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Declaration

I declare that this project: ‘To believe or not to believe’, is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Social Care Practice BA (Honours) degree programme. It is entirely the work of the author and has not been submitted to any other university or higher education institution, or for any other academic award in this institute. Where use has been made of the work of other people it has been fully acknowledged and fully referenced.

Signature_________________  Date___________________________

Sean McGuire     27/11/2014
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1. Introduction

1.1 Abstract

Research indicates that the people of Ireland are slowly losing the Catholic faith which was passed down from generation to generation. Spirituality and other belief systems are on the rise. Specific research regarding third level students in Ireland and their practice of faith is limited.

This research aims to investigate the religious attitudes and spiritual beliefs amongst the students of Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT). A quantitative method is used, involving the administration of twenty questionnaires to students. The main findings of this study are that students have a belief in God, call themselves Catholics and attend mass. However, the participants struggle with the teachings of the Church and exhibit a general scepticism towards the Catholic Church.

Overall, the study suggests that students have a ‘belief without belonging’ attitude. Evidence highlights that students in AIT continue to believe in God and value the spiritual dimension in their lives. However, this practice of spirituality is exercised in an individualised manner.
1.2 Introduction

The Catholic faith in Ireland is in a serious crisis. From covered up scandals to controversial teachings the Institution of the Roman Catholic Church has been rocked to its very foundation (O'Doherty, 2008, pp. 2-11). The current generation of young adults in Irish colleges today are testament to this contemporary disbelief with the Catholic Church. Religious faith and spirituality are fast becoming trivial pursuits in the lives of today’s students (Dooley, 2011).

To understand the third level student it is important to look at the person’s cultural background and social setting. Ireland in the twenty first century is no longer a homogenous land with a strong Catholic influence on State legislation (Gallagher, 2010). The students of Ireland are living secular lifestyles full of exploration and individualism (Hession, 2005).

Firstly, this in-depth study begins with a brief historical analysis of the Church and State. Continuing from this starting point, it further explores the influential cultural changes which Ireland has witnessed over the past 20 years. Thirdly, having ascertained the challenges students may have with the Catholic Church, the research will then show the spiritual beliefs of students in Athlone Institute of Technology (from here on referred to as AIT). And finally, the study duly delves into findings and further recommendations for research.

This research investigates the views of Roman Catholic students attending AIT. The students’ opinions on spirituality and the extent to which they practice their faith will be explored. In order to do this, there are two objectives. The first objective is to investigate if AIT students’ are aware of their Catholic faith and to enquire as to how they practice their religion. Objective two wishes to ascertain whether the Roman Catholic students of AIT embrace ideas of spirituality in their own lives in general. But firstly, a brief look at the history of religion in Ireland is vital.
2. Literature Review

2.1 A history of religion in Ireland

‘If religion be the opium of the people, the Irish were addicts,’ (Tovey & Share, 2003, p. 384) observe. Such a statement indicates the Irish people’s relationship with religion. To offer a complete historical analysis of the connection between the Irish people and the Catholic Church is beyond the remit of this work. The specific focus concerns Ireland pre-Vatican II (i.e. prior to 1965). Vatican II was a gathering of the Roman Catholic Church and their effort to progress with the modern world. Catholicism was something engrained into the Irish people. Although the majority of the lay population did not understand Latin mass, attendance at Sunday mass was considered paramount to many citizens. The Church served as a meeting place for the Irish people to receive news and share stories. There was a strong sense of sacramental practice, a devotional piety to the saints and an active interest in processions and pilgrimages (Waters, 2008). The acceptance of Church teaching without question was standard, and these practices led to the parish priest being exalted (Twomey, 2003). The tradition of ‘passing down the faith’ to the next generation without rigorous questioning was common practice. The Church in Ireland was a conservative body, largely untouched by the enlightenment era and the modern world (O'Doherty, 2008).

Post-Vatican II, the Church attempted to develop away from the dogmatic doctrinal approach. In the 1960s and 1970s, almost all of the schools in Ireland were operated by the Catholic Church. This led to an upsurge in vocations to the religious life (Fuller, 2004). A pivotal teaching titled *Humanae Vitae* (‘human life’), written by Pope Paul VI, was published in 1968. This encyclical provided instructions concerning married life, including the total rejection of birth control via contraceptives. *Humanae Vitae* is cited by many as a major turning point in the participation in the Catholic Culture. The moral stability that the Catholic Church gave to the Irish people was gained through guilt and a fear of an authoritarian God (O'Doherty, 2008). The Irish people were now becoming more educated. The world was becoming more globalised with the influence of television and the mass media. Cultures and different religions could be experienced more easily following advancements in transport and
communication. The Irish affiliation with the Catholic Church thus began to experience a colossal change (Fuller, 2004).

