CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND ADOLESCENT RELIGIOSITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND: SHAPING MORAL VALUES

Leslie J Francis
Trinity College
Carmarthen

John E Greer
University of Ulster
Coleraine

Five hundred and seventy one fourth fifth and sixth form pupils attending ten Catholic secondary schools in Northern Ireland completed a scale of Christian moral values and a scale of attitudes towards Christianity and answered questions of religious practice and belief Analysis of responses indicates that a large proportion of Catholic pupils reject moral absolutes maintained by traditional Catholic teaching Path analysis suggests that the formation of a positive attitude towards Christianity in general is a fundamental condition for the espousal of traditional Catholic moral values The implications of these findings are discussed for the Catholic educative process

In a survey of 1,207 14–16-year-old students attending Catholic and Protestant schools in Northern Ireland in 1981, Greer (1984) asked students to assess the rightness or wrongness of 17 moral issues on a 5-point scale In one sense, the results of the survey may be seen as supporting the effectiveness of the Catholic school system by demonstrating that students attending Catholic schools were more likely than students attending Protestant schools to hold views which were consistent with traditional Catholic teaching on issues concerning sexual morality relating to premarital sexual intercourse, artificial birth control, and divorce, and with traditional Catholic teaching on issues concerning the sacredness of human life, such as arise in abortion, capital punishment, and suicide In another sense, however, the results may be seen as questioning the effectiveness of the Catholic school system by drawing attention to the proportion of students attending these schools who rejected traditional moral absolutes Less than half the students in Catholic schools judged divorce (45%), premarital sexual intercourse (47%) or artificial birth control (48%) as always wrong, while the proportion was higher for capital punishment (53%), suicide (73%), and abortion (83%)

These findings raise important questions about the moral socialization of students attending Catholic secondary schools in Northern Ireland and the relationship between the formation of moral values and other aspects of

adolescent religiosity. While parallel studies have monitored the religious attitudes and behaviour of students attending Catholic schools in Northern Ireland (Greer & Francis, in press) and compared attitudinal and behavioural dimensions of religiosity of students attending Catholic schools with those of students attending Protestant schools (Turner, Turner, & Reid, 1980; Greer, 1981, 1982, 1985), little attempt has been made to chart more closely the interaction between moral values and other aspects of adolescent religiosity among students in Catholic schools. The aim of the present paper is to address this issue.

METHOD

Subjects

The study was conducted with the help of ten teachers engaged in a project called Teaching Religion in Northern Ireland (Greer & McElhinney, 1984), working in ten Catholic secondary schools. Each teacher was asked to administer a questionnaire during normal lesson time to all pupils in three classes, one form 4, one form 5, and one form 6, giving full assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Questionnaires were completed by 254 boys and 317 girls.

Questionnaire

The Questionnaire was made up of a 24-item Likert scale of attitude towards Christianity developed by Francis (1978, 1989) and a 10-item Likert scale of Christian moral values developed for use in Northern Ireland by Francis and Greer (in press). The items in both scales were scored on a 5-point continuum, with values of 1 through 5 assigned to the responses 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'not certain', 'agree', and 'agree strongly'. In the case of both scales, items cohered to form a unidimensional scale. The scale of Attitude to Christianity yielded an alpha-coefficient (Cronbach, 1951) of 0.93 and was known to function reliably and validly among Catholic students in Northern Ireland (Greer & Francis, in press). The scale of Christian moral values had an alpha-coefficient of 0.70.

The questionnaire included three questions on religious practice and belief. Church attendance was measured on a 4-point scale, with values of 1 through 4 assigned to the responses 'never', 'a few times a year', 'once or twice a month', and 'about once a week or more'. Extent of personal prayer was measured on a 3-point scale, with values of 1 through 3 assigned to the responses 'never', 'sometimes', and 'daily'. Belief in the existence of God was measured on a 5-point scale, with values of 1 through 5 assigned to the responses 'completely

confident that God does not exist', 'fairly sure that God does not exist',
'uncertain whether God exists', 'fairly sure that God exists' and 'completely
confident that God exists'

Analysis

The data were analysed by means of multiple regression and path analysis
(Duncan, 1966, MacDonald, 1977, Keeves, 1988), using the SPSS statistical
package (SPSS, 1988)

