



**RELIGION,
MARRIAGE AND
FERTILITY:**

**Shall the
Religious
Inherit
Ireland?**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The subtitle of this paper, 'Shall the Religious Inherit Ireland?' is deliberately somewhat provocative. It is based on the title of a book from 2010 called 'Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?' by Eric Kaufmann. In that book, Kaufmann pointed out that religious people have more children than their secular counterparts and over time, this will make a difference to the composition of our populations, even allowing for some children not following the religion of their parents. The difference will become more apparent over time because of the looming demographic crisis the world is facing. As the century advances, the population of most countries in the world is going to age and begin to decline. The religious share of the world's population, even in the West, could well go up, not down.

The same analysis applies to Ireland. If religious people in Ireland have more children than their secular counterparts, then over time this will become evident in our population make-up. The effect will become more and more pronounced if the fertility rate of religious couples remains above replacement level and that of secular remains well below that.

Indeed, if the religious share of the population drops too much, that will be very bad for Ireland because our fertility rate is likely to sink further. Ironically, a secular society needs a certain baseline number of religious people if it is to continue.

The fact is that religion promotes some of the most pro-social behaviour, that is, behaviour beneficial to society. This is often overlooked in some of the heated debates about religion today and the common assumption that religion is mainly associated with regressive practices. But there is now a wealth of evidence showing that religious practice is associated with improved mental and physical health,¹ lower rates of crime, lower rates of alcohol and drink abuse, more giving of time and money to charity, higher rates of marriage, lower rates of divorce and higher fertility levels.²

1 The psycho-social benefits of religious practice (Casey, 2009).

2 American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us (Putnam, 2010).



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This paper would like to draw particular attention to the link between religious practice on the one hand, and higher rates of marriage and fertility on the other. Currently, Ireland is rapidly ageing, along with much of the rest of the world. Fertility rates have plunged, and people are either marrying and having children later, or not at all. The decline of religious practice is closely linked with the decline in marriage and fertility rates and in debates about this issue, the link must be carefully considered and not simply dismissed out of hand.

To put it bluntly; if levels of religious practice in Ireland and elsewhere continue to fall, so will rates of marriage and fertility. The consequences of the fall in fertility rates to well below replacement level are particularly drastic. To counter this, a society needs a minimum number of people whose values and beliefs highly motivate them to marry and have children. Those people are most likely to be religious believers, as we will see.

In the paper, we will examine the role of religion in increasing fertility and marriage rates, using Irish data and international evidence.



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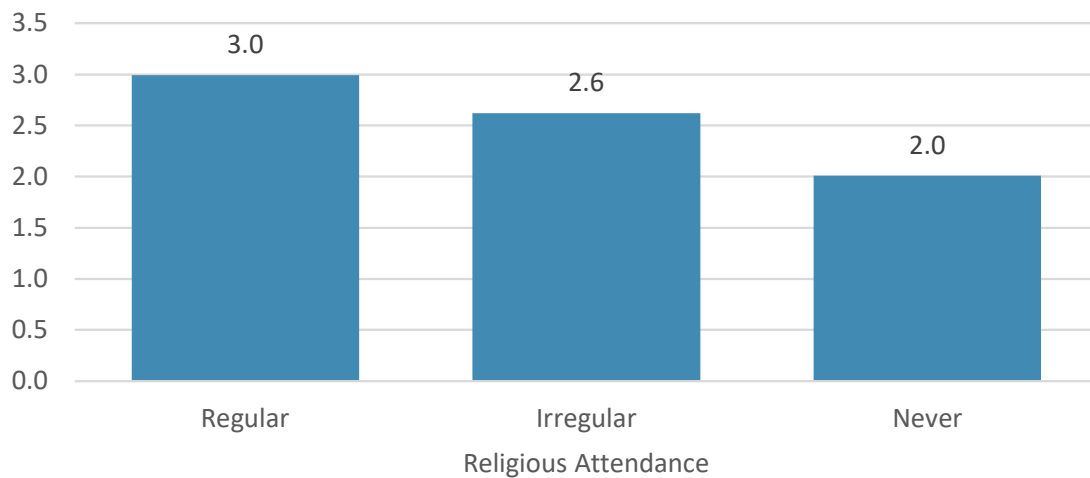
Why Fertility Matters

Fertility is the ultimate driver of society and the economy. Persistently low fertility rates will lead to significant geopolitical, social, and financial challenges. Countries like Japan, Italy, and South Korea are expected to see their populations halve by 2100. This will result in a higher age dependency ratio, increased tax burdens, and a precarious quality of life for the elderly.



TABLE 1

Irish Adults (Aged 18 to 50): Average Number of Desired Children



Source: Global Family and Gender Survey (GFGS, 2018, n = 2,420)

Ireland Then and Now

Ireland has experienced a significant decline in fertility rates over recent decades and the CSO says it could fall further to 1.3 by 2037. That may turn out to be optimistic. It is currently at 1.5. Replacement level, which is the number of children each woman must have to sustain a population at its present level, is 2.1.

According to a CSO report issued last year, in 2023, those aged 65 and over represented 15% of the overall population. But by 2057, according to the CSO, this age group is expected to constitute between 27.8 and 31.6 percent of the total, depending on immigration levels. This will present us with a very challenging situation which immigration alone cannot solve.³

While falls in fertility levels during the last century are heavily attributable to education and economic development, reasons for the falls this century are less clear but it appears it may be values-related as we will explore.

³ Population and Labour Force Projections 2023-2057 - Central Statistics Office, 16 July 2024.

The Influence of Religion on Fertility

Religious practice, particularly regular attendance at religious services, is strongly associated with higher fertility rates. This report identifies two ways by which this influence occurs:

- 1. Indirect Influence:** Religion shapes pro-natalist values and attitudes. This includes a strong orientation towards marriage, future planning, and higher life satisfaction. Regular religious attendees in Ireland report higher desired fertility (3.0 children) compared to those who never attend (2.0 children).
- 2. Direct Influence:** A significant body of international evidence also finds a direct correlation between higher religious attendance and higher fertility rates. We can see from Table 1 above that those who attend religious services regularly in Ireland wish to have on average one child more than those who never attend, which is the difference between below and above replacement level fertility. (This finding is from the 'Global Family and Gender Survey' of 2018 which included a sample of over 2,000 Irish people. The survey will be cited several times in this report).



Religions are more likely to place having children near the apex of life, and they create an environment where parents don't feel the need to justify their decision to have them.



In the US, data show that those who attend religious services weekly have more than two children each on average. For those who never attend, the figure is below 1.5.⁴

Higher religiosity also supports other outcomes related to fertility. This includes a greater importance placed on family life, higher quality childrearing and higher quality spousal relationships.

This paper also looks one recent example of how religious practice shapes attitudes towards the family, namely Ireland's 2024 referendums on family and care.

Conclusion

The religious view of having children differs sharply to that of secular society. A secular outlook often seeks to maximise utility and this can lead many young adults to prioritise career progression and financial success over having children. Religions are more likely to place having children near the apex of life, and they create an environment where parents don't feel the need to justify their decision to have them.