### 2.2 The link between Church and State

The Irish State has had a long standing relationship with Catholicism. In the period 1923 to 1979, meetings between ministers of government and bishops over issues of policy occurred, on average, approximately one per year. Politicians consulted Church leaders when legislating on so-called ‘moral issues’ (Fuller, 2004). *Bunreacht na h-Eireann*, the Irish constitution, was established in 1937, and incorporated a strong Christian ethos throughout. The Bishop of Dublin at the time, Charles John McQuaid, and the Irish president, Eamon de Valera, are recognised as the two principal authors who prescribed this Christian ethos. In Article 44 of the old constitution, the Roman Catholic Church held a special position in two of its subsections (Gallagher, 2010). It was not until a referendum held in December of 1972 that these provisions were removed (Fuller, 2004). The Irish state was engrossed in Catholic morality. In 1979, the visit of Pope John Paul II was viewed as a major celebration of Catholicism in Ireland, with more than a million Irish citizens greeting *il papa magna*. John Paul II preached about liberal developments and how the Irish people must choose their values (Vatican, 2014).

The rate of change in Irish society since 1979 has been immense. The Catholic Church is now finding itself in a new position. Politicians are now longer defending the Church’s teachings, as they once had done (Gallagher, 2010). Furthermore, in 1981, the first European Values Study held in Ireland asked regular mass-goers about their ‘great deal’ of confidence in the Catholic Church. Results from 1981 revealed that 57% were confident in the Catholic Church. However, 19 years later, in 2000, that figure had decreased to 29% (Lalor, et al., 2007, p. 194).

An Irish priest and Jesuit, Dr. Micheal MacGreil, conducted extensive research in relation to attitudes and religious practices in Ireland. MacGreil is regarded as the seminal author on religious practice in Ireland. In his books *Pluralism and Diversity in Ireland* and *The Challenge of Indifference*, he measured the religious behaviour and beliefs of a national sample between November, 2007 and March, 2008 using a qualitative approach. MacGreil interviewed 1,015 Irish adults over the age of 18.
years. One of the many findings from his books was that of changes in mass, Holy Communion and confession attendance of Roman Catholics since 1974 (MacGreil, 2009, p. 157). The figures revealed a drop of 48% from weekly mass attendance in comparison to figures from 1974. Monthly Holy Communion attendance had also declined by 23% in 2007-2008 compared to 1974. Meanwhile, monthly confession in 1974 dramatically dropped by 47% comparing the years 1974 to the years 2007-2008 (MacGreil, 2011). MacGreil indicates that a serious decline in religious practices predated the child abuse scandals of the 1990s and beyond (MacGreil, 2011). These figures demonstrate the evolution in thinking that has occurred among the Irish people from the 1970s until the present day.

2.3 Religious attitudes amongst third-level students

Throughout the colleges and universities of Ireland today, one will find students of varying races and religions. With these changes comes diversity in thought, action and belief. Irish colleges and universities appear to lack research in regard to the spiritual/religious practices of their students. Thus, the present chapter concentrates on a North American study conducted by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 2011. Their study defined spirituality as “a dynamic construct that involves personal authenticity, genuineness and wholeness, of being open to exploring a connection to a higher power while developing a great sense of others and the universe” (University Of California, 2011, p.2). The study continued to highlight that a student’s spiritual development and qualities are important for answering some of the fundamental questions in life, in addition to questions relating to their motivation to attend college. The study took place over seven years, and involved 14,527 students from 136 colleges in North America. It identified that only 19% were encouraged to explore spiritual/religious matters in their first year of college. It also discussed religious scepticism and determined that spirituality was increasing amongst the third-level students (University Of California, 2011).

Nonetheless, students are often associated with the process of secularisation in Irish sociological textbooks in regards to religious beliefs. The latter can be described as ‘removing sectors of society and cultures away from the domination of religious practices and institutions (Tovey & Share, 2003, p. 403). In terms of the evidence
related to this theory, abortion polls, mass attendance figures and the attitudes of Irish students are all relevant. A survey commissioned by the Association of Catholic Priests in February 2012 adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods, and consisted of 1,000 participants aged above 18 years. The Association of Catholic Priests are an organisation established by the Priests of Ireland, who wish to voice the concerns of the Irish faithful within the Roman Catholic Church and their teachings. From the 1,000 participants, 720 completed questionnaires, 180 were interviewed and 100 failed to complete their questionnaires correctly. The results revealed that 61% disagreed with the Church’s teaching on homosexuality, stating that it was not immoral. Meanwhile, only 18% agreed with the Church, stating that homosexuality was immoral (Research, 2012, p.5).

