. A 55-year-old woman began her account.

When I was about five I had the experience on which, in a sense, my life has been based. It has always remained real and true for me. Sitting in the garden one day . . . (p 12).

A 63-year-old man began:

The first approach to a spiritual experience which I can remember must have taken place when I was five or six years old at the house where I was born and brought up. It was a calm, limpid summer morning . . . (p 33).

A 40-year-old woman began:

When I was about eleven years old I spent part of a summer holiday in the Wye Valley. Waking up very early one bright morning, before any of the household was about, I left my bed and went to kneel on the window seat I was left filled with exhilaration and exultation of spirit (p 37).

A 76-year-old woman began:

When I was about ten I had a strange experience which I still remember quite clearly . . . (p 114).

More recent research continues to support Robinson's (1977a) contention regarding the importance later in life of religious experience during the early years. For example, Farmer

(1992) made a study of ‘adult perspectives’ on religious experience in childhood, and Scott (2004) concentrated on ‘retrospective spiritual narratives’, exploring recalled childhood and adolescent spiritual experiences. Farmer’s (1992) research describes an adult who recalled seeing light around people and hearing their thoughts, as a 3-year-old-child (p 263), an adult who recalled feeling a oneness with herself and with her environment as a young school child (p 264), and another adult who recalled seeing the inner connections between all things as a child (p 266). Scott’s (2004) research relates Nora’s account for her ability to see auras as a 4- or 5-year-old child (p 70), Cleo’s account of intense joy when she sat one calm evening as a young teenager (p 73), and Gwen’s account of her transformation when kneeling before ‘a longer-than-life size carved wooden statue of the Madonna’ in a shrine as a 12-year-old child (p 74).

In spite of the importance of childhood and adolescence in shaping apparent receptivity to religious experience, as demonstrated by the Hardy research tradition, comparatively little attention has been given to researching religious experience among school pupils. The notable exceptions are provided by Elkind and Elkind (1962), Paffard (1973), Hoge and Smith (1982), Miles (1983), Robinson and Jackson (1987), and a set of studies reported by Greer (1981, 1982), Greer and Francis (1992) and Francis and Greer (1993, 1999). Recent research relevant to this field has concentrated on the much broader and considerably more nebulous construct of ‘spirituality’ rather than on the narrower and more tightly-defined construct of ‘religious experience’ (see, for example, Erricker, Ericker, Sullivan, Ota and Fletcher, 1997; Hay and Nye, 1998).

In a study entitled ‘Varieties of religious experience in young adolescents’, Elkind and Elkind (1962) found that a high percentage of a group of 144 high school pupils in the United States

of America had 'recurrent' and 'acute' experiences in which they felt close to God. In a study subtitled 'transcendental experiences in childhood and adolescence', Paffard (1973) produced evidence of the common occurrence of transcendental experience among 400 sixth-form pupils and undergraduates in England. Hoge and Smith (1982) asked a sample of 451 Catholic, Baptist and Methodist grade-ten pupils in the United States of America about definitive religious experiences in their lives, and 58% reported them. Most such experiences took place at a retreat or camp or in a church service. In a doctoral project concerned with 'adolescents' attitudes to and understanding of transcendental experience', Miles (1983) undertook a detailed study among 137 sixth-form pupils in England to test three hypotheses: that transcendental experience forms an element in the experiences of adolescents; that teaching can improve students' understanding of transcendental experience; and that understanding improves students' attitudes toward transcendental experience. Comparisons were made between a group of 82 students who followed a taught programme about transcendental experience and a control group of 55 students.

Robinson and Jackson (1987) conducted a wide ranging questionnaire survey among 6,576 pupils from the age of 16 upwards in the United Kingdom for a study they styled *Religious and Values at 16+*. Factor analysis identified ten potential scales within the quantitative data generated by the survey, including measures of numinous experience and mystical experience. The survey also presented pupils with two model passages offering accounts of religious experience. These two model passages were followed by questions probing the pupils' own understanding and experiences.