The evidence presented in this report underscores the positive impact of religious practice on fertility and marriage rates. It also raises a grim outlook for Ireland, as religious practice and fertility look set to continue their downward trajectory in the coming years. However, it also serves as a marker of hope, as the trend may work in both directions. Any turnaround in fertility rates may necessitate a return to religious practice and vice versa.

⁴ America's growing religious-secular fertility divide – Institute for Family Studies, 8 August 2022.

PART 1. WHY FERTILITY MATTERS

It's easy to overlook the importance of fertility rates to society. After all, the societies we inhabit today are the products of the number of children we have, and the same naturally goes for all generations before us. The presumption can easily be that people will always have enough children to sustain society going forward but this now appears highly complacent. The world's population is now at record highs (over 8 billion people), and climbing, so it is easy to be complacent, and some also question whether fewer people would really be such a tragedy.

But this attitude ignores the rocky road to 8 billion people. In the past, wars, famine and disease were just some of the disasters that emerged to lower population levels, even in eras of high fertility. These eras were also marked by high child mortality. Some parts of the world still experience this. It was once quite common for families to have eight children, with perhaps only four surviving long enough to themselves begin having children.

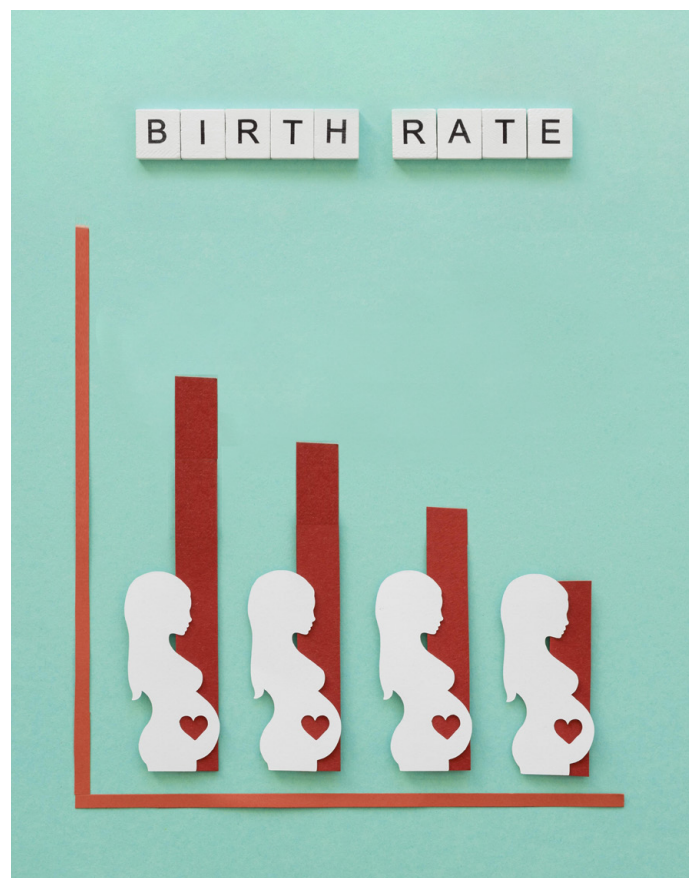
The modern era has resolved many societal ills and families have responded by lowering the number of children they have. Fewer lifetime pregnancies are needed for a family to see their children grow into adulthood. This has lowered the population replacement rate to 2.1. Child-bearing and child-rearing is now more commonly marked by certainty than uncertainty.

But while much of the global fall in fertility is understandable, its fall to extreme lows in many societies now raises alarm bells.

Fertility is the ultimate driver of society and the economy. When it falls persistently below replacement, it creates the risk of a demographic tailspin. Played out over generations, it can cause populations to more than halve and then in time halve again. This very scenario is now expected by the year 2100 for over 20 countries including Japan, Italy, Portugal, South Korea and Thailand.⁵

British demographer Dr. Paul Morland writes in his 2024 book *No One Left: Why the World Needs More Children* that the fallout from collapsing fertility can include the geopolitical ("great powers will wane"),

5 Population in more than 20 countries to halve by 2100: Study | Environment News | Al Jazeera, 15 Jul 2020.



social ("the elderly will die unattended and alone") and financial ("tax levels will have to be expropriatory").

A rise in fertility rates from below replacement levels among the current generation of childbearing age is the only way to reverse the decline. Achieving a steady or rising population allows for more economies of scale for public services and it addresses the issue of ageing populations.

Ireland's Department of Finance recently warned of the higher expenditure needed just to maintain existing healthcare and pensions for the elderly.⁶ The share of Gross National Income (GNI) for all age-related expenditure is projected to rise from 22% in 2022 to 28% in 2050. This reflects the worsening age dependency ratio. There are currently four workers for every pensioner. This will fall to just two by 2050 (even with high immigration). While longer life expectancy can partly explain these costs, it is made worse by low fertility.

6 Ireland's age-related spending will need highest increase in the EU, Department of Finance report shows | Irish Independent, 29 Jun 2024.

PART 2. IRELAND THEN AND NOW

TABLE 2

Religious Attendance, Marriage and Fertility in Ireland

Metric	1973-77	1981-89	1992-97	2002-07	2011-16	2020-23
Religious Attendance (% Attending Monthly or More Often)	92%	86%	80%	43%	33%	28%
Marriage Rate (per 1,000 People)*	6.8	5.4	4.5	5.2	4.6	3.9
Average Age at Marriage (Bride)**	24.8	25.4	28.4	30.9	33.0	35.8
Fertility Rate (Average Number of Children per Woman)*	3.44	2.53	1.90	1.94	1.92	1.54
Average Age at Birth of First Child***	24.8	26.0	27.0	28.8	30.4	31.6

*Average over years within period, except 2020-23 which is 2023.

**Data is for years 1973, 1983, 1996, average of 2002-07, average of 2011-16, and 2023.

***Data is for years 1975, 1985, 1995, average of 2005-07, average of 2011-16, and 2023.

Source: CSO / "Historical Political Cleavages and Post-Crisis Transformations in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Ireland, 1953-2020" (2021)

Ireland has seen drastic social changes since the 1970s. As we can see from the table above, religious attendance, marriage rates and fertility rates have declined simultaneously, raising the question of how they relate to one another. This has also coincided with older average ages getting married and/or having a first child.

Religion

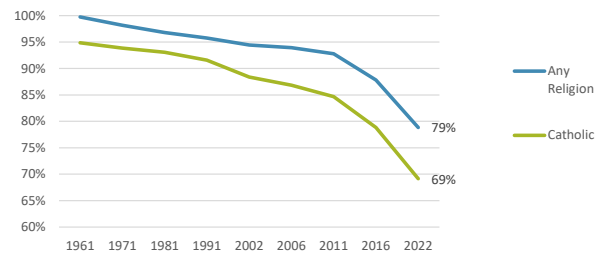
The 2022 Census recorded new lows in people reporting an affiliation with any religion (79%) and with Catholicism (69%).