This leads to the conclusion that the contemporary student no longer accepts the rules and regulations of the Church in how to live one’s life (Hession, 2005). Further evidence is provided by the Central Statistics Office, which conducts surveys every five years in Ireland. The latest survey released was in 2011. The study highlighted that the proportion of the population who were Catholics reached its lowest point in 2011, at 84.2%, while the Catholic congregation in Ireland, at 3.86 million strong, was the highest since records began (Office, 2011). At a local level the CSO figures from 2011 regarding the Athlone town area, which is most pertinent to the present study, accounted for 16,226 Roman Catholics, while 1,045 persons indicated that they had no religion or were atheists (Office, 2011).

Additionally, this lack of satisfaction with the Catholic Church in Ireland, and their teachings is highlighted at a national level with the recent survey by the Ipsos MRBI (Market Research Bureau of Ireland). In October 2014, they conducted quantitative research on one thousand participants, aged over eighteen years regarding the issue of abortion in Ireland. The results showed that 68% of people surveyed were in favour of a referendum to be held on abortion in Ireland. Abortion referenda in Ireland have been rejected twice in 1992 and in 2002 (MRBI, 2014). In July 2013, a student website called Campus carried out an opinion poll. Campus is an Irish website dedicated to third level students in Ireland and their welfare. They discovered that 40% of respondents believe that abortions should be freely available in Ireland. 48% of students stated that they believe abortions should be carried out
under medical guidance, where a team of medics decide if the abortion is appropriate or not, and 6% of respondents said they did not know. The remaining 6% spoilt their vote (Campus, 2013). The Catholic Church’s teachings on contraception and homosexuality are something that third level students view as equal rights and almost rebel against because of an authoritative system who would instruct them on how to live (Brennan, 2001, pp. 166-168).

Moreover, in November 2009 the Iona Institute, which is a pro Catholic and pro-marriage organisation, released figures on Church attendance. The poll was a qualitative research project in which 1,000 adults age 18+ years were interviewed between the 19th and 21st of October 2009. The poll found that 31% of young people aged between 18 years and 24 years attend mass weekly and 22% attend monthly or more (Institute, October 2011).

2.4 Conclusion

It should be noted that religious belief, identity and practice are quite complex entities to quantify. Any attempt to ‘measure’ the extent of religious belief or practice is quite difficult. This can be fraught with much practical difficulty (Tovey & Share, 2003, p. 384). Furthermore, as MacGreil observes, because religion is essentially a metaphysical reality, it is not adequately explained by an empirical methodology. He asserts that only peoples’ behavioural norms and dispositions are open to measurement and research (MacGreil, 2011). In any case, a study of this kind has never been completed in the context of Athlone Institute of Technology. Therefore, the present study explores and analyses how the Catholic students of AIT practice their faith. The first objective is to ask AIT students whether they are aware of their Catholic faith, and to enquire as to how they practice their religion. The second objective aims to ascertain whether the Roman Catholic students of AIT embrace ideas of spirituality in their own lives in general. The approach this research has undertaken is similar to MacGreil, as it uses quantitative methods and applies Share and Toveys’ research in order to compose all-inclusive survey.
3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces us to the research design, procedure, participants of the survey and ethical issues regarding this subject. The aim of this research is to explore the views of Roman Catholic students attending AIT and an analysis of how they practice their faith. In order to do this we have two objectives. The first objective is to investigate if AIT students’ are aware of their Catholic faith and to enquire as to how they practice their religion. Objective two wishes to ascertain whether the Roman Catholic students of AIT embrace ideas of spirituality in their own lives in general. To fulfil the projects ambition of ascertaining information regarding the above objectives, a quantitative method was utilised through the distribution of questionnaires.

3.2 Research design

The research style selected was quantitative in nature. A questionnaire containing twenty questions about various aspects of the Catholic Church, spirituality and the participant’s personal faith was distributed. The questionnaire was selected as the more suitable method. Questions were pre-formulated in a structured sequence and the questionnaire given to a sample of individuals drawn so as to be representative of a defined population (Bryman, 2008).

According to Bryman, quantitative research is a “emphasizes on quantification, in the collection and analysis of data” (Bryman, 2008, p. 697). Bryman lists several advantages to questionnaires. He states they are less expensive than other methods, produce quick results and can be completed at the respondent’s convenience. Questionnaires offer a greater assurance of anonymity and give a stable consistent, uniform measure without variation. He continues stating questionnaires give wider coverage because the researcher can approach respondents more easily than other methods (Bryman, 2008, pp. 588-602).
3.4 Participants

The participants were ten third year students in applied social care and ten second year students from accounting. All of the participants were attending AIT. Surveys were distributed in two lecture halls after verbal permission was acquired from the lecturer. The questionnaires were explained in detail. Before the participants received the questionnaire, I assured them of the strictest confidentiality and informed them that I have received permission from the college to carry out the survey.

