

## **RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND CHURCH ATTENDANCE OF SIXTH FORM PUPILS AND THEIR PARENTS\***

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The results of an investigation into the religious beliefs and practices of Northern Ireland sixth form pupils and their parents suggest that in general the degree of certainty of belief in God and the frequency of Church attendance of parents and children are related. However, in several cases, a marked difference was observed between the degree of certainty of belief in God of parents and of their children, and a small but significant difference was found between the frequency of Church attendance of parents and boys. About half of the pupils who were uncertain of God's existence and about a quarter of the pupils who were fairly sure that God did not exist attended Church regularly.

In any culture, religious beliefs and practices are passed on with varying degrees of success from one generation to the next. The effectiveness of this transmission is probably influenced to a considerable degree by the attitudes of a young person's peer group, by the mass media and by the religious climate of opinion in society. The period of adolescence is of great importance in this connection, since it bridges the gap between childhood, when religious beliefs and practices of the family and locality are accepted uncritically, and young adulthood when individuals decide what is their own belief and practice. It is difficult to make generalizations about religious behaviour during this period, but Argyle concludes that adolescence is a time of decision when young people generally become either religious or irreligious. 'Intellectual doubts start at a mental age of 12, followed by emotional stress, these conflicts are often resolved at about the age of 16 either by conversion to religion or by a decision to abandon the religion of childhood' (1, p 69). Writing of American adolescents, Hurlock states that 'by the time the child reaches the mental age of 12 years or more, he is no longer satisfied to accept religious

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teachings as they are given to him Doubt reaches a peak at the age of 17 years It is then calmed, in one way or another, by the age of 20 years in the majority of cases (6, p 398)'

The present investigation was designed to examine certain aspects of the religious attitudes, beliefs and practice of sixth-form pupils attending county and Protestant voluntary schools in Northern Ireland and of their parents It was carried out in January and February of 1968 Almost three-quarters of the pupils had their eighteenth birthday between July 1967 and June 1968 and so most were approximately eighteen years of age at the time of the investigation, i.e. they were in late adolescence and it is probable that many had worked out their own attitude to religious belief and practice

#### METHOD

The investigation was part of a wider study of the religious beliefs, attitudes and practice of sixth-form pupils in Northern Ireland The method employed and some of the results have already been described (4) The questionnaires of Edwin Cox (2) were used in a slightly amended form For the study reported here, the questionnaire sought information on (i) parents' and children's belief in the existence of God, (ii) attendance at Church of parents and children, and (iii) parents' attitude to their children's attendance at Church

A request to co-operate in the study was sent to the principals of all county and Protestant voluntary schools in Northern Ireland which were thought to have a sixth form (n 67) Of these, 42 took part From a total of 1,882 second-year sixth-form pupils in the co-operating schools, 1,631 completed and returned usable questionnaires Each pupil was given an envelope for his or her parents which contained a letter of explanation, a short questionnaire and a stamped addressed envelope, 832 parental replies were received, and 803 of these were identified with a corresponding pupil's reply Of the parental replies, 16.9 per cent were completed by the father, 33.2 per cent by the mother, 45.9 per cent by the father and mother in agreement, 2.3 per cent by the father and mother in disagreement (in which case the convention was adopted of recording the father's reply), and 0.7 per cent were completed by guardians Boys and girls whose parents replied were significantly more inclined to attend Church and to read the bible than were boys and girls whose parents did not reply, and boys whose parents replied were significantly more inclined to belief in God and in the divinity of Jesus than boys whose parents did

not reply (4) Thus it cannot be assumed that pupils whose parents replied were representative of the whole sample. However their replies can be compared with their parents' replies, and certain tentative conclusions may be drawn about the belief in God and the Church attendance of the two generations.

#### RESULTS

Respondents were asked to indicate on the following five point scale their view concerning the existence of God: (i) I am completely confident that God exists, (ii) I am fairly sure that God exists, (iii) I am uncertain whether God exists or not, (iv) I am fairly sure that God does not exist, (v) I am completely confident that God does not exist. The results are set out in Table 1 in which the five statements are summarized for convenience as complete belief, partial belief, uncertain, partial disbelief, complete disbelief.