In his ambitious empirical study among children and adolescents in Finland, *Religious Development in Childhood and Youth*, Tamminen (1991) included an important section on

religious experience, which he defines as ‘experience to which a sense of dependency on or connection with God/the divine and the transcendent is connected’ (p. 34). Two surveys conducted in 1974 and 1986 employed the two following key questions: Have you at times felt that God is particularly close to you?; Have you at times felt that God is guiding, directing your life? Each question was followed by a probe to generate a narrative description of the experience.

Greer’s research is of particular interest for two reasons. The first reason is that the research was conducted in Northern Ireland which is not only an especially religious context, but also one which is significantly divided between Protestant and Catholic communities (Cairns and Darby, 1998; Barnes, 2005a, 2005b). Greer’s research was conducted within both Protestant and Catholic schools. The second reason is that Greer’s programme of research has employed the same question in a series of studies among well-defined cross-sectional samples of secondary school pupils. These studies have consistently included the question ‘Have you ever had an experience of God, for example, his presence or his help or anything else?’

Greer’s first study employing this question was conducted in 1978 among 1,872 upper sixth-form pupils at controlled or Protestant voluntary schools. In his report of this study Greer (1981) found that 38% of the males and 51% of the females gave a positive response to his religious experience question. Greer employed the question for the second time in 1981 among 940 Catholic and 1,193 Protestant pupils between the ages of 12 and 17 attending 19 secondary and grammar schools. According to Greer (1982) this time the answer ‘yes’ was given to the religious experience question by 31% of the Protestant males, 39% of the Protestant females, 35% of the Catholic males and 64% of the Catholic females. In this study

Greer found no significant age differences in the proportions of pupils who reported religious experience.

Greer employed the question for the third time in 1984 among 1,177 fourth-, fifth- and sixth-form pupils from ten Protestant and ten Catholic schools. According to Francis and Greer (1993) this time the answer 'yes' was given by 26% of the Protestant males, 38% of the Protestant females, 34% of the Catholic males and 56% of the Catholic females. Greer employed the question for the fourth time during the school year 1991-1992 among 2,129 third-, fourth-, fifth- and sixth-form pupils attending 12 Protestant and 12 Catholic grammar schools. According to Francis and Greer (1999) this time the answer 'yes' was given by 37% of the Protestant males, 56% of the Protestant females, 49% of the Catholic males and 61% of the Catholic females.

In addition to providing information about the level of reported religious experience among Protestant and Catholic pupils, Greer's surveys facilitated two other strands of enquiry. One strand explored the relationship between reported religious experience and attitude toward Christianity among Protestant and Catholic adolescents in Northern Ireland. The three analyses reported by Greer and Francis (1992) and by Francis and Greer (1993, 1999) all supported the hypothesis that the acknowledgement and naming of personal religious experiences is associated with the formation of more positive attitudes toward Christianity within Northern Ireland.

The other strand gave attention to a different kind of data provided by the pupils. In the two studies conducted in 1978 and in 1981 Greer invited those pupils who gave the answer 'yes' to his religious experience question to 'describe this experience if you can'. In the 1978

study 28% of the pupils accepted the invitation to describe their religious experience and in the 1981 study 31% did so. The two analyses reported by Greer (1981, 1982) attempted to categorise these descriptions of religious experience within discrete groups. Greer (1981) proposed nine categories which he characterised as: guidance and help, examinations, depression and sickness, death, answered prayer, God's presence, conversion experiences, good experiences, and miscellaneous. Greer (1982) reduced the number of categories to eight by eliminating the category 'good experience'. Greer fully recognised the arbitrary and problematic process of attempting to assign each account to one category.

It may be pointed out that a number of replies referred to several experiences, for example, guidance and answered prayer. Such multiple answers were for convenience classified, sometimes arbitrarily, under the heading which seemed most appropriate. The classifications of replies might well have been carried out differently and there was no attempt at standardisation (Greer, 1981:24).