3.5 Proposed method of data analysis

The survey was created using a website called ‘survey monkey’ on line. This website allows you to generate questionnaires and surveys in a user friendly manner. The cost is free and proved to be a useful tool in generating a questionnaire (www.surveymonkey.com, 2014).

3.6 Ethical issues

The subject of faith, spirituality and ones relationship with the Catholic Church is a sensitive issue. All relevant precautions were adhered too before questionnaires were given to participants. It is vital to remember that respect, consideration and confidentiality were adhered throughout this process. The participants were assured that in filling out the questionnaire, their identity would be kept confidential. They were made aware that they could withdraw their consent at any time and that all questionnaires would be destroyed within six months. This information was communicated to the students through a letter of consent attached to the front of the questionnaire.

3.7 Limitations

The principal limitations are those associated with any quantitative research. The disadvantages were that questionnaires do not allow for the probing, prompting and clarification of questions. They do not give opportunities for motivating the
respondents to participate in the survey. The condition under which the questionnaire was answered was unknown. The researcher would also have liked if the limitations towards research imposed by AIT where lifted. The college restricts research solely to the AIT campus.

3.8 Cover Letter

The cover letter indicates the aims and objectives of the project. It requests the filling out of the questionnaire. It was made clear to the students that their consent was optional, and that they could later withdraw their consent. It also stated that the questionnaire was entirely confidential.

3.9 Pilot Questionnaire

A pilot study was conducted on three friends from outside the college. They were satisfied with the questionnaire, stating that they had no trouble filling it out and that it seemed thorough. It was noted that it took between five and ten minutes for an individual to complete a questionnaire.

3.9.1 Conclusion

The strengths of the quantitative method allow a large group of students to be surveyed. Confidentiality was an important factor in obtaining quality information from the survey’s participants. This method of research was less direct than carrying out interviews, as the participants would feel more comfortable with the questionnaire and therefore be more honest in their answers. The quality of participant’s responses was influenced by the way the author phrased the questions. The author could not verify the authenticity of the participant’s answers. An interview method of research would have allowed the author to probe deeper into certain topics that the questionnaire proposed, and would have allowed for increased elaboration by participants on certain areas that they were willing to divulge larger amounts of information.
4. Results

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will illustrate the findings in tabular, narrative and graphical form. The information will be presented under the two main objectives:

Objective 1: To investigate if AIT students’ are aware of their Catholic faith and to enquire as to how they practice their religion.

Objective 2: Wishes to ascertain whether the Roman Catholic students of AIT embrace ideas of spirituality in their own lives in general.

Twenty participants both male and female aged from seventeen years upwards were surveyed. There were ten participants from second year accounting and ten participants from applied social studies. All of the participants volunteered and were students of AIT.

60% (n=12) were female and 40% (n=8) were male. 20% (n=4) were in the 17 to 20 age category. 15% (n=3) were within the 21 to 24 bracket. 10% (n=2) represented the 25 to 30 range, and 25% (n=5) were within the 31 – 36. And finally 30% (n=6) 37 years and over.

4.2 Results under objective one

Objective 1: To investigate if AIT students are aware of their Catholic faith and to enquire as to how they practice their religion.
4.2.1 Those who believe in God

85% (n=17) said they believed in God, whilst three participants 15% (n=3) said they did not believe in God. Therefore, for objective one the total sum of participants is seventeen participants and for objective two the sum returns to twenty participants.

Figure 1. Belief in God

4.2.2 Those who still practice the Catholic Faith they inherited from their parents

70% (n=14) still practice the Catholic faith in which they inherited from their parents. 25% (n=5) stated that they do not practice the religion they inherited. 5% (n=1) stated that they had converted to Christianity from an Islamic belief.

Figure 2. Continue to practice Catholicism
4.2.3 The importance of religion in the participant’s life

18% (n=3) said that religion is very important to them. 47% (n=8) said that it was important. 35% (n=6) said that it was not that important to them.

![Figure 3. Importance of religion](image)

4.2.4 Mass attendance

53% (n=9) said they attend mass weekly. 12% (n=2) stated they attend monthly. 6% (n=1) said only at Christmas. 29% (n=5) said only when they have to attend i.e. wedding / funeral.