While the share of religious affiliation has fallen as a percentage of the total population, the actual number hasn't always fallen. For example, the 2011 Census showed 216,575 more religious persons (compared to 2006). At the most recent 2022 Census, however, there were 109,524 fewer self-identified religious persons (compared to 2016), and 180,783 fewer Catholics. (See table 3)

The decline is also evident in the share of the population regularly attending religious services. The 2020s are the first decade in modern times where a greater number of people never attend (50%) than those who attend monthly or more often (28%). (See table 4)

TABLE 3

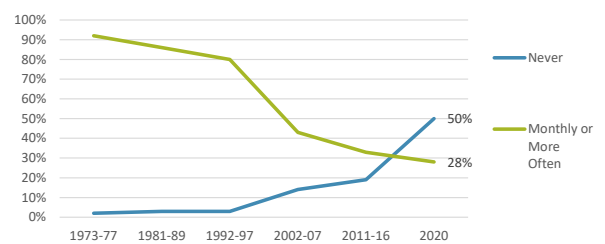
Ireland: Religious Affiliation at Census Years



Source: Central Statistics Office

TABLE 4

Ireland: Religious / Church Attendance



Source: "Historical Political Cleavages and Post-Crisis Transformations in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Ireland, 1953-2020" (2021)

The precise level of regular religious attendance varies by source. Those attending monthly or more often lies between 24% and 34%. Amárach's March 2023 survey (commissioned by The Iona Institute) showed that just 14% of the population was a "regular" mass goer. Respondents may have perceived "regular" to mean weekly or daily.

TABLE 5

Snapshot of Religion in Ireland

Measure	Source	Year	%
Religions Affiliation			
Any Religion	CSO Census	2022	79%
<i>of which Catholic</i>	CSO Census	2022	69%
Religious Attendance			
Monthly or More Often	GFGS	2018	24%
Monthly or More Often	Paper 1	2020	28%
Pre-COVID Mass Goer ¹	Amárach	2023	24%
<i>Post-COVID Mass Goer¹</i>	Amárach	2023	14%
Monthly or More Often	IPSOS B&A	2024	34%
Religious Belief			
Believe in God	Amárach	2003	87%
Believe in God	Eurobarometer	2010	70%
Believe in God	Pew	2017	39%
Religion is "Important"	Eurobarometer	2020	43%
Believe in God	Amárach	2023	55%
Believe in God (Aged Under 35)	Amárach	2023	41%

¹ Frequency unspecified

Paper 1: "Historical Political Cleavages and Post-Crisis Transformations in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Ireland, 1953-2020"

Religious belief has also moved significantly lower. Belief in God stood at 87% in 2003 and fell to 70% in 2010. More recent estimates place it between 39% (Pew in 2017) and 55% (Amárach in 2023). Those aged under 35 have lower religious belief than older generations.

However, an exit poll⁷ conducted for RTE at the time of the 2016 General Election found that only 4% of respondents said they were atheists. Another 1% said they were agnostics. Older people are more likely in general to vote than young people, but even allowing for this, we see a big discrepancy between polls in terms of the number of people who say they are atheists.

Also, how do we reconcile 79% of people saying in Census 2022 that they belong to a religion with just 55% saying in one poll listed in the table above that they believe in God?

Marriage

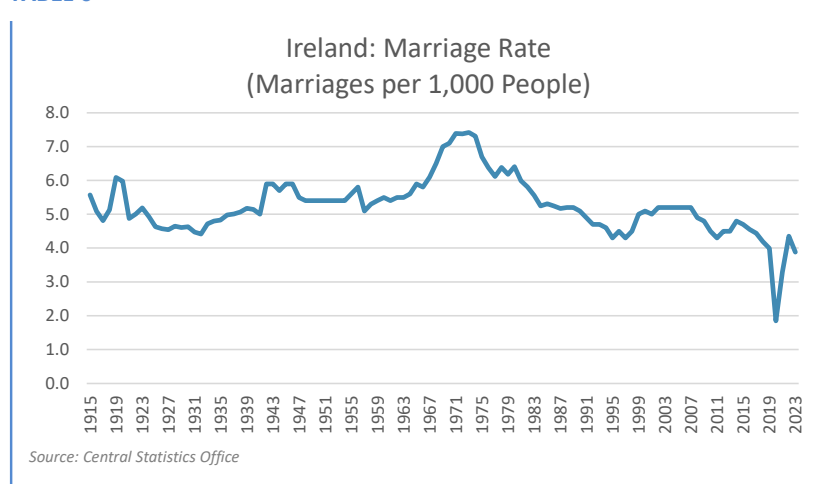
Ireland's marriage rate peaked in the early 1970s and has been in decline since. The COVID pandemic led to a sharp drop in weddings which has since mostly recovered. However, weddings in the years since COVID haven't fully compensated for the drop.

7 RTÉ/Behaviour & Attitudes 2016 General Election, 26 February 2016.





TABLE 6



The crude marriage rate (per thousand persons) was 3.9 in 2023 versus 7 in 1973.

The average age of marriage (age of bride) was 24.8 years in 1973, but it has since moved 11 years later to 35.8 years in 2023⁸, which can obviously have the effect of leaving less time to have children.

Fertility

Strong declines in family size led to falls in fertility during the 20th century, from 4.0 children in 1963 to 2.0 in 1992. Fertility hovered around replacement for much of the 1990s and 2000s.

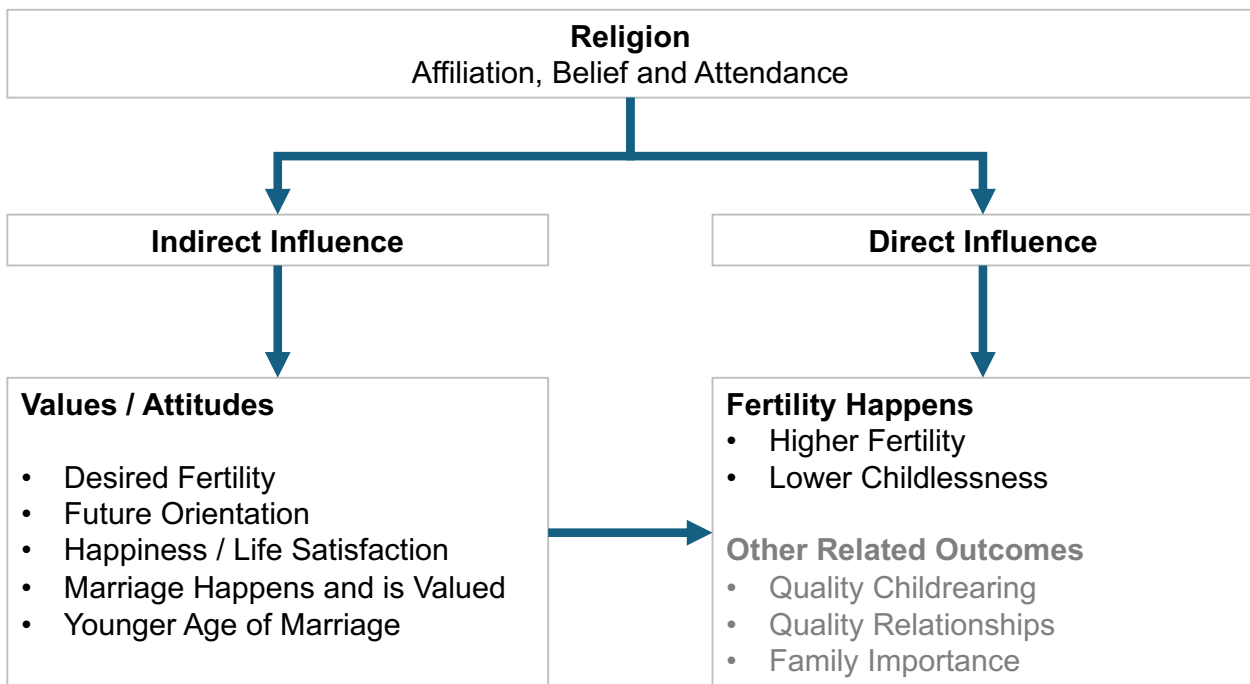
The years since 2010 have seen more gradual declines. However, these declines are the most significant because fertility has now firmly fallen below replacement. The COVID-19 pandemic led to volatility in the fertility rate (reflecting the volatility in births). Ireland's fertility rate hit a new low of 1.5 births per woman in 2023.