In spite of these acknowledged limitations, the two studies reported by Greer (1981, 1982) provide valuable insights into the ways in which young people in Northern Ireland reported and interpreted religious experience. Unfortunately the invitation to describe their religious experience was not extended to pupils in the 1984 and 1991-1992 surveys.

Against this background the aim of the present study was to replicate Greer's earlier research in 1998. In the intervening years since the studies conducted in 1978 and 1981 a number of commentators had begun to suggest that the religious climate of Northern Ireland was undergoing considerable change. Although self-expressed religious affiliation remained high and religious practice remained high, especially within the Catholic community, studies like Mitchell's (2005) qualitative research conducted in 2000 suggested that religious affiliation and religious practice in Northern Ireland were functioning largely as vehicles to convey

social and cultural identity rather than to signify real religious belief or commitment to faith. An enquiry into how young people in Northern Ireland respond to Greer's religious experience question and into the extent to which they continue to volunteer to provide descriptions of religious experience may provide a good test of the extent to which the religious climate of Northern Ireland has or has not undergone profound change during that twenty year period.

METHOD

Sample

Staff within a random sample of seven Protestant schools (including single-sex schools for boys only) and nine Catholic schools (including single-sex schools for girls only) were invited to administer the research instrument to their lower and upper sixth form pupils. The questionnaires were administered by teachers according to a standardised procedure, emphasising confidentiality and anonymity and with the assurance that the responses would not be inspected by school staff. Although given the option not to participate in the project, very few pupils refrained from participation. Thoroughly completed questionnaires were submitted by 2,359 pupils (600 aged 16 years, 1,160 aged 17 years and 599 aged 18 years), 1,093 of whom were attending Protestant schools (702 males and 391 females) and 1,266 attending Catholic schools (488 males and 778 females).

Instrument

Alongside a full range of questions concerned with the dimensions of religious affiliation, belief, and practice, the questionnaire included Greer's (1981, 1982) question concerned with religious experience: 'Have you ever had an experience of God, eg his presence or his help or anything else?' This question was followed by dichotomous response categories: *yes* and *no*.

Those pupils who checked the positive response were then given the following invitation:
'Please describe this experience if you can.'

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview

Overall 791 (33%) of the pupils reported that they had recognised at some time in their life an experience of God. The level of reported religious experience varied according to sex, but not according to denomination: religious experience was reported by 29% of males in Protestant schools, 29% of males in Catholic schools, 39% of females in Protestant schools and 38% of females in Catholic schools. The proportions of the pupils who then proceeded to describe their religious experience varied according to denomination, but not according to sex: among those who reported religious experiences, these experiences were described by 52% of males and 57% of females in Protestant schools and by 80% of males and 80% of females in Catholic schools. Overall 544 (23%) of the pupils provided a description of religious experience.

Categorising religious experience

Greer's (1982) original research identified eight main categories of religious experience: help and guidance, exams, sickness, death, answered prayer, God's presence, conversion and miscellaneous. Greer allocated individual responses describing religious experience to just one of these categories. In order to test the robustness of Greer's original methodology, the first phase of data analysis employed content analysis to locate each of the 544 described experiences within one category. This methodology generated the following hierarchy of categories: help and guidance (25%), exams (16%), God's presence (16%), answered prayer (12%), death (8%), sickness (7%) and conversion (1%), with the remaining 15% classified as

miscellaneous. Table 1 illustrates how these categories varied according to sex and denomination.

- insert table 1 about here -

This first phase of data analysis identified two main shortcomings in Greer's original methodology. The first shortcoming with Greer's categorisation is that it allows each reported religious experience to be located within only one category. Paffard (1973), in *Inglorious Wordsworths: a study of transcendental experiences in childhood and adolescence*, employed a different method of categorisation which allows each reported experience to be located within up to two categories. As a significant number of the responses to the current survey potentially fell into more than one category, Paffard's scheme may provide a more accurate picture of the distribution of the responses within the various categories. The second shortcoming identified in Greer's original methodology relates to the ability of Greer's categories to represent the range of responses adequately. In the present study the use of Greer's categories alone yielded a high percentage of responses located in the miscellaneous category. The introduction of an additional category which indicated an inability, difficulty, or unwillingness to describe a religious experience may significantly reduce the percentage of responses in the miscellaneous category.