![Figure 4. Mass attendances of AIT students](image)
4.2.5 Catholic Church teachings the students of AIT would Change

Students were asked to select one teaching from the Catholic Church that they would change. The responses are as follows; 18% (n=3) would change the teaching on contraception. 6% (n=1) agreed with female ordinations to the priesthood. 6% (n=1) stated they would change the teaching on divorce. 18% (n=3) said they would change the teaching with regards to homosexuality. 18% (n=3) participants said they would change the teaching on living together before marriage. And finally 34% (n=6) said they would change all of the above teachings listed.

![Figure 5. Teachings students wish to change](image)

4.2.6 Students opinion on abortion

82% (n=14) would change the Church’s teaching on abortion and 18% (n=3) were unsure or had no opinion.

![Figure 6. Opinion on abortion](image)
4.2.7 Students understandings about prayer

29% (n=5) stated it was a conversation with God. 6% (n=1) said it was time between you and your higher power. 24% (n=4) described it as moments in silence. 29% (n=5) stated it was a calling for help or assistance 12% (n=2) described it as a thanksgiving.

4.2.8 Practice of religious beliefs

47% (n=8) receive Holy Communion weekly. 18% (n=3) said monthly and 23% (n=4) said they receiving communion annually. 6% (n=1) said they never receive Holy Communion. When asked about Holy confession 6% (n=1) stated they go weekly and 6% (n=1) monthly. 35% (n=6) go annually and 41% (n=7) stated they never attend Holy confession.

4.2.9 Identify the head of the Catholic Church

94% (n=16) answered that it was Pope Francis and 6% (n=1) stated it was Pope Benedict XVI.

4.2.10 Influence of religion in one life

Students were asked to select one option with regards to the influence of religion in their life. 18% (n=3) believed religion was an essential help to them in their growth as a person. 35% (n=6) said it was important but not essential to them. 12% (n=2) said it helped them somewhat in their development as a person. 23% (n=4) believed it was neither a help nor a hindrance to have been brought up with religion. 12% (n=2) stated that it hindered them somewhat.
4.3 Results under objective two

Objective 2: Wishes to ascertain whether the Roman Catholic students of AIT embrace ideas of spirituality in their own lives in general.

4.3.1 Students views on the difference between religion and spirituality

When asked what was the difference between religion and spirituality 25% (n=5) stated that religion is manmade and spirituality is not. 35% (n=7) believed that spirituality is more free spirited and that religion has conditions. 15% (n=3) stated that they believed religion keeps you from hell and spirituality brings you back from there. 25 % (n=5) believed that religion and spirituality are the same thing.

4.3.2 Students belief in spirituality

70% (n=14) considered their spirituality as Christian. 15% (n=3) considered themselves as Humanists. 5% (n=1) believed themselves to be Buddhist. 5% (n=1) believed in atheism and 5% (n=1) in Agnosticism.

Figure 7. Spirituality of students in AIT
4.3.3 The importance of spirituality in the students life

When asked how important a spiritual belief is in their lives 30% (n=6) stated that it was very important. 20% (n=4) stated that it was important. 25% (n=5) believed that there are moments in their lives when spirituality is more important than average. 25% (n=5) believed that spirituality was not that important in their life.

- Very important: 6
- Important: 4
- There are moments in my life when it is more important than average: 5
- Not that important: 5
- I have no belief in spirituality: 1

Figure 8. Importance of spirituality to students

4.3.4 Spiritually orientated classes

When asked if they would partake in classes regarding spirituality and associated beliefs the results were as follows. 50% (n=10) stated they would definitely attend Yoga/Pilates classes. 5% (n=1) said they would attend Yoga/Pilates if a friend was going. 40% (n=4) said they not sure and 25% (n=5) stated they would definitely not attend Yoga/Pilates classes if provided by AIT.

When asked if they would partake in meditation classes 30% (n=6) stated they definitely would attend, and 35% (n=7) stated they would definitely not attend. 15% (n=3) said they attend meditation classes if their friend was going, and 20% (n=4) were not sure if they would attend the class.

With regards to centring prayer classes 65% (n=13) stated that they would definitely not participate if they were provided, while 20% (n=4) said that they definitely would
partake. 10% (n=2) said they were not sure if they would attend centring prayer classes if they were provided.

55% (n=11) stated if Sacred Scripture classes were provided that they would definitely not attend. 10% (n=2) said they definitely would attend. 25% (n=5) were not sure if they would attend whilst, 5% (n=1) stated they would go if a friend was going.

15% (n=3) stated they would definitely partake in mindfulness classes, whereas 45% (n=9) stated they would definitely not attend. 10% (n=2) stated they would attend if a friend was going and 25% (n=5) stated they were unsure.

25% (n=5) stated they would definitely partake in the meaning of dreams classes whereas 35% (n=7) stated they would definitely not attend. 15% (n=3) stated they attend if a friend was going and 25% (n=5) stated they were unsure.