The CSO's latest population projections (released in July 2024) assume the fertility rate falls to 1.3 gradually to the year 2037. It then projects to 2057 with the rate remaining constant⁹. However, fertility rates generally are declining faster than expected around the world.

The average age of a first-time mother in 1975 was as young as 24.8 years¹⁰. It has since moved some seven years later in life by 2023, to an average age of 31.6 years¹¹. As mentioned, this leaves the typical Irish woman with a much smaller window of time to begin having children.

8 Main Results Marriages 2023 - Central Statistics Office, 26 April 2024.
 9 Fertility Assumptions. Population and Labour Force Projections 2023-2057 - Central Statistics Office, 16 July 2024.
 10 Health Women and Men in Ireland 2019 - Central Statistics Office.
 11 Vital Statistics Yearly Summary 2023 - Central Statistics Office, 24 May 2024.

PART 3. THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON FERTILITY



This section explores the link between higher religiosity and higher fertility. It looks at international research and uses supporting Irish data where available.

Indirect and Direct Influences

The framework proposed in this report is that religion doesn't just spur fertility (direct influence), but that it also spurs values and attitudes, which themselves spur fertility (indirect influence). The indirect influences allow us to appreciate a wider body of research and to better establish the overall link to higher fertility.

It's important to first establish what we mean by "religion". Religion can simply be an affiliation, like marking "Catholic" on the census. Religion can also mean a belief, where a person marks "yes" when asked if they believe in God. Regular religious attendance is the most active form of engagement. This reflects the most serious obvious communal engagement and it most exposes people to the values and attitudes promoted by religions. Most studies find religious attendance (as opposed to affiliation and belief) is the strongest predictor of high fertility.

Indirect Influences

There are a mix of values and attitudes which religions form. The attitude of simply desiring having children sets young adults on a course to attain high fertility. Religiosity steers people towards marriage and towards valuing it. It also spurs an orientation towards the future and higher happiness, both of which are predictors of fertility.

Direct Influences

Fertility outcomes emerge from high religious attendance (and the values they form):

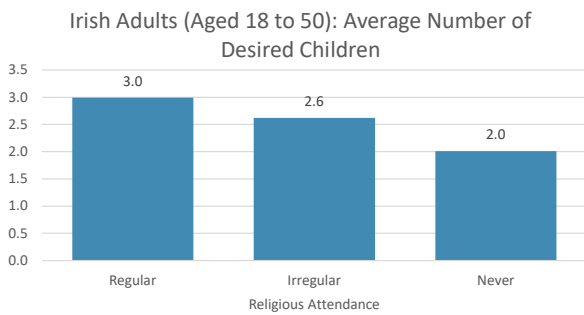
1. **A couple become parents:** The fertility rate is higher (and childlessness lower) among those with higher religious attendance.
2. **Other related outcomes:** Religion not only spurs fertility but other related outcomes. Children are more likely to be hugged and praised (see below) while parents experience strong relationships with each other. Family values are reinforced and may be expressed through civic engagement.

Indirect Influences

Desired Fertility

In the great majority of cases, fertility, meaning actually having children, must first be desired before it is to happen.

Irish adults regularly attending religious services (monthly, weekly or daily) have a desired fertility of 3.0, compared to 2.0 for those never attending.

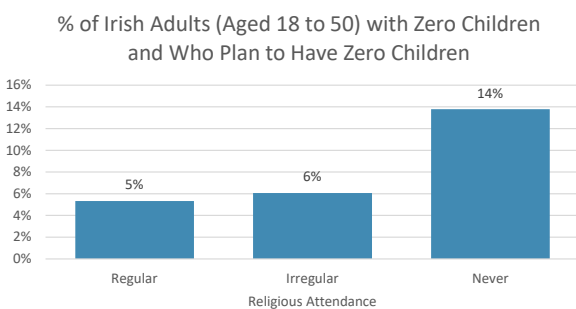


Source: Global Family and Gender Survey (GFGS, 2018, n = 2,420)

This data conforms to international evidence. Women in the US who report that religion is “very important” in their everyday life have higher fertility and higher intended fertility than those saying religion is “somewhat important” or “not important”¹².

The Global Family and Gender Survey from 2018 found that 8% of adults in Ireland (aged 18-50) have no children and no desire for them either. This is the concept of voluntary childlessness. It is nearly three times higher among adults who never attend religious services (14%), compared to those who regularly attend (5%).

TABLE 7



Source: Global Family and Gender Survey (GFGS, 2018, n = 2,420)

Future Orientation

Having children is a bet on the future. It involves a medium term sacrifice of time and money in exchange for the rewards of being a parent in future years. An orientation towards the future and the practice of delayed gratification is therefore a likely prerequisite for having children.

A 2012 study found that “religious commitment was associated with a tendency to forgo immediate rewards in order to gain larger, future rewards”¹³. It should therefore transpire that religious attendance prepares young adults for the delayed gratification of childbirth and child-rearing.



Happiness / Life Satisfaction

Subjective measures of well-being (happiness and life satisfaction) correlate with higher fertility, but only within developed countries. These countries exhibit low fertility and high overall life satisfaction (partly due to higher material prosperity) whereas developing countries exhibit the opposite.