After modifications were made to Greer's approach to categorising religious experience, by combining it with Paffard's method and including the additional category, the second phase of data analysis employed content analysis to locate each of the 544 described experiences within up to two categories. This revised methodology produced the following hierarchy of categories: help and guidance (58%), exams (18%), God's presence (19%), answered prayer (21%), death (9%), sickness (10%) and conversion (1%), difficulty in describing (6%), with

the remaining 9% classified as miscellaneous. Table 2 illustrates how these categories varied according to sex and denomination.

- insert table 2 about here -

Sex and denominational difference

The main sex and denominational differences identified in table two have been confirmed by the chi square test of statistical significance, collapsing the data into a series of 2 x 2 contingency tables. Help and guidance was cited by a higher proportion of females (58%) than males (27%) among the Protestants ($X^2 = 19.4$, $p < .001$) and by a higher proportion of females (80%) than males (39%) among the Catholics ($X^2 = 56.9$, $p < .001$). Exams were cited by a higher proportion of Catholic males (28%) than was the case among the other three groups ($X^2 = 9.9$, $p < .01$) of Catholic females (16%), Protestant males (14%) and Protestant females (14%). God's presence was cited by a higher proportion of Protestant females (30%) than was the case among the other three groups ($X^2 = 11.2$, $p < .001$) of Protestant males (17%), Catholic males (10%) and Catholic females (18%). Death was cited by a higher proportion of Catholics (11% males and 11% females) than Protestants (2% males and 8% females) ($X^2 = 5.3$, $p < .05$). Sickness was cited by a lower proportion of males (3% Protestants and 9% Catholics) than females (7% Protestants and 14% Catholics) ($X^2 = 3.9$, $p < .05$). Conversion was cited by a higher proportion of Protestants (6% male and 3% female) than Catholics (0% males and 0% females) ($X^2 = 14.9$, $p < .001$). Difficulty in describing and miscellaneous responses were cited by a higher proportion of Protestant males (10% difficulty in describing and 22% miscellaneous) than was the case among the other three groups ($X^2 = 25.0$, $p < .001$) of Protestant females (4% difficulty in describing and 6% miscellaneous), Catholic males (6% difficulty in describing and 9% miscellaneous) and Catholic females (5% difficulty in describing and 6% miscellaneous). There were no

significance differences by sex and denomination in respect of answered prayer.

Exemplification of categories

The exemplification of categories is based on the modified version of Greer's scheme. Each cited example is identified by denomination and sex: Protestant male (Pm), Protestant female (Pf), Catholic male (Cm) and Catholic female (Cf).

Help and guidance

Responses included in the help and guidance category are general references to help and guidance. Specific references to help and guidance which fall clearly into one of the other eight categories are not included. Overlaps do occur with other categories but only when there is a general reference to help or guidance in addition to the specific examples.

Physical help and energy. (Pm)

I asked him for help and he helped me. (Pf)

His help and guidance. (Cm)

His help when I need it. (Cf)

References to specific instances of help and guidance are cited by both sexes and denominations and included parental separation, bullying, debt, and the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

When I was 11 and my parents split up and at a Baptist youth camp when I was 12.

He helped me to accept what was happening and to stop crying. (Pf)

Some Catholic males and Catholic females referred to help in resisting temptation.

I was helped through a time of temptation. (Cm)

Both sexes and denominations often referred to help and guidance during difficult times or times of need, although there are a few examples of recording God's help and guidance in the good times and when things go well.

Everyday I feel God's help in getting through the day and his blessings in all the good things I have. (Cf)

Both sexes and denominations often emphasise the everyday, frequent nature of the help and guidance as well as its ordinariness.