Table 1. Those who would partake in spiritual classes if provided

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed Spiritual Classes</th>
<th>Definitely</th>
<th>If my friend was going I would go</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Definitely Not</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yoga / Pilates</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centring Prayer</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Scripture</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning of Dreams</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3.5 Students definition of the word spiritual

20% (n=4) stated the definition as holistic. 35% (n=7) believed the term to be defined as balanced. 5% (n=1) chose for the word hippy. 5% (n=1) used the word religious. And 20% (n=4) described it as deep, with 15% (n=3) describing it as kind.
4.3.6 Spiritual development in AIT

80% (n=16) specified that they did not feel spiritual development was promoted in AIT in first year. Whilst 20% (n=4) gave the opinion that they were not interested in spiritual development.

4.3.7 Has the survey made you think again about your faith and spirituality?

80% (n=16) indicated that it did and 20% (n=4) said it did not make them think of their own faith and spiritual beliefs.
5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings whilst referring to the literature review. This current research is unique as it has never being undertaken in AIT until now. The findings of the research are analysed in terms of their relevance to the objectives. The first objective asked AIT students if they were aware of their Catholic faith and to enquire as to how they practiced their religion. Objective two wished to ascertain whether the Roman Catholic students of AIT embrace ideas of spirituality in their own lives in general. Evidence suggests whilst students believe in God and declare themselves as Catholics, the rituals of mass attendance and belief in Church teachings does not define the Roman Catholic populous of AIT students. The students demonstrated a slight scepticism towards the Church and her teachings but an openness to spirituality is very present.

5.2 Profile of students

Twenty participants both male and female aged from seventeen year upwards were surveyed. There were ten participants from second year accounting and ten participants from second year applied social studies. 95% (n=19) of the participants were born Roman Catholic and 5% (n=1) was born into an Islamic faith.

5.3 Contemporary Catholics

Evidence relating to objective one suggests that belief in God was high at 75%. This in turn led to a result of 70% of those who still practiced the Catholic faith in which they inherited from their parents. These figures demonstrate that a high awareness is present among AIT students regarding the Catholic faith. But interestingly, as the findings develop, just because a participant states they are Catholic and attend weekly mass, this does not imply that they agree with the Catholic Church’s teachings. According to O’Doherty, we now live in an age of a la carte Catholics. He
considers that the believer may now pick and choose which teachings of the church they aspire to adhere to (O’Doherty, 2008, p. 153).

Evidentially, McGreil highlights in his 2008 study, the rapid decline of weekly mass attendance (MacGreil, 2011). McGreil’s figures are slightly below the findings from the current study amongst AIT students. The attendance rate for Sunday mass is 43% at a national level. However, the results from the students of AIT are marginally higher at 53%. Arguably, this difference is possibly due to the size of the current survey regarding the small amount of participants and it might not hold up in a larger scale study.

At the same time a journal article produced by the Association of Catholic Priests (Research, 2012), highlighted the dissatisfaction the Irish population had with the Church’s teaching on homosexuality. Comparatively, those high figures coincide with the high level of dissatisfaction AIT students have towards the Church’s teaching on homosexuality. Another comparison from the current study to recent literature is the issue of abortion. The Church preaches that life is precious and no referendum should be held to decide whether abortion should be legalised or not. However, AIT students score highly and clearly stated that the Church should change their rule on abortion. 70% of the participants believe abortion should be allowed. Whereas the Irish people in a recent MRBI survey, chose strongly at 68% in favour of a referendum to be held in order to decide on abortion change (MRBI, 2014). Both of these comparisons highlight that AIT students do not agree with Church teachings and these coincide with that of the general public as recently as October 2014.

Moreover, in relation to religious practices, evidence demonstrated that 18% of participants receive Holy Communion monthly. This figure is slightly lower than McGreils, which was at 43% (MacGreil, 2011). A possible explanation for this slight difference maybe the demographics and the lower age profile of the participants in the current research.

The results of the survey lead us to believe that if the Catholic Church wants to survive in such a changing world, perhaps they should listen to the people in order to understand their belief system and struggles in 2014. Of course, there are Universal truths that do not change, but our world has evolved in such a rapid manner, ideals and maxims from centuries before may not be apt for today’s world. The question
also must be posed towards the Catholic Church, ‘is faith in a higher power about filling seats in a building on a Sunday morning or is it something greater?’ The current findings generate a strong sense that the Catholic Church is slowly losing its congregation but faith in a higher being is enduring. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church is slowly engaging in discussion regarding her teachings, but the Church adapts at glacial speeds and any imminent change is doubtful.

