

The rapid rise of 'New Age' weddings in Ireland; How should the Churches respond?

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INTRODUCTION

The social and religious landscape of Ireland has shifted massively over recent decades and one very clear marker of that is the types of wedding ceremonies couples now opt for. Whereas in the past almost all couples married in a Catholic ceremony (91.5% in 1994), this dropped to just 35% last year. Many couples now marry in civil ceremonies (see below), but incredibly almost a quarter of wedding ceremonies last year were - very broadly speaking - 'New Age' in nature.

What is driving this? The change in attitudes towards religion is one big factor, but as we shall see, there is also a big commercial aspect to what is taking place.

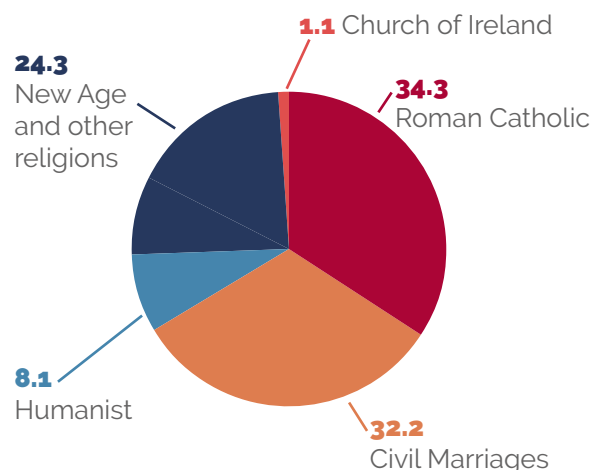
A big question is how the mainstream Churches should respond. *How can they re-engage with couples and how far should it go to do so?*

GROWTH IN NON-CATHOLIC, 'NEW AGE' RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES

This is not a phenomenon confined to Dublin or even to other urban areas although the drop is most dramatic in the capital. There were 2,898 opposite-sex weddings in Dublin City (not to be confused with greater Dublin) in 2023. Only 263 of those ceremonies were Catholic, about 9%.¹ This is partly explained by the high immigrant population in Dublin City plus the more secular nature of the capital city.

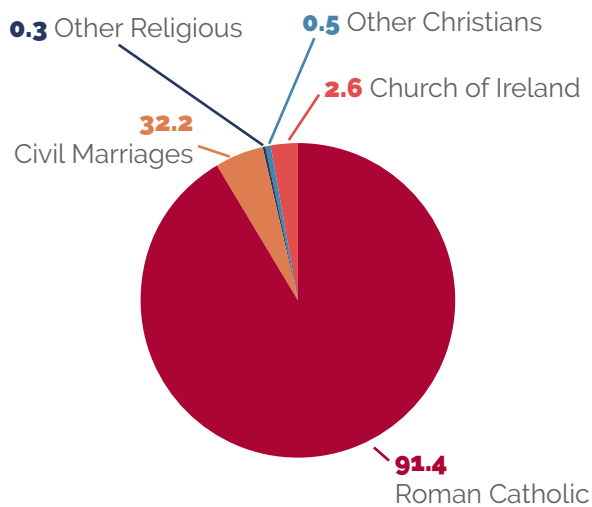
In the Republic in 2023, Catholic wedding ceremonies remained the most popular, but Catholic ceremonies only comprised 35% (7,256) of the total, followed by civil ceremonies at 32 % (6,474) [See figure 1]. Civil ceremonies take place in a registry office or in an approved

Figure 1. All marriages by form of ceremony (%), 2023.



venue and are officiated by a marriage registrar.² In 1994, 15,200 Catholic marriages took place accounting for 91.5% of the total.³ [See figure 2]

Figure 2. **All marriages by form of ceremony (%)**, 1994.



The statistics confirm a decline in Catholic marriages, which is not surprising, given the decline in active Church attendance and vocations to religious life and priesthood.

OPTIONS FOR GETTING MARRIED IN IRELAND

There are three options for getting married in Ireland, that is, a civil ceremony, a religious ceremony (this includes 'spiritual'/New Age weddings), or a secular ceremony (via the Humanist Association). Each is equally valid and binding under Irish law, provided the ceremony meets certain legal requirements and is conducted by a solemniser, that is, a person licensed by the State to conduct weddings.⁴

However, the definition of 'religion' for the purpose of conducting religious ceremonies is broad indeed. For example, the Spiritualist Union of Ireland is the largest single provider of opposite-sex wedding ceremonies after the Catholic Church, that is, 1,604 or 7.8% of all marriages last year.