RESULTS

Table 1 presents information on the percentages of students choosing each
response option on each of the ten issues on the scale of Christian moral values
separately These statistics confirm the trend towards the rejection of traditional
Christian moral absolutes identified by Greer (1984) In the area of sexual
morality, only about a third of the sample regard divorce (29%), artificial birth
control (30%), or premarital sexual intercourse (34%) as always wrong In the
area of the sanctity of human life, about two-thirds regard suicide (63%) and
three-quarters regard abortion (75%) as always wrong

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGES OF STUDENTS CHOOSING EACH RESPONSE OPTION ON THE TEN
ITEMS OF THE SCALE OF CHRISTIAN MORAL VALUES

	Always wrong %	Usually wrong %	Un decided %	Usually excusable %	Never wrong %
Gambling	21	39	5	34	1
Drinking alcohol	9	27	2	55	7
Drunkenness	46	38	1	14	1
Stealing	72	23	1	3	1
Drug taking	68	25	2	5	1
Sexual intercourse before marriage	34	21	17	17	11
Abortion	75	18	3	3	1
Artificial birth control	30	26	13	16	15
Suicide	63	22	5	6	3
Divorce	29	49	7	10	5

Table 2 explores the relationships between scores on the scales of Christian
moral values, Attitude to Christianity, Church attendance, Personal prayer, and
Belief in God in terms of correlation coefficients Gender is also included It is

clear that students' moral values are related both to Gender and to the level of their religious behaviour, belief, and attitudes. The fact that the largest correlate of values is attitude towards Christianity suggests that moral judgments are more closely aligned to students' subjective and deep-rooted feelings about Christianity than to their participation in public or private religious practices. Female students, compared to male students, hold more traditional Christian moral values, adopt a more positive attitude towards Christianity in general, attend church more frequently, pray privately more often, and have stronger belief in the existence of God. These gender differences are consistent with the general patterns identified within the psychology of religion (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; Brown, 1987).

TABLE 2

INTER-CORRELATIONS BETWEEN VARIABLES AND GENDER

	Attitude to Christianity	Church attendance	Personal prayer	Belief in God	Gender
Moral values	46	19	20	28	26
Gender	26	15	19	19	
Belief in God	65	14	36		
Personal prayer	54	12			
Church attendance	21				

Note. Decimals omitted. All correlations are positive and significant at the .001 level except the one between Church attendance and Personal prayer which is significant at the .01 level.
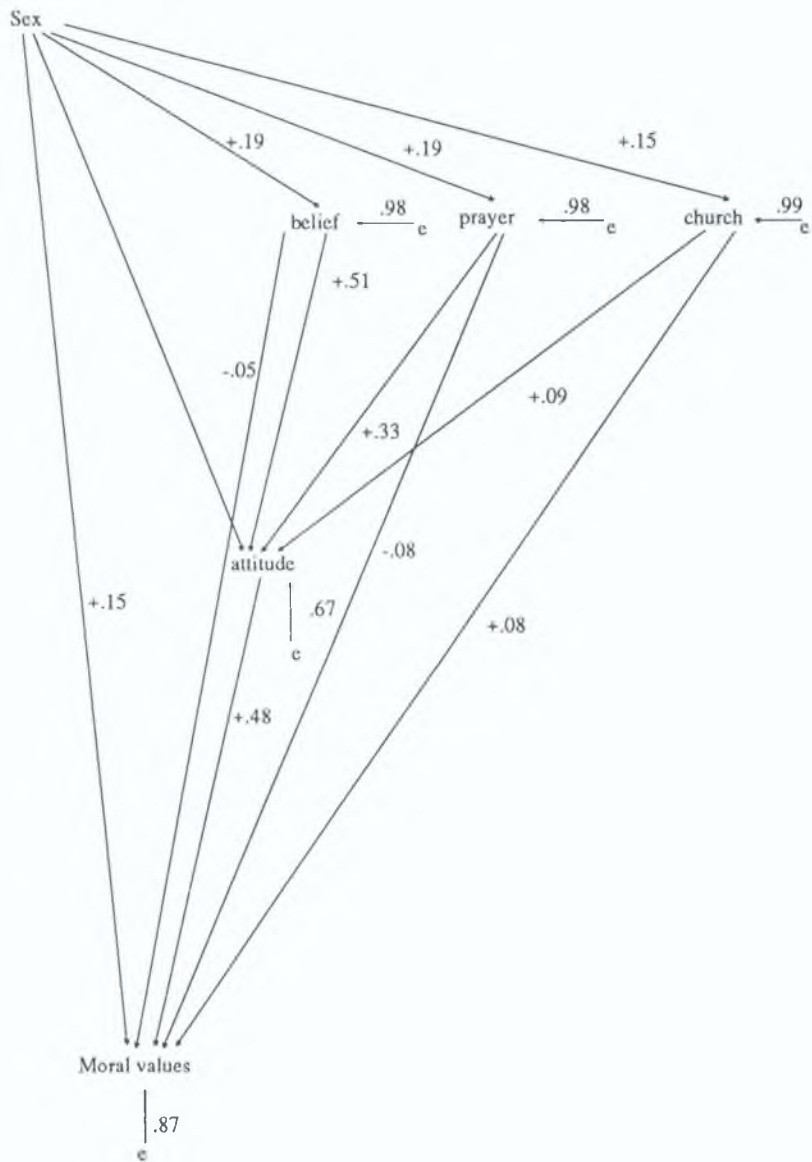
To examine in greater detail the significance of the relationship between attitude towards Christianity and the shaping of Christian moral values against the background of the complex pattern of inter-relationships identified by the correlation matrix, Table 3 and Figure 1 set out the results of multiple-regression analysis and a path diagram to explore a sequence of hypothesized causal paths. The path model begins by examining separately the influence of Gender on Church attendance, Personal prayer, and Belief in God. The beta weights indicate that Gender has a slightly stronger effect on Belief and on the personal practice of prayer than on the public practice of Church attendance. Second, the path model examines the cumulative influences of Church attendance, Personal prayer, Belief in God, and Gender on shaping Attitude to Christianity. While it is generally recognized that there is neither a simple nor unidirectional relationship between attitude and behaviour (Ajzen, 1988; Eiser & van der Pligt, 1988), the path model specifies directionality to control for the influence of belief and behaviour before examining the unique significance of the relationship