TABLE 1  
BELIEF IN GOD OF SIXTH FORM PUPILS' AND THEIR PARENTS'

	Boys	Girls	Parents
Complete belief	174	173	617
Partial belief	129	103	97
Uncertain	107	46	50
Partial disbelief	31	14	5
Complete disbelief	14	5	10
No reply or contradictory reply	5	2	24
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>460</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>803</b>

An analysis was also made of the degree of certainty of belief in God of the children of parents in each category of belief. Because of the small numbers of parents who were uncertain or disbelieving, categories 3, 4 and 5 were grouped together, the results are set out in Table 2. From this table it can be seen, for example, that of the 617 parents who were completely confident of God's existence, 147 (42 per cent) of sons and 155 (58 1 per cent) of daughters were also completely confident, while 99 (28 2 per cent) of sons and 36 (13 5 per cent) of daughters were uncertain or disbelieving. Children of parents who believed in God were significantly more inclined to belief than were children of uncertain or

TABLE 2  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS AND PUPILS' BELIEF IN GOD

Pupils' Belief	Parents' Belief					
	Complete (n 617)		Partial (n 97)		Uncertain & Disbelief (n 65)	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Complete	147	155	14	12	8	3
Partial	100	75	13	18	10	7
Uncertain and Disbelief	99	36	27	11	21	16
No reply	4	1	1	1	0	0
TOTAL	350	267	55	42	39	26

disbelieving parents (for boys  $\chi^2 19.5, df 4, p < 001$ , for girls  $\chi^2 33.8, df 2, p < 001$ ) It will be noted that the connection between parents' and children's belief in God was stronger in the case of girls than in the case of boys

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they attended Church (i) weekly, (ii) monthly, (iii) occasionally (in addition to weddings, funerals and christenings), or (iv) never A small number indicated that

TABLE 3  
FREQUENCY OF CHURCH ATTENDANCE

	Boys	Girls	Parents
Weekly	298	259	563
Fortnightly	9	2	14
Monthly	26	15	54
Occasionally	71	50	127
Never	49	16	38
No reply	7	1	7
TOTAL	460	343	803

they attended fortnightly The results are set out in Table 3 Parents were significantly more inclined to regular Church attendance than boys

( $\chi^2$  15.8,  $df$  3,  $p < 0.1$ ) but not more so than girls ( $\chi^2$  3.4,  $df$  3, N.S.)

The Church attendance of the children of parents in each category of attendance was examined. For convenience, respondents who attended weekly, fortnightly and monthly were grouped together as regular attenders. The results are set out in Table 4. There is a connection between

TABLE 4  
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS' AND PUPILS'  
CHURCH ATTENDANCE

Pupils' Attendance	Parents' Attendance					
	Regular (n 631)		Occasional (n 127)		Never (n 38)	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Regular	303	234	21	35	5	6
Occasional	44	22	20	22	6	5
Never	15	5	21	8	13	3
No reply	7	1	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	369	262	62	65	24	14

the Church attendance of parents and of their children, children of regular Church-going parents were significantly more inclined to attend Church regularly than were children of parents who were occasional or non-attenders (for boys  $\chi^2$  11.9,  $df$  4,  $p < 0.01$ , for girls  $\chi^2$  5.6,  $df$  2,  $p < 0.01$ ). The connection was slightly stronger in the case of girls than of boys, 82 per cent of the sons and 89 per cent of the daughters of regular attenders indicating that they attend Church regularly.

Four questions were asked relating to the attitude of parents to children's attendance at Church and Sunday School (i) Do you think that parents should encourage their children to go to Church or Sunday School? (ii) Do you think that parents should compel their children to go to Church or Sunday School? (iii) Do you think that parents should accompany their children to Church? (iv) Do you think that children should be left entirely free to choose for themselves whether they attend? The age of children was not specified in these questions and a number of respondents added comments to the effect that they were thinking of young people 'up to a certain age' or 'in the early years'. Approximately 8 per cent of parents made this kind of comment, in response to the

second question and 12 per cent of parents in response to the fourth question The results are set out in Table 5

TABLE 5

## PARENTS' ATTITUDES TO CHILDREN'S ATTENDANCE AT CHURCH

	Yes	No	No reply	Total
Should parents compel	338	382	83	803
Should parents accompany	715	49	39	803
Should parents encourage	764	19	20	803
Should child be entirely free	127	617	59	803

The Church attendance of the children of parents who replied 'Yes' and 'No' to each question was examined, and the results suggest a relationship between parental attitude and the frequency of attendance of children Higher percentages of the children of parents who agreed that children should be compelled to attend Church or Sunday School indicated regular attendance (81 1 per cent boys, 89 8 per cent girls) than of the children of parents who agreed that children should be accompanied (76 6 per cent boys, 84 9 per cent girls) or encouraged (74 6 per cent