The aims of the Spiritualist Union are 'to promote Spiritualism as a religion in Ireland and facilitate both the personal and spiritual development of its members in Spirituality, general Mediumship, Spiritual Healing and all other aspects of holistic and Spiritual enlightenment.'⁵

An interfaith minister, Rev Brenda O'Grady, explains further: "Those who follow [modern Spiritualism] are united in believing that communication with spirits is possible. Spiritualists communicate with the spirits of people who have physically died."⁶ It is not at all clear that people taking part in Spiritualist religious ceremonies share these beliefs, but it is a fascinating development that the single biggest providers of such alternative ceremonies believe in and advocate for communication with the spirits of the dead.

Since 2014, after the commencement of the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act 2012, explicitly secular ceremonies are now legally recognised in Ireland.

The majority of such ceremonies are conducted by the Humanist Association of Ireland. In 2023, 1,711 secular weddings (8.1% of the grand total) took place. Interestingly, neither a civil nor a secular ceremony may contain any reference to religion or spirituality. However, there remains a strong desire for ritual and spiritual symbols, which is now being funnelled in the direction of so-called 'other religious denominations' (as the CSO classifies this), which carried out 16% of all weddings in 2023.

The changing times are illustrated by an anecdote told by Fr Joe Mullan. When he was ordained for the Dublin Archdiocese in 1986, he was assigned to Sandycroft Parish. Our Lady of the Wayside, Kiltarnan, better known as the 'Blue Church' was one of the parish churches. The Church has light blue timbers framed in white and is so pretty that at the time Fr Joe was appointed, it was booked solid for weddings from Spring to Autumn. Couples often had to wait for two years to get a slot. Fr Joe returned there recently for a wedding and when he casually flipped through the marriage register, he was astonished to see that it was only the fourth wedding in the Church that year. Only fourteen weddings took place during the entire previous year, instead of the dozens that once would have been the norm.

ANECDOTE

But to this must be added the 7.8% conducted by the Spiritualist Union, bringing us to nearly a quarter of all wedding ceremonies.

"Other religious denominations' include, small Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches, as well as a few dozen Muslim weddings. But many of these so-called 'other religious denominations' are, in fact, of recent origin and are not denominations in the way we would recognise the term.

For example, one of the groups that comes under this heading is called 'Entheos'. It was only established by founder, Karen Dempsey (also known as 'the Bald Priestess') during the Covid lockdown of 2020 and submitted to the Office of the Registrar General as an 'inclusive, non-denominational religion'.⁷ The organisation now has 65 celebrants. Would-be celebrants have to commit to challenging 'heteronormativity, racism and homophobia'.⁸ In 2023, Entheos carried out 623 weddings, far more than the 242 that the Church of Ireland celebrated.

Another provider, FuturFaith, also celebrated its first wedding only in 2021 but conducted 78 weddings last year.⁹

The table on this page shows the number of weddings conducted by each group that comes under the CSO heading 'Other religious denominations' last year.

NEW AGE?

It is difficult to classify some of these emerging religious organisations but many practice a bespoke type of spirituality tailored to the couple's desires. They could loosely be described as 'New Age', but this is a contested term. Few people involved in these organisations would claim 'New Age' as a descriptor for their beliefs. For example, self-styled pagans might say that subscribe to "a belief system based upon nature worship and ancestor veneration" and believe that "the natural world is sacred and that humans are part of it." They also believe that "magic is real" and embrace polytheism.¹⁰