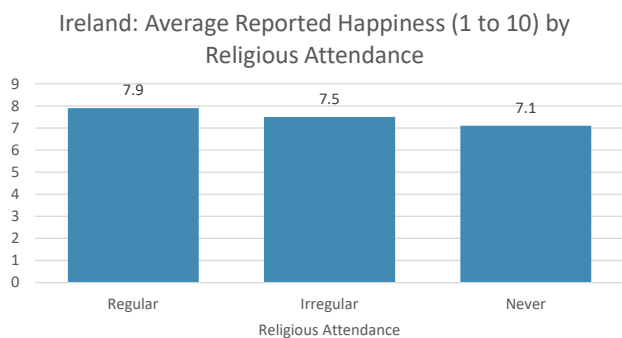
Within developed countries, the question is whether their most satisfied people have higher fertility than their least satisfied people. A 2018 study found that higher life satisfaction was associated with a higher probability of having children in all seven developed countries studied¹⁴.

12 Religiosity and Fertility in the United States: The Role of Fertility Intentions | Semantic Scholar (Hayford & Morgan, 2008).

13 Religious people discount the future less (Carter et al., 2012).

14 Life satisfaction favors reproduction. The universal positive effect of life satisfaction on childbearing in contemporary low fertility countries (Mencarini et al., 2018).

TABLE 8

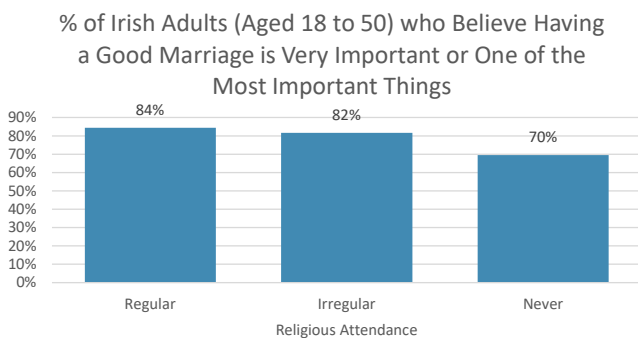


Source: Global Family and Gender Survey (GFGS, 2018, n = 2,420)

Religion’s role in this relationship is to spur higher life satisfaction. Irish adults (aged 18 to 50) were asked in 2018 to rate their happiness score from 1 to 10. Regular attenders of religious services reported an average score of 7.9, compared to 7.1 among never attenders.

Religion comes with higher happiness, and happy people are more likely to go on to have children.

TABLE 9



Source: Global Family and Gender Survey (GFGS, 2018, n = 2,420)

Marriage Takes Place and is Valued

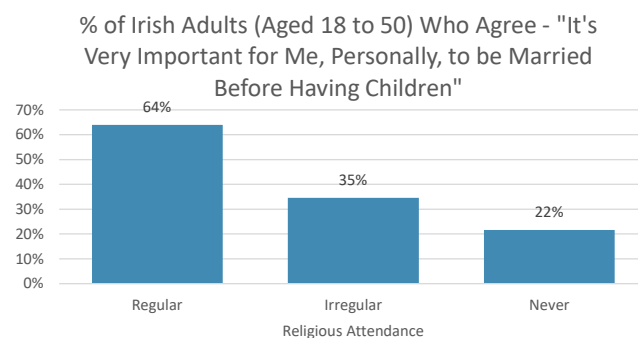
While births outside of marriage have risen in recent decades (now over 40% in Ireland¹⁵), marriage continues to be the primary environment for having children. The 2022 census found that among married adults aged 35-44, only 18% are living in households with no children, meaning the big majority of married couples go on to have children¹⁶. This compares to 51% for single (never married) persons of the same age.

Irish adults were asked in 2018 about the importance of having a good marriage. Seventy-nine percent of respondents marked that it was either very important or one of the most important things. When split by religious attendance, a gap emerges between regular attenders (84%) and never (70%) attenders.

15 Vital Statistics First Quarter 2024 - Central Statistics Office, 23 August 2024.

16 Central Statistics Office (CSO), Census 2022 (Table F3031), and Authors’ estimates.

TABLE 10



Source: Global Family and Gender Survey (GFGS, 2018, n = 2,420)

This points to the influence of religion on attitudes favourable towards marriage. This in turn likely predisposes people to view any associated fertility favourably.

The same survey asked whether it’s important for a person to be married before having children. This reveals a significantly large gap by religious attendance. Sixty-four percent of regular attenders agreed, while just 22% of never attenders agreed.

Data from the US suggests that falling marriage rates mostly explain the fall in fertility rates there. Lynam Stone, writing for the Institute of Family Studies (IFS) in 2018, says that:

Essentially all of the decline in fertility since 2001 can be explained by changes in the marital composition of the population. Married, single, and divorced women are all about as likely, controlling for age and marital status, to have kids now as they were in 2001. But today, a smaller proportion of women are married during those peak-fertility years.¹⁷

Younger Age of Marriage and fertility

Countries with a younger age of marriage tend, as you would expect, to have higher fertility rates¹⁸. A significant driver of the decline in fertility is the later age couples marry and conceive their first child.

There has been an historic link between the average age of marriage and the average age of first birth¹⁹. A likely precursor to a higher fertility rate will be a return to attitudes which support marriage and family at an earlier average age.

17 No Ring, No Baby: How Marriage Trends Impact Fertility | Institute for Family Studies (Stone, 2018).

18 For Fertility, Marriage Still Matters | Institute for Family Studies (Stone, 2022).

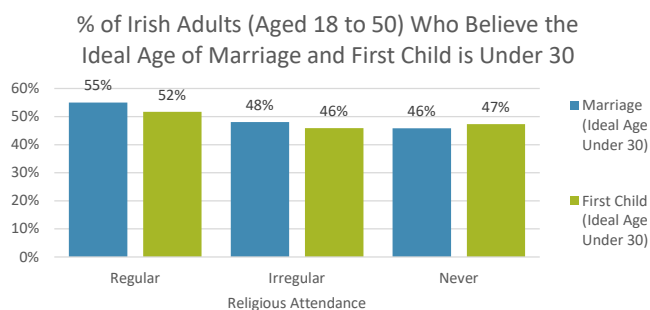
19 Have kids, settle down - UK Parliament.



Several studies link religion to earlier ages of marriage²⁰. Research in the US shows that younger marriages are more likely to emerge from conservative Protestant or Mormon families, and from those who value their faith more highly.²¹

Religion's role in these attitudes is evident in a 2018 dataset from the European Social Survey. It asked respondents for the ideal age that a person should marry and become a parent. Those placing the ideal age below 30 are people we can reasonably conclude are supportive of taking the average age down from its current high levels.

TABLE 11



Note: "Regular" only refers to daily and weekly, not monthly attendance.
Source: European Social Survey (2018, Round 09), Ireland responses (aged 18 to 50, n = 989)

20 Religion and Early Marriage in the United States: Evidence from the Add Health Study (Uecker, 2014).

21 Early Marriage in the United States (Uecker, 2008).

Irish adults who are regular attenders (daily or weekly) of religious services have the highest support of this lower ideal age of marriage (55%), compared to those who never attend (46%). The same is true for the ideal age of first child, but with a smaller gap (52% vs 47%).