TABLE 6

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BELIEF IN GOD AND CHURCH ATTENDANCE OF PUPILS

Church Attendance	Belief in God									
	Complete Belief		Partial Belief		Uncertain		Partial Disbelief		Complete Disbelief	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Weekly	261	264	159	138	120	37	20	6	10	1
Fortnightly	3	2	7	2	8	1	1	0	0	0
Monthly	11	9	15	16	19	6	2	1	4	0
Occasionally	35	25	58	35	71	42	25	9	7	4
Never	13	1	19	5	42	10	25	9	23	8
No reply	6	1	5	1	6	0	1	0	1	0
TOTAL	329	302	263	197	266	96	74	25	45	13

boys, 81.7 per cent girls) In contrast only 45 per cent of boys and 41.7 per cent of girls whose parents believed that children should be left free to choose for themselves attended Church regularly

Finally, the Church attendance of *all* pupils (irrespective of parental reply or non-reply) was related to the pupils' belief in God. The results are presented in Table 6. A striking feature of the table is the relatively large number of pupils who though uncertain or disbelieving about God's existence continue to attend Church

#### DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation concerning belief in God are in general agreement with those of a survey of adults aged 16 and over carried out in December 1968 and January 1969 by the Opinion Research Centre (7) in Northern Ireland. 86 per cent of the Opinion Research Centre sample agreed with the statement 'I am certain there is a God' and 10 per cent agreed with the statement 'I believe there is a God but I am not certain'. The remaining 4 per cent were more uncertain or disbelieving. The sample included Roman Catholics as well as Protestants, but the denominational breakdown of results indicated that belief in God was held by a high percentage of members of all the Churches. Questions relating to Church attendance in the Opinion Research Centre study were of such a kind that a comparison with the results of the present investigation are not possible but the general conclusion was that in Northern Ireland church-going was much more frequent than in Britain.

In the present investigation, parents as a group were more inclined to believe in God than were their children. Three-quarters of parents were completely confident of God's existence compared with half of the girls and a third of the boys. Parents were also more inclined to regular Church attendance than boys, though surprisingly, less inclined than girls. Children of parents who believed in God were significantly more inclined to belief than were children of uncertain or disbelieving parents. There was a similar relationship between the Church attendance of parents and of their children. Thus the degree of certainty of belief in God and the frequency of Church attendance of parents are probably important factors in the transmission of this belief and practice to the next generation. Such an interpretation is in agreement with Greeley and Rossi's (3) conclusion in the United States that parental religious practice has a considerable influence on children.

While in general there was a relationship between the degree of certainty

of belief in God of pupils and frequency of Church attendance (which was stronger among girls than boys), it must be noted that quite high percentages of pupils who were uncertain or disbelieving attended Church regularly. About half of the pupils who were uncertain of God's existence, a quarter of those who were fairly sure that God did not exist and a quarter of the boys who were completely confident that God did not exist attended Church regularly. Cox also found a significant connection between belief in God and Church attendance (2) but higher percentages of Northern Ireland pupils than English pupils in every category of belief indicated that they were regular Church attenders. For example 21.6 per cent of English boys and 29.8 per cent of English girls who were uncertain attended Church regularly, compared with 55.2 per cent of Northern Ireland boys and 45.7 per cent of Northern Ireland girls, 6.9 per cent of English boys and 6.1 per cent of English girls who were fairly sure that God did not exist attended Church regularly, compared with 31 per cent of Northern Ireland boys and 28 per cent of Northern Ireland girls. Some light is thrown on the frequent Church attendance of Northern Ireland pupils by other information which was obtained from this sample of pupils, sixteen per cent of the boys who took part in the investigation and 12 per cent of the girls gave parental pressure as the reason for attendance.

In his study of the problems of adolescent girls, James Hemming concludes that 'much of the conflict that arises between parents and their adolescent children is the direct outcome of the attempt of parents to apply to their children the attitudes and rules which their parents applied to them (5, p 13)' In small primitive communities, in which the authority of the parent is backed by the authority of convention, adolescents normally give way. But, today, guidance by authority has lost its hold and 'parents who still depend upon it find themselves posturing impotently while their adolescent children either become more and more resentful or else pay less and less regard to them (5, p 145)' The results of the present investigation tend to suggest that many sixth form pupils in county and Protestant voluntary schools in Northern Ireland came into conflict with the belief in God and the pattern of Church attendance of their parents. Many of these pupils move away from belief in God but they remain under pressure to attend Church, thereby creating resentment which may well encourage a critical attitude in many pupils to members of the local Church community and to the Church as an institution in society. A further examination of the belief and practice of the present sample when they leave the relatively strict environment of home and school for the

freedom of university and professional life would help to elucidate further a number of the issues which this survey has raised

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