He helps me everyday. (Pm)

Not anything spectacular, just basically help in life and in everyday situations. (Pf)

Helping me in daily life. (Cm)

God always helps me in my daily life, he is a comfort everyday. (Cf)

Protestant males and Protestant females and Catholic females referred specifically to help and guidance in a decision-making context, with some Protestant males and Protestant females referring to the use of bible notes or readings in this process.

Help to live a good life through daily bible readings etc. (Pm)

By praying – feel like getting help – eases decision making. (Cf)

Exams

Responses included within the examination category are exams in general, GCSEs, 11+ exams, studying, revision, driving tests and competitive sports. Both sexes and denominations recorded a conviction that God has either helped at specific times in the past or helps with exam success in general. In some responses, exam success was explicitly linked

to prayer.

He helped me pass my 11+ and GCSEs. (Pm)

Good exam results – prayed for them. (Pf)

Praying before exams and achieving. (Cm)

This may sound stupid I feel without his help I would not have passed my GCSE's. I prayed to him before each exam and I did much much better than I thought. (Cf)

Some Catholic males and Catholic females reported feelings of confidence, strength, and calmness associated with their religious experiences.

When coming up to exams I pray for help and by doing this I feel more confident and relaxed I know I will do well. (Cm)

Help in exams – a feeling of calm etc. This leads to success in exams (hopefully/Thankfully!). (Cf)

Some Catholic males and a Protestant female referred to God's guidance in the examination process.

With his guidance I was able to do well in my exams. (Cm)

When stressing over my exams, I was reading my daily reading notes and a verse was very helpful to me. It said that you must seek God and he will help you and guide you. (Pf)

God's presence

Within the category of God's presence a number of themes emerged relating to the frequency and context of the experiences, and feelings associated with them. Protestant males and Protestant females often described God as being a constant presence.

Just knowing that he is always there being a close friend and listening. (Pm)

Although I am not a very religious person, I always feel God's presence. I feel he is always here with me. (Pf)

Other Protestant males, Protestant females, and Catholic females often described God as being a frequent or a regular presence in their lives. Catholic males almost always gave specific concrete examples of God's presence in their lives without reference to frequency.

Both sexes and denominations cited particular contexts for their experiences of God's presence which most often referred to difficult or stressful periods in their lives (death, exams, and problems at school), and specific religious contexts (prayer, meditation, and worship).

In trying situations I feel God help and presence which reassures me. (Pm)

When it comes to taking communion at church, I can feel God's presence. (Pf)

I feel if you pray to God you can feel his presence and he will help you (eg) Exams.
(Cm)

Whenever I feel alone, scared or hurt I feel God's arms around me and feel his presence, this comforts me and makes me feel better. (Cf)

Some Catholic females reported experiencing the presence of God in nature and people.

I have experienced God in many occasions while in prayer, in the beauty of nature and in the kindness of other people. (Cf)

Some Catholic females reported experiencing the presence of God in denominationally linked locations (Lourdes), activities (confession), and figures (Mary and guardian angels).

I was able to feel God's presence when I went to Lourdes. (Cf)

Both sexes and denominations described feelings experienced with God's presence. Protestant females and Catholic females described feelings more frequently and in greater detail than Protestant males and Catholic males. Most of the feelings were described in positive terms and included feelings of calm, peace, relaxation, harmony, contentment, love, warmth, comfort, happiness, well-being, security, safety, support and strength.

. . . there was a strong and comforting presence, and to all my questions, answers suggested themselves into my head, as if I'd just worked them out, but without conscious thought. (Pm)

I feel relaxed, content, refreshed, happy knowing that he is there with me. (Pf)

An overwhelming sensation of well being and hope for no apparent reason whilst praying. (Cm)

. . . a feeling of peace, of calm, of harmony of joy. (Cf)

Some Protestant males and Protestant females commented on the powerful, astounding and emotional nature of their experiences.

It was magic and it felt very powerful. (Pm)

Knowing that there is somewhere, a feeling that is so astounding, its hard to explain. (Pf)

Answered prayer

Within the category of answered prayer a number of themes emerged relating to both general and specific instances of answered prayer. Both sexes and denominations made many general statements about their belief in answered prayer, including some references to answered

prayer in times of need, or when guidance was required.