Direct Influences

Higher Fertility

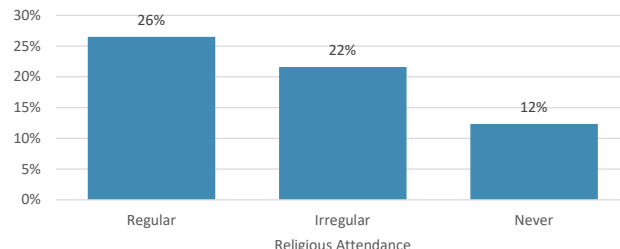
Irish data reveals an association between religious attendance and high fertility. Among surveyed adults aged 18-50 in 2018, 20% responded as having three or more children. There was a significant gap by religious attendance, with regular church attenders more than twice as likely (26%) than never attenders (12%) to report a larger family size.

This aligns with a large body of international evidence²² directly linking religiosity to fertility:

Buber-Ennsner and Berghammer (2021)²³ studied eight European countries and found that religious people have more children.

TABLE 12

% of Irish Adults (Aged 18 to 50) with 3 or More Children by Religious Attendance



Source: European Social Survey (2018, Round 09), Ireland responses (aged 18 to 50, n = 989)

Götmark and Andersson (2020)²⁴ found that fertility on the national and regional levels was positively correlated with the share of the population, in a country, that said, "Religion is an important part of daily life".

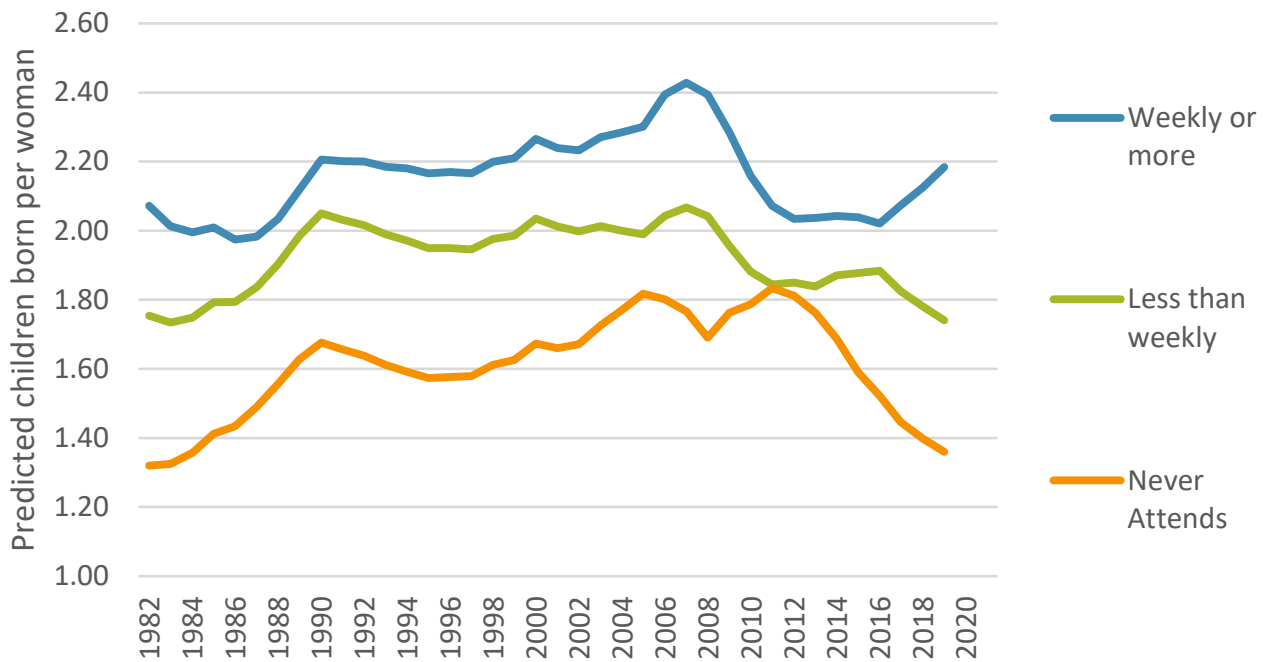
22 Acknowledgements are given to the Twitter account @MoreBirths for their compilation of studies referenced in this section.

23 Religiosity and the realisation of fertility intentions: A comparative study of eight European countries (Buber-Ennsner & Berghammer, 2021). It further found that views on family intention are formed very young, even in childhood. The fertility advantage across the 8 countries was half a child per woman.

24 Human fertility in relation to education, economy, religion, contraception, and family planning programs (Götmark & Andersson, 2020).

TABLE 13

Stone (2022): US Fertility Rates by Religious Attendance



Source: "America's Growing Religious-Secular Fertility Divide" by Lyman Stone (IFS, Aug 2022)
 Data Source: 1982-2019 NSFG estimates, 2021 DIFS waves 2-5 estimates; adjusted to fit CDC official TFRs.

Hayford et al. (2008)²⁵ found a difference in fertility of one child per woman between those who rated religion as very important and those who rated religion as unimportant or reported no religion.

Kolk and Saarela (2024)²⁶ studied Finland and found that those declaring no religion had 0.3 births per woman fewer than the national average.

Stone (2017)²⁷ describes a large increase in fertility in the Republic of Georgia after the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church urged families to have more children. Marital fertility and higher order births in particular rose dramatically.

Peri-Rotem (2020)²⁸ looked at the interaction between religion, education and fertility in the UK and France. Religious practice led highly educated women to have more children and be more likely to become mothers in the first place.

Stone (2022)²⁹ found that fertility rates have been high and stable among religious attenders, and that declining fertility is due to a sharply increasing share of people that are not religious. Schnabel (2021)³⁰ found that the proportion of secular people in a country is associated with sharply lower fertility on a national level, suggesting that these individuals are bringing about cultural shifts across society.

25 Religiosity and Fertility in the United States: The Role of Fertility Intentions (Hayford & Morgan, 2008).
 26 Religion and Fertility: A Longitudinal Register Study Examining Differences by Sex, Parity, Partner's Religion, and Religious Conversion in Finland (Kolk & Saarela, 2024).
 27 In Georgia, a Religiously-Inspired Baby Boom? (Stone, 2017).
 28 Fertility Differences by Education in Britain and France (Peri-Rotem, 2020).
 29 America's Growing Religious-Secular Fertility Divide (Stone, 2022).
 30 Secularism and Fertility Worldwide (Schnabel, 2021).

Low Childlessness

The link between religiosity and fertility rates is well established, but is there a similar link between religiosity (or lack thereof) and childlessness? We can first establish that lower fertility rates have gone hand in hand with higher childlessness.

This point is argued strongly by Stephen J. Shaw, filmmaker of the documentary series *Birthgap – Childless World*. He cites Japan where the rate of childless women was just 6% in 1973 and is now 30%³¹. The rate of childless women in Italy is 40%.

Some countries have childlessness rates in line with their historic trends. The US is currently at 15%, but this could rise as high as 30% if current low fertility persists among young adults³².