5.4 The complexities of spirituality

Objective two investigated whether Roman Catholic students in AIT embrace ideas of spirituality in their lives. Overall, students appear to have a private spirituality that is practised individually. When asked if they would attend spiritual classes provided by AIT, students were largely not interested in attending the classes. In addition, when students were asked about the importance of spirituality in their lives, the results were quite varied. Throughout the survey a belief in spirituality is evident but is difficult to quantify. Furthermore, when students were asked if they felt spiritual development was promoted in first year of AIT, a high majority responded by saying they did not feel it was promoted. Yet, contradictorily, AIT students are hesitant to attend spiritual classes within the college if they were provided. One may conclude that students prefer to practice their own spirituality in private. According to MacGreil in his 2007-2008 survey, Irish people are now ‘believing without belonging’ (MacGreil, 2009, pp. 173-177). This coincides with results from the current survey.

Additionally, the AIT students were asked what they understood by the term ‘spirituality’. The results produced a mixed response which highlights the broadness and complexity of spirituality. The research carried out by UCLA in 2011 on their students definition of spirituality, also presented with a high complexity and particularity associated with spirituality (University Of California, 2011).

The final question of the survey related to the student and asked if the survey had made them reflect somewhat on their own personal beliefs. 80% (n=16) indicated that it did and 20% (n=4) said it did not. According to MacGreil in his literature ‘the challenge of Indifference’, if a personal, intimate belief in something is to be maintained, discussion and involvement are significant elements in sustaining that belief (MacGreil, 2009, pp. 173-175).
Interestingly, the findings from the current report regarding spirituality amongst AIT students are thought-provoking. It might well be assumed that if religion is slowly fading away, spirituality would soon follow. But this is not the case, as the current results give evidence into the personal belief system of the AIT students and presents some positive findings. Students have belief and faith, but not in the congregated setting which is associated with Catholicism. Contemporary spirituality is difficult to quantify and how to cultivate and develop this is another discussion. Moreover, the AIT College has an opportunity to extend possibilities to students who want to develop their faith and spiritual development. Therefore it may of benefit to the A.I.T. community to create a culture where people can talk about their faith and spirituality. Thus, making students aware of supports and services available to help maintain, express and grow in their faith. Particularly, as AIT has a large multicultural student population with students from China, Saudi Arabia, Spain and Italy. These students come from a wide ranging religious background and ought to feel safe in expressing their creed. Hence, allowing them to practice their religion in a safe environment.

5.5 Evaluation of method

The method of quantitative research chosen was positive in that it allowed for a larger sample group than a qualitative method. This meant that the results would be more accurate for the overall student population, and it also eliminated a lot of ethical issues that would have arose if conducting interviews on such a personal and sensitive topic. However, had a qualitative approach been adopted, clarification on responses would have been possible and this would have allowed a more in depth analysis.

5.6 Limitations to the research

There was a dearth of modern literature relating to the research aim and therefore much information was gathered through website and newspaper articles. Surveys on faith and spirituality regarding third level students are limited in Ireland. However, the challenge was overcome and hopefully this current study may inspire like-minded students to carry out research in their respected colleges with regard to faith and spirituality. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there is a strong possibility that the
results are erroneous in this research, as it was of a small-scale study. A nationwide study into spirituality and faith of Catholic student would substantiate the validity of the results.

6. Conclusion

In compiling the literature review, a dearth of studies regarding students and spiritual beliefs was observed. There are many studies at a national level but the age profile was much higher. American research was utilised and proved to be beneficial for the research. In terms of students' spirituality, a great degree of belief is present in a higher power. However, this spiritual element of the student appears to be private and is exercised alone. Additionally, if a student declares themselves as a Catholic, this does not imply that they are practising Catholics. They may attend mass and frequent the Catholic sacraments but the affiliation with the Catholic Church is not enduring. The majority of the students in the survey struggle with the teachings of the Church and desire a change. There is a real indifference amongst the students when it comes to spirituality and religion. Values and morals are still present but lived in a manner that differs from the past.

7. Recommendations

The author recommends a further study to be carried out in AIT to expose the reasons behind a cold environment for spiritual development. The board of management within the college could be made aware of the findings and requested to facilitate information workshops. Support services could be invited into the colleges to help students feel safe in expressing their faith. There are numerous communities and youth ministry movements available throughout Ireland who provides these services. Secondly, Catholicism is in decline amongst third level students but spirituality is not. Students revisit their spirituality, as it is a meaningful dimension in their lives. Those students can organise thematic days of spirituality in conjunction with information workshops and perhaps begin a spiritual society within the college. And finally, faith and spirituality being of such an innate and personal
matter, the emphasis is on the individual to practice how they please. If you chose to believe, then be free and satisfied in your practice.