Answered prayers when I was afraid. (Pm)

Prayers have been answered. (Pf)

God answers prayer when we are most in need. (Cm)

Most things I pray for and ask for are granted. (Cf)

Other responses from both sexes and denominations cited specific examples when prayer was believed to have been answered. The examples shared by both sexes and denominations included answered prayer in exam and illness contexts.

I asked for help to achieve good exam results and he helped me to achieve these. (Pm)

My mum had a cancerous growth, we all prayed extremely hard and it went away.

(Pf)

Any time I had relatives very, very ill if I prayed they recovered. (Cm)

I asked for his help during my exams and received it. (Cf)

Other examples cited by individual groups included answered prayer in relation to death, relationships, sport, competitions, guidance and protection.

I asked for a relationship with a girl to go better recently and it did. (Pm)

I had a difficult moral situation with which I was unsure what I was going to do, so I prayed and God gave me strength and showed me the right answer. (Pf)

Playing a Gaelic match, didn't score for Five matches before. Said prayer before match to help score. In the first minuit I scored. (Cm)

When my granda died (who I was very close to) I asked God for a sign that granda was alright. I felt a strange tingling sensation through my whole body – a prescence which is very hard to describe – and which sounds so ridiculous that I have never told

anyone before. (Cf)

Some Protestant females and Catholic females referred to answered prayers in relation to the welfare and safety of family, friends, and themselves more often than Protestant males or Catholic males.

Ongoing help and answers to prayer eg the saving of friends. (Pf)

My daily prayers are answered – my family and friends are safe and well and most importantly loving and supporting. (Cf)

Some Catholic males and Catholic females observed that God answers prayer in his own way.

I have prayed to God for many things and have received what I have asked for in prayer most of the time. When I pray for something and don't get it, I know that God has not given me it for my own good. (Cm)

There isn't one outstanding event, I pray to God for help and guidance and I believe he does answer me in his own way. (Cf)

Some Catholic females recorded answered prayers in relation to saints.

When I lose something, pray to Saint Anthony and normally I will find it. (Cf)

Some Catholic males recorded that they had prayed successfully for 'favours.'

Praying for favours which I have received. (Cm)

Death

Responses included in the death category are deaths of relatives and friends, suicidal feelings,

and life-threatening experiences. Both sexes and denominations recorded religious experiences when relatives died.

To 'get over' the death of a family member. (Pm)

When someone in my family died, God helped me through that time. (Pf)

Helping me through death of Grandfather. (Cm)

He helped me through the death of a friend. (Cf)

Both sexes and denominations often described their religious experiences during family bereavements in positive terms referring to feelings of comfort, strength, ability to cope, support, security, peace, comfort, and calmness.

When my grandmother died. God was a comforter. (Pm)

A deep sense of peace and love, during difficult and sad times, eg when a close relative died recently. Calmness. It helped me cope with loss. (Pf)

When my Granny died I was very depressed but I looked to God for comfort and he give it to me, as I managed to cope. (Cm)

It was a calming influence when he helped me through a family bereavement. (Cf)

Some Catholic males and Catholic females recorded an initial distancing from God during bereavement, before an understanding and acceptance of what had taken place.

When my father died two years ago, I felt God helped me. Initially I blamed [him for] my father's death but then spoke to him and prayed to him for help. (Cm)

When my 2 year old cousin died I hated God and thought he did not exist. During this time I was not coping well with her death. When I began to think that God actually did exist and had taken her for a reason and could help me to cope, I began to come to terms with her death. (Cf)

Some Protestant females and a Catholic female recorded God's help in coping with their own suicidal feelings.

Everyday He gives me the strength and courage to go on and He helped me through His word to get through a suicide attempt. (Pf)

I took an overdose of paracetamol tablets when I was 15 and have the strength to get on with my life because I refound my faith in God. (Cf)

Some Protestant females, Catholic males and Catholic females recorded God's intervention and help in life-threatening experiences presented in comparatively extensive narratives.