Ireland's childlessness rate has risen over recent years:

- The cohort of women born in 1955 ended their childbearing years around the year 2000. Many gave birth in the 1980s and 1990s. Their childlessness rate was 12.4%.³³

31 A surprising reason why fertility rates have fallen so much | The Iona Institute, 24 March 2023.

32 1in4: Projecting Childlessness Among Today's Young Women | Institute for Family Studies, 7 December 2022.

33 Author's analysis of the Human Fertility Database (HFD).

- The cohort of women born in 1975 ended their childbearing years around the year 2020. Their childlessness rate was 17.1%.

It's important to note that childlessness takes many decades to emerge, as it can only be measured after women turn 45 years old.³⁴

The question of a link with religion is explored in two papers. One in 1992 found that childlessness in the USA was significantly higher among married couples who didn't attend religious services, who didn't affiliate with a religion, who didn't believe in the Bible, or who had a civil rather than religious marriage ceremony³⁵.

The second paper in 2015 looked at a sample of female research scientists aged 25 to 45 in Austria³⁶. It found lower rates of intended childlessness among those with a religious affiliation and high self-reported religiosity.

34 Childlessness in Europe: Reconstructing Long-Term Trends Among Women Born in 1900–1972 (Sobotka, 2017).

35 Religiosity of Married Couples and Childlessness (Heaton et al., 1992).

36 Researchers, religion and childlessness (Buber-Ennsner & Skirbekk, 2015).



The 2018 European Social Survey asked adults aged 18-50 if they currently had children. It found that 40% of Irish adults in this age group currently didn't have children. This was higher than many other European countries (29% in Great Britain, 36% in Spain and 39% in Italy). It's important to note that measuring no children among adults aged 18-50 is different to measuring childlessness which looks at adults after their childbearing years (typically over the age of 45).

Nonetheless, this measure allows us to consider the absence of children by religious attendance. Regular attenders in Ireland aged 18-50 are much less likely to report having zero children (31%) than those never attending religious services (49%). This same difference can be observed in other countries (24% vs 55% in Italy, for example).

Quality Childrearing

While high religiosity appears to spur higher fertility, is this where the story ends? It's also worth considering whether religiosity leads to high quality child rearing and spousal relationships. After all, fertility might only continue through future generations if families act as good ambassadors and role models for having and raising children.

Religious parents are more likely to report praising and hugging their children³⁷. The Deseret News/Brigham Young University American Family Survey tells us that parents who attend religious services weekly are more likely to eat dinner with their children, do chores together and attend outings with their children, even after controlling for parental age, gender, race and marital status³⁸.

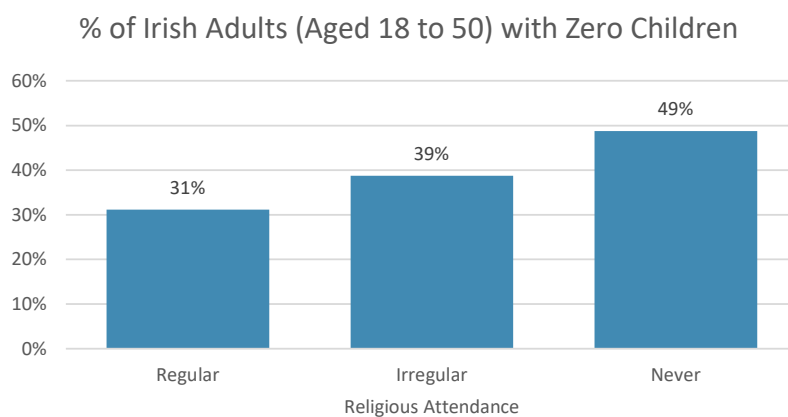
Adult children who attended religious services more frequently are significantly more likely to help their older parents, and they reported higher quality relationships and more frequent contact with both their fathers and mothers³⁹.

37 Conservative Protestant childrearing: Authoritarian or authoritative? (Wilcox, 1998).

38 The latest social science is wrong. Religion is good for families and kids. - The Washington Post, 15 December 2015.

39 Religion and Ties Between Adult Children and Their Parents (King et al., 2015)

TABLE 14



Source: European Social Survey (2018, Round 09), Ireland responses (aged 18 to 50, n = 989)



Religions are more likely to place having children near the apex of life, and they create an environment where parents don't feel the need to justify their decision to have them.

Quality Relationships

If fertility is to persist through generations, it's important that parental relationships are strong. This is where it's incumbent for spousal relationships to be of high quality and for them to avoid divorce. Research by Harvard has found that divorce is about 40% less likely among women who attend church regularly⁴⁰.

Religiosity among couples is linked to more sexual fidelity, greater commitment and higher relationship quality⁴¹. When couples are surveyed on whether they're "very happy" in their marriage, responses are higher among those who regularly attend religious services⁴².

In the table below we see that highly religious couples in Ireland report the highly quality relationships.

40 Religion and health: A synthesis (VanderWeele, 2017).

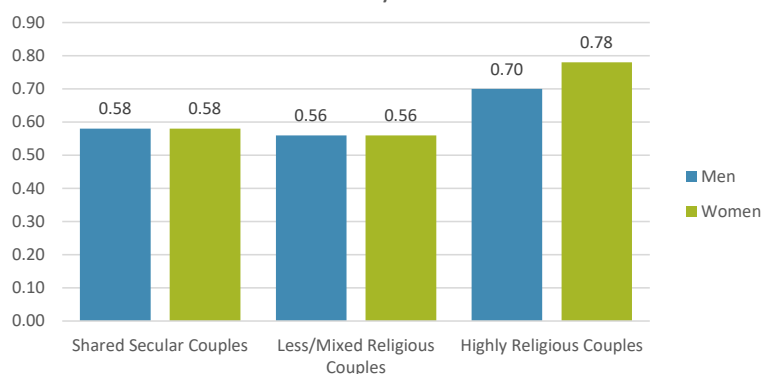
41 The Surprising Case for Marrying Young | Institute for Family Studies, 6 July 2022.

42 Get Married: Why Americans Must Defy the Elites, Forge Strong Families, and Save Civilization (Brad Wilcox 2024, p. 33).



TABLE 15

Ireland: Share Scoring Above Average on Relationship Quality Index



Notes: Probabilities predicted controlling for age, education, native-born status, whether respondent lived with both parents around age 16, whether respondent was previously divorced, legal status and duration of current union, presence of children in household, household finances, and urban residence.

Source: Global Family and Gender Survey (2019) Ireland responses (aged 18 to 50, n = 2,420)

Family Importance

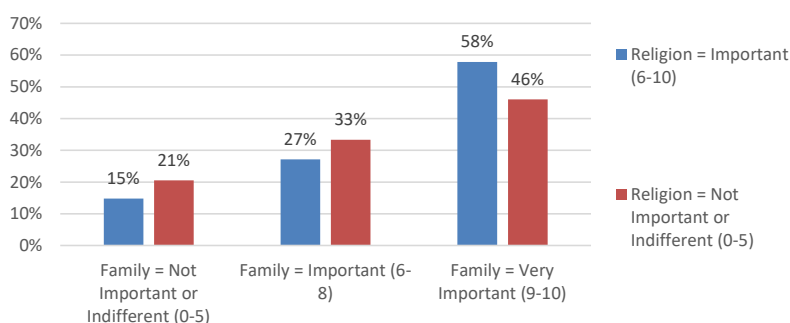
Eurobarometer surveyed Irish adults in 2020 about their values. It asked respondents to rate from 0 to 10 the importance they placed on religion and their families.