N	Ceremonies of 'other religious denominations'	Count	Share
1	Entheos Ireland	623	19.1
2	One Spirit Interfaith Foundation	531	16.3
3	One World Ministers	465	14.3
4	One Spirit Ireland	424	13.0
5	The Earth Spiritualist Tradition	405	12.4
6	Our Spiritual Earth	220	6.8
7	Evangelical Christian Rite	105	3.2
8	Celtic Tradition	88	2.7
9	FuturFaith Ministry	78	2.4
10	Islamic Community	30	0.9
11	The Order of Marian Apostles	27	0.8
12	One Spirit Interfaith Foundation	25	0.8
13	The Unitarian Church	23	0.7
14	Assemblies of God Ireland	16	0.5
15	The Church of God	14	0.4
16	The Spiritualist National Union	14	0.4
17	Romanian Orthodox Church in Ireland	12	0.4
18	The Usages of the Baptist Church in Ireland	11	0.3
19	The Elim Pentecostal Church in Ireland	10	0.3
20	Temple of Éiriú - Celtic Tradition	10	0.3
21	Pentecostal Marriage Rite	9	0.3
22	Oratory Society	8	0.2
23	The usage of Jehovahs Witnesses	8	0.2
24	Passage of the Indigenous Wisdom tradition of Celtic Druid Temple	7	0.2
25	Pentecostal marriage rites and ceremonies	6	0.2
26	The Seventh-day Adventist Church	6	0.2
27	Christian Rites of Cork Church	5	0.2
28	The rights of Arann Reformed Baptist Church	5	0.2
29	All Others	74	2.3
30	Total	3,259	100

(Figures provided by the CSO for 'other religious marriages' in 2023)

Others practice witchcraft, and can be found among a thriving section on TikTok nicknamed 'WitchTok', which has billions of combined views.¹¹ One of the many self-styled witches on TikTok, Brenda Brennan, is an Irish wedding celebrant.¹² She has over 4,000 followers on Tiktok and her videos have been seen hundreds of thousands of times.

Religious studies scholar, Margrethe Løøv, acknowledges that 'New Age' is not a sufficient term, but nonetheless, still titles her 2024 book, *The New Age Movement* in part because of the difficulty of finding a term that encompasses such a broad spectrum of beliefs. Citing Heelas and Woodward, Løøv elucidates what she means by New Age by outlining the difference between 'subjective-life spiritualities' and 'life-as-religion'.

In 'life-as-religion' (Catholicism is an example), authority is embedded in a hierarchical structure and theological dogmas, and the individual is expected to adhere to a preordained system of beliefs and values. In contrast, subjective-life spiritualities are characterized by an emphasis on the individual self as the authority, agent, and goal of spiritual practices.¹³

Eclecticism,¹⁴ picking and mixing from ancient and modern traditions, is also often a feature. However, eclectic, individualist and subjective spirituality does not exactly trip off the tongue, so like Løøv, the term 'New Age' will be used as shorthand.

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The Pew Research Center has pointed out that many US Christians also hold New Age beliefs, including 'belief in reincarnation, astrology, psychics and the presence of spiritual energy in physical objects like mountains or trees'.¹⁵ The situation is probably no different in Ireland, with some people not even realising (for example) a belief in reincarnation is incompatible with Christianity.

What is clear is that is misleading to describe these broadly New Age organisations as denominations, which implies a degree of adherence to institutional religion that they emphatically reject. For example, the founder of Entheos, Karen Dempsey, dislikes the term 'religious' and would prefer her movement to be described as a philosophy.¹⁶ The Civil Registrar/CSO should strongly consider some designation other than 'denomination'.

COMMERCIAL DRIVERS OF THE CHANGES

While increasing secularisation and the impact of several decades of sexual abuse scandals are implicated in the drop in Catholic weddings, there are also several commercial drivers of the phenomenon. Although the Civil Registration Act of 2004 permitted weddings (initially civil ceremonies) in venues other than registry offices, such ceremonies did not actually place until 2007, when as Carl O'Brien of the Irish Times said, 'Hotels, castles and country houses [were] queuing up to cash in on changes to marriage laws'.¹⁷

Couples seeking a venue for their wedding reception are routinely nudged towards having the ceremony in the hotel or other venue, as a kind of one-stop shop. The hotel will then typically refer them on to one of the 'New' Age' organisations listed in the table on page 3. This is crucial to understanding what is taking place.

Online sites list hotels, marquees, barns, golf resorts and even an island as venues.¹⁸ Weddings are big business. *One Fab Day*, one of Ireland's biggest online sources of information for weddings which claims to have 500,000 monthly readers, conducted a survey in 2022. It found that the average cost of a wedding in Ireland was €36,000.¹⁹ Providing a bespoke service in a competitive industry, including hosting the ceremony, is a commercial necessity in modern Ireland.