When I was about 8, I was playing with a rope, and it accidentally got caught around my neck. I could easily have been strangled but just then my father came and helped me to get it from my neck. (saved my life). I have often thought that that was God who helped me at that time, by sending my father to help me. (Pf)

As I was walking home from school a lorry carrying building materials crashed about 20m in front of me. If I hadn't stopped to say hello to a friend a few minutes before then I probably would have been killed. I felt that God had helped me and kept me alive by sending a friend to me. (Cm)

Sickness

Responses included in the category of sickness are sickness relating to family, friends and personal sickness. Both sexes and denominations reported positive religious experiences when God provided help during illnesses of family and friends.

Helped me and my brother through an illness my brother had. (Pm)

His help when a family member was very ill, he gave me strength to cope with the situation. (Pf)

. . . when my mum is unwell I feel God gives me confidence and awareness. (Cm)

God helps me through exams and when people in my family are sick. (Cf)

Within these positive religious experiences, both sexes and denominations provided examples of answered prayer in relation to illness, where the sick person was either cured or improved.

A friend of mine had meningitis, I prayed for him every night and I believe God healed him. (Pm)

My little brother was very ill. I prayed he would survive and the next day he was taken off his ventilator and allowed to breathe for himself. He is now completely healthy. (Pf)

Anytime I had relatives very, very ill if I prayed they recovered. (Cm)

My sister was sick and I prayed. She has cerebral palsy but I know God is helping her make a steady, constant improvement. (Cf)

However, some Catholic females described instances of unanswered prayer in relation to sickness and the feelings associated with this.

. . . I doubted God when a friend of mine was in a coma for 10 days everyone prayed but it was no Good God took her from us at 18 years old I know I should not hold it against him since he helped my cousin but I cant help it she was so young and had so much going for her. (Cf)

Some Protestant males, Catholic males and Catholic females referred to God's help during personal illnesses, which included depression as well as physical illness.

Helps me get through states of depression. (Pm)

I believe that God pulled me through a period of severe depression. (Cm)

I suffered from an illness sought help in God and then got better. (Cf)

Both a Catholic male and a Catholic female reported the presence of God through working with sick people.

Coping with family bereavement and working with terminally ill. (Cm)

Although I won't say I have ever seen God, I do go to Lourdes every year to help the sick. Through this I have become more aware of his presence always around me. (Cf)

Some Catholic males and Catholic females used denominationally linked references in their descriptions.

In hospital with meningitis – could have died but pulled through – complete recovery – mum bought rosary beads when I became aware again and I prayed every night after coming out of intensive care – eased my state of mind and helped me to cope. (Cm)

My boyfriend's mother took a brain haemorrhage. After weeks of prayer from hundreds of people and many visitations from nuns, priests and faith healers she came around. I now strongly believe in the use of prayer especially the prayer to St Joseph. (Cf)

Conversion

Both Protestant males and Protestant females reported religious experiences in conjunction with conversion to Christianity. In each example, Protestant females referred to God's presence from conversion to the present, as either a constant or frequent phenomenon. Protestant males usually referred to the religious experience at the time of conversion.

When I became a Christian, I felt God around me. (Pm)

Since becoming a Christian I feel his presence and help everyday. (Pf)

Difficulty in describing

Responses included in the difficulty in describing category are the inability or refusal to describe as well as the difficulty in describing the religious experience. Both sexes and denominations gave examples of these three types of responses. Both sexes and denominations also commented on the personal and private nature of their religious experience.

It is a personal matter. (Pm)

I wish not to describe this experience. (Pf)

Too hard to explain. (Cm)

Not willing to share just yet. (Cf)

Miscellaneous

Responses included in the miscellaneous category do not fit into any of the other eight categories either because of their general and non-specific nature or because they were not clearly related to the question asked in the questionnaire. A few responses recorded relevant religious experiences but were numerically too few to generate a new category.