Among those who rated religion as important (values between 6 and 10), 58% of them rated family as being very important (between 9 and 10). Among those who rated religion as not important or indifferent (between 0 and 5), only 46% of them rated family as very important.

Higher religiosity predisposes people to a more favourable outlook to family. Religiosity may also spur civic engagement that upholds the importance of family and fertility. An example of this is explored in the next section, looking at Ireland's 2024 referendums on marriage and family.

TABLE 16

Ireland: Relationship Between Religious Importance and Family Importance



Source: Eurobarometer 2020 (Special Eurobarometer 508: Values and identities of EU citizens, n = 1,050)

PART 4. CASE STUDY:

IRELAND'S 2024 REFERENDUMS

An Example of Religion Driving Family Values

The relationship between religiosity and social attitudes was recently on display in Ireland's March 2024 referendums on "family" and "care":

The "family" referendum sought to widen the Constitutional definition of the family from being solely based on marriage to being based on marriage and so-called "durable relationships".

The "care" referendum sought to remove references to "mothers" from the Constitution and sought to insert a wider concept of "care", to include carers, who support elderly and vulnerable persons.

Ireland's Catholic bishops called for a No vote in both referendums⁴³. Exit polls showed that those who attend religious services regularly were most likely to reject the referendum proposals.

The family referendum was rejected by 68% of the electorate. This rose to 78% among those who regularly attend religious services (daily, weekly or monthly), while only 53% of those who never attend rejected it.

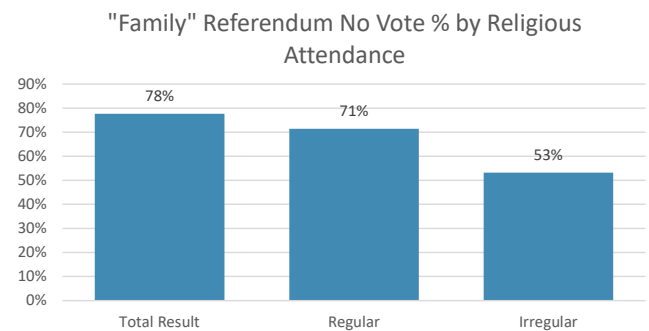
A similar pattern emerged in the care referendum. It was rejected by 74% of the electorate. This was 77% among regular attenders, compared to 66% among those who never attend.

Both votes point to the influence of religiosity in anchoring people in a social outlook that is broadly supportive of the institution of marriage and the role of mothers in nurturing and raising the next generation.

43 Catholic bishops call for No vote in both March referendums – *The Irish Times*, 25 February 2024.

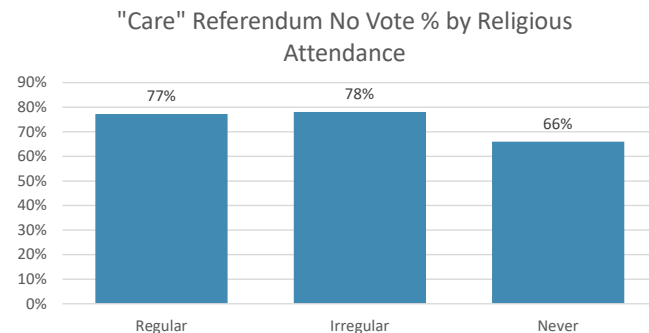


TABLE 17



Note: Responses have been adjusted to match the actual referendum result. Source: IPSOS B&A Exit Poll (8th March 2024, n = 3,557) / Authors' Estimates

TABLE 18



Note: Responses have been adjusted to match the actual referendum result. Source: IPSOS B&A Exit Poll (8th March 2024, n = 3,557) / Authors' Estimates

PART 5. SUMMARY OF RELIGIOUS AND FERTILITY INDICATORS IN IRELAND



This table summarises the main Irish data available on religious attendance, in line with the framework in the prior section. It reveals the sizeable link between regular religious attendance and fertility indicators.

TABLE 19

Summary of Irish Data on Religious Attendance and Family Indicators

Section	Item	Source (Year)	Religious Attendance			Total
			Regular Daily, Weekly, Monthly	Irregular Less often / only special occasions	Never Never	
RELIGION						
	% Religious Attendance (1973 - 77)	(2021)	92%	6%	2%	100%
	% Religious Attendance (2020)	(2021)	28%	22%	50%	100%
VALUES / ATTITUDES						
	Average Reported Happiness (1-10)	(2018B)	7.9	7.5	7.1	7.5
	Ideal Age of Marriage and First Child (% Responding with Under 30 as the Ideal Age)¹					
	Marriage (Ideal Age Under 30)	(2018A)	55%	48%	46%	48%
	First Child (Ideal Age Under 30)	(2018A)	52%	46%	47%	47%
	Having a good marriage is...					
	Very Important / One of the Most Important Things	(2018B)	84%	82%	70%	79%
	Not Important / Somewhat Important	(2018B)	16%	18%	30%	21%
	How many children do you have? If 0, how many children do you plan to have?					
	Has 0 Children and Wants 0	(2018B)	5%	6%	14%	8%
	Has 0 Children and Wants 0 (aged 18-34 only)	(2018B)	3%	4%	12%	6%
	Average number of desired children	(2018B)	3.0	2.6	2.0	2.5
	It's very important for me, personally, to be married before having children?					
	Completely / Mostly Agree	(2018B)	64%	35%	22%	38%
	Completely / Mostly Disagree	(2018B)	36%	65%	78%	62%
OUTCOMES						
	Fertility Happens - Number of Children Ever Given Birth to / Fathered					
	Zero	(2018A)	31%	39%	49%	40%
	1 or 2	(2018A)	42%	39%	39%	39%
	3 or More	(2018A)	26%	22%	12%	20%
	Fertility Endures - 2024 Referendums on Family and Care					
	% No - "Family" / "Durable Relationships"	(2024)	78%	71%	53%	68%
	% No - "Care" / "Women in the Home"	(2024)	77%	78%	66%	74%

Sources:

(2018A) - European Social Survey (2018, Round 09), Ireland responses (aged 18 to 50, n = 989)

(2018B) - Global Family and Gender Survey (GFGS, 2018) Ireland responses (aged 18 to 50, n = 2,420)

(2021) - "Historical Political Cleavages and Post-Crisis Transformations in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Ireland, 1953-2020"

(2024) - IPSOS B&A Exit Poll (8th March 2024, n = 3,557) / Authors' Estimates

¹ "Regular" attendance here only refers to daily and weekly, not monthly attendance.

About the Iona Institute

The Iona Institute promotes the place of marriage and religion in society. We defend the continued existence of publicly-funded denominational schools. We also promote freedom of conscience and religion.



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