8. References


9. Appendixes

9.1 Appendix A Introduction Letter

Introduction letter

To whom it may concern,

My name is Sean McGuire. I am a 4th year student in Social Care Practice BA (Honours). As part of my course I am required to undertake a research project.

The study I am carrying out is in relation to the Catholic faith and the Spirituality of A.I.T students.

I would greatly appreciate if you would complete a questionnaire in order to facilitate my research. Participation is on a voluntary basis. All information gathered will be used solely for the purpose of this research and students will be anonymous.

Each student is required to sign a consent form before completing the questionnaire. Consent forms will not be attached to questionnaires in order to preserve anonymity. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have in relation to the study.

Thank you for your time.

_________________________

Sean McGuire
I, ______________________________ (Students’ name), voluntarily consent to participate in the questionnaire on Catholicism and Spirituality carried out by Sean McGuire as part of his research project, in partial fulfilment of a Social Care Practice BA (Honours).

I have been informed of the purpose of the survey and I am aware that I can withdraw from it at any time. The questionnaire is confidential and information I offer may NOT be linked to me.

Signed: ______________________________ (Students’ name)

Date: ______________________________
9.3 Appendix C Questionnaire

AIT Student Survey on Catholicism & Spirituality

1. Are you male or female?
   - Male
   - Female

2. Please state the name of your course at AIT and which year you are in.
   - Year
   - Course

3. Into which age category do you fall?
   - 17-20 yrs.
   - 21-24 yrs
   - 25-30 yrs
   - 31-36 yrs.
   - 37+

4. Do you still practice the Catholic Faith you received as Child from your parents?
   - Yes
   - No
5. Do you believe in God? (If the answer is "no" please proceed to question 16)

- Yes
- No

6. How would you rate the importance of religion in your life?

- Very important
- Important
- It is not that important to me
- I have no belief in religion

7. What do you understand by the term "prayer"?

- Conversation with God
- Time between you and your higher power
- Moments in silence
- A calling for help or assistance
- Thanksgiving
- Other (please specify)
8. Do you pray?

- Everyday
- When I want something
- In emergencies
- Angeles (Noon/6pm)
- When I get up in the morning
- When I go to bed
- Christmas/Easter
- Never

9. How often do you go to mass?

- Daily
- Weekly (Sundays)
- Monthly
- Only at Christmas
- Only when I have to go (wedding/funeral)
- Never
10. When do you practice the following religious beliefs?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Belief</th>
<th>Weekly</th>
<th>Monthly</th>
<th>Annually</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Receiving Holy Communion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Annually</td>
<td>Never</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Confession</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>Annually</td>
<td>Never</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. Which Catholic Church teaching would you change?

- Contraception
- Women to be ordained as Priests
- Celibate Priests
- Divorce
- Views on Homosexuality
- Living together before Marriage
- None

12. Can you select the name of the current Catholic Pope?

- John Paul II
- Benedict XVI
- Francis
13. **What is your opinion on Abortion?**

- Church should change its teaching
- I do not have one
- Or other opinion (please specify)

14. **Would you say that the religious beliefs in which you were brought up influenced your growth or development as a person?**

- An essential help to me
- Important but not essential to me
- Helped me somewhat
- Neither a help nor a hindrance
- Hindered me somewhat
- A serious hindrance
- A grave hindrance

15. **In your opinion what is the difference between spirituality and religion? Please tick one**

- Religion is man-made and spirituality is not
- Spirituality is more free spirited and religion has conditions
- Religion keeps you from hell and spirituality brings you back from there
- They are both the same to me
- Other (please specify)
16. What type of spirituality would you consider yourself to have?

- Christian
- Islamic
- Judaism
- Buddhism
- Agnosticism
- Humanism
- Atheism
- Other (please specify)

17. What do you understand by the word spiritual? Please just tick one.

- Holistic
- Balanced
- Hippy
- Religious
- Deep
- Distracted
- Kind
- Other (please specify)
18. If the college provided classes in the following would you attend?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option of Class</th>
<th>Definitely</th>
<th>If my friend was going, I would</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Definitely not</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yoga / Pilates</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
<td>If my friend was going, I would</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Definitely not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
<td>If my friend was going, I would</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Definitely not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centring Prayer</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
<td>If my friend was going, I would</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Definitely not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Scripture</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
<td>If my friend was going, I would</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Definitely not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
<td>If my friend was going, I would</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Definitely not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning of Dreams</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
<td>If my friend was going, I would</td>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>Definitely not</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19. Do you feel that spirituality and spiritual development is promoted in first year of college in AIT

- Yes
- No
- Other (please specify)
20. Has this survey made you think about your spiritual beliefs?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Other (please specify)

All information is strictly confidential Thank you for time and honesty.

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