between attitude and moral values. The beta weights indicate that Church attendance, Personal prayer, Belief, and Gender all made unique contributions to predicting scores of Attitude to Christianity. Finally, the path model examines the cumulative influence of Attitude to Christianity, Church attendance, Personal prayer, Belief in God, and Gender on shaping Christian moral values. The beta weights indicate that the potential influences of religious practice and belief on moral values are mediated through attitude. Gender, however, has a direct influence on shaping moral values in addition to the indirect influence mediated through attitude. It should be noted that only 25% of the variance in moral values is explained by the variables explicitly included in the causal model. The residual path coefficient for moral value is 87.

TABLE 3

MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSES

Criterion variables	Predictor variables	R^2	F	f	Beta	T	f
Church attendance	Gender	0229	13 2	001	+ 1515	+3 6	001
Personal prayer	Gender	0347	20 2	001	+ 1864	+4 5	001
Belief in God	Gender	0377	22 2	001	+ 1942	+4 7	001
Attitude to Christianity	Church	0455	26 8	001	+ 0913	+3 2	01
	Prayer	3145	220 2	001	+ 3344	+10 9	001
	Belief	5473	288 0	001	+5080	+16 6	001
	Gender	5533	7 5	01	+0801	+2 7	01
Moral values	Attitude	2152	154 1	001	+4831	+8 8	001
	Church	2242	6 5	05	+0826	+2 2	05
	Prayer	2272	2 2	NS	0752	1 7	NS
	Belief	2284	0 8	NS	0514	1 1	NS
	Gender	2483	14 8	001	+ 1473	+3 9	001

FIGURE 1

PATH MODEL

DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined the degree of acceptance given to traditional moral values among 571 fourth, fifth, and sixth-form students attending Catholic secondary schools in Northern Ireland Two main conclusions emerge from the data First, a large proportion of Catholic students reject a number of the moral absolutes maintained by traditional Catholic teaching And second, the importance of the relationship between attitude towards Christianity and Christian moral values is established

By drawing attention to the way in which a positive attitude towards Christianity is fundamental to the promotion of the endorsement of traditional Christian moral values, the path model suggests that neither attendance at a Catholic school nor participation in public or private religious practices is in itself an adequate condition for effective socialization into the moral norms of the Catholic community While the present data in no sense detract from the important role of the school within the Catholic educative process, they imply that both school and parish would be well advised to concentrate on the development of positive attitudes among young people towards the faith in general as a key precursor to the communication of traditional moral teaching and to the acceptance of traditional values and standards of behaviour by contemporary Catholic adolescents

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