CONCLUSION

Building on the research tradition pioneered by John Greer in 1978, the present study has examined the reporting of religious experience in 1998 by a sample of 2,359 sixth-form pupils in Northern Ireland (1,093 attending seven Protestant schools and 1,266 attending nine Catholic schools). Four main conclusions emerge from the analyses of these data.

The first conclusion concerns the utility of Greer's original question: 'Have you ever had an experience of God, for example, his presence or his help or anything else?' Both in the late

1970s and the late 1990s this relatively simple and basic question generated a wide range of insightful responses into the ways in which young people conceptualise and discuss their religious experiences. The question can be commended for future research.

The second conclusion concerns the stability of the categories employed by young people in Northern Ireland to describe their religious experiences over the two decades between 1978 and 1998. With relatively minor modification, Greer's categories remain useful and can be commended or future research.

The third conclusion concerns the methodology for classifying reported religious experiences. The original method proposed by Greer (1981, 1982) attempted to assign each reported religious experience to just one category. Building on the different method proposed by Paffard (1973), the present study has assigned each reported religious experience to either one or two categories. This revised method enables a fuller description of the data and does better justice to the rich resource materials. The revised methodology can be commended for future research.

The fourth conclusion concerns interpreting the stability and the shifts in the levels of reported religious experience among young people in Northern Ireland between 1978 and 1998. On the one hand, one set of data suggests that religious belief and practice remains very high in Northern Ireland. For example, the quantitative data published by Brierley (2003:2.21) calculated church membership for 2002 as representing 55.9% of the population of Northern Ireland, compared with 17.4% in Scotland, 8.2% in Wales and 7.2% in England. On the other hand, a second set of data suggests that religious belief and practice in Northern Ireland may be functioning largely as vehicles to convey social and cultural identity rather

than to signify real religious belief and commitment to faith. In the present study religious experience has been advanced as a way of adjudicating between these two interpretations. For young people to describe an experience of God suggests that religious categories and religious language retain real saliency for them. If religion has been declining in Northern Ireland between 1978 and 1998 we would expect such decline to be reflected in the proportion of pupils who claim religious experiences. The data provide a highly nuanced answer to this question.

On the one hand, changes over the twenty-year period have not been that startling and pronounced among Protestant males, Protestant females and Catholic males. Over the period 1978 to 1992 responses from Protestant males fluctuated between 26% and 28% and stood at 29% in 1998. Over the period 1978 to 1992 responses from Protestant females fluctuated between 38% and 56% and stood at 39% in 1998. Over the period 1981 to 1992 responses among Catholic males fluctuated between 34% and 49% and stood at 29% in 1998. These figures cannot be interpreted as illustrating a great change in religiosity among these three groups of pupils. On the other hand, the profile of responses among Catholic females follows a different trajectory. Over the period 1981 to 1992 responses among Catholic females remained relatively stable between 56% and 64%, but fell dramatically to 38% in 1998. Given the historic and important role of female faith within the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland, these figures may indeed reflect a serious erosion in religion where it has been strongest in Northern Ireland. Further research is now needed to account for such erosion. One possible explanation may be related to the high profile scandals which have rocked the Catholic Church in recent years.

Given the valuable insights into religious change which have been generated by the series of

studies between 1978 and 1998, the further replication of the study can be commended, ideally in 2008.

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Table 1 Classification of described religious experiences by sex and denomination

Category	Protestant		Catholic	
	male %	female %	male %	female %
help and guidance	20	34	23	25
exams	13	10	24	16
God's presence	15	27	8	15
answered prayer	8	9	12	14
death	2	7	10	9
sickness	3	4	6	10
conversion	6	2	0	0
miscellaneous	33	7	17	11

Table 2 Classification of described religious experience by sex and denomination

Category	Protestant		Catholic	
	male %	female %	male %	female %
help and guidance	27	58	39	80
exams	14	14	28	16
God's presence	17	30	10	18
answered prayer	14	24	17	25
death	2	8	11	11
sickness	3	7	9	14
conversion	6	3	0	0
difficulty in describing	10	4	6	5
miscellaneous	22	6	9	6