Training as a celebrant is not cheap. For example, FuturFaith charges between €5,995 and €6,320 for its online training course of

120 videos, which helpfully also covers such ministerial topics as marketing and branding. However, celebrants can hope to make a good living. According to the Academy of Modern Celebrancy, 'independent Wedding celebrants generally charge anywhere between €500 – €1500 per wedding ceremony, Funeral Celebrants typically charge between €300 – €500 for a funeral ceremony and Naming Celebrants charge similar fees between €250 – €600.'²⁰ Technically, however, no training is required as a person simply has to be nominated by an approved solemnising body, whether secular or religious.²¹

HOW SHOULD CHURCHES RESPOND?

It raises questions for the Christian Churches. Why are people drawn to these ceremonies? What impact is it having on traditional Christian belief? And is there anything the Churches can do to encourage more couples to participate in Christian marriage?

There is an argument that perhaps it is more honest for people who do not truly embrace the Christian message to choose an alternative wedding ceremony. However, suppose couples are drifting into wedding ceremonies because of convenience? In that case, it represents a failure on the part of the Church to properly explain the sacramental and fundamentally transcendent nature of Christian marriage.

In the past, couples might have married in Church simply to keep Granny or Mammy happy.²² There is, however, a case to be made for parents exploring with young people why they are choosing to marry in alternative ceremonies. Parents are often reluctant to discuss sensitive matters for fear of being seen as interfering but it should be possible to have an exploratory conversation.

Similarly, it is important that when people come to a parish to discuss getting married in a Catholic ceremony, they are made welcome and that the opportunity to witness is not missed.

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Covid-19 exacerbated many trends, including the fact that religious practice has never returned to pre-pandemic levels. The Iona Institute has tracked this phenomenon since the end of the lockdowns. The latest poll, conducted with Amárach Research, found that 41pc of Catholics who went to Mass before Covid, no longer did so in 2023. This figure is up from 25 % the previous year.²³

However, in some US Dioceses, Covid-19 reinforced the wisdom of a cautious experiment to allow marriages to take place in venues other than churches as it allowed weddings to go ahead during pandemic restrictions. For example, Rev Stephen Hook was an advocate for allowing ceremonies to take place outdoors or in dignified secular places and his diocese, the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Maryland, began permitting it for a three-year trial period in 2018.²⁴ Priests and parishioners alike are enthusiastic. Some priests report bringing whole families back to the faith. Rev Joshua Laws, of the same diocese, says that it helps dispel the idea that the Church is obsessed with rules and regulations. However, couples still have to undertake marriage preparation and a mass is not celebrated.

The Diocese of Helena in Montana began approving marriages in venues other than churches and chapels in 2015.²⁵ Some people oppose the move because they say that marriage belongs not just to the couple, but to the whole local community who come to witness. Deacon Greg Kandra puts it even more simply: 'By bringing themselves before the Church, and into a church, and bearing witness in that sacred setting, a couple performs a public act of humility, and faith, and belief. They don't expect God to come to them. They go to Him.'²⁶

While there is a range of views about celebrating marriage in alternative venues, it might be considered as part of a wider strategy focusing on the importance of marriage. Overall, marriage as an institution is in decline, while divorce figures rise.²⁷ If making it easier to get married outside a church building, at all costs it must be avoided that a sacramental wedding is seen as just another element of the day, rather than as a meaningful step in a life of faith. As cognitive scientist and religious anthropologist, Dr Hugh Turpin, says in another context regarding ex-Catholics, they 'often still participate in a nostalgic, expedient or instrumental manner when it suits them.'²⁸

If, however, we believe as Christians in the Good News, we cannot be sanguine about so many seeking alternative meaning systems, some of which are antithetical to Christianity, at such a crucial transition time as deciding to marry, even if we allow that some are being nudged towards these ceremonies by hotels for commercial reasons. It is very likely that in future, far more funerals will take place outside Churches, also in 'New Age' ceremonies. This is already starting to happen. The various 'New Age' organisations that conduct weddings also conduct funerals, 'naming ceremonies' and many other ceremonies besides, including even in one case, an abortion ceremony.

ENDNOTES

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