

**Remarks by Prof. John Brewer**  
**21<sup>st</sup> Century Faith in Ireland**  
**Irish School of Ecumenics, 20-21 October 2009**

First may I thank Gladys and the ISE for inviting me and may I congratulate you on the surveys. I was fascinated by the findings and in a few brief ways I want to suggest how you might think about the data.

There are two ways to get people to respond to surveys: a) first you target them individually through a sampling procedure, and the more random the sampling procedure the more reliable are the generalizations to the wider universe from which the sample is drawn; b) secondly, you ask for volunteers, ending up with a self-selected sample that you cannot be sure is in anyway like the wider universe from which they come.

Here we have the second type: it's a bit like the academic equivalent of the radio phone in show. People with strong opinions, for or against, have the motivation to respond: so atheists and conservative evangelicals vie to assess ecumenicalism. Now, before you run away with the idea that I'm suggesting this survey is the equivalent of the appalling Stephen Nolan show there are two advantages to this strategy when dealing with ecumenicalism in Ireland.

First, ecumenicalists, especially in the North, have had to hold to this belief against many kinds of detractors with as much passion as hotheads of all sorts; and the resulting fervour to write comments in free text spaces gives us a wealth of qualitative data that

surveys of any kind do not normally disclose. Let me suggest that the free text will end up as important as the statistics for this survey.

It is surprising, given that ecumenicalism, in the North at least, *is* an extreme position, that the response rate was only 18 per cent, a few percentage points below targeted sample surveys. Is this 'reconciliation research' fatigue?

Without the Methodists the response rate would have been considerably lower. This acts as a nice bridge to my next set of points about how you might make sense of the results. I can only give a few highlights in the short time available.

Let me deal first with Methodism. Their over-representation is explained in the survey by technical reasons – they have more time and they keep better records. It might also be that their minority religion status gives extra motivation, increases their risk taking and gives them less to lose. Minority religious status is often associated with disproportionate involvement in peace processes – Christians in Sri Lanka, Christians or liberal wings of Judaism, such as Rabbis for Human Rights, in Israel-Palestine. The flipside is that majority religions find it harder to challenge dominant group notions.

I was also interested by your equivalent of the dog that didn't bark: by secularization. There are a few sociologists of religion who portray this in stark, mutually exclusive terms as either do/don't; something which is reinforced by the over-significance attached to the so-called 'religious independents' in surveys who declare no religion. We got a

glimpse of the passionate anti-religious feeling in Ireland in the free text. The significance attached to non-belief in the North is that ethno-religious identities are thought to recede as religion declines. Ecumenicalism wants the first without the second.

But there are stages on the way to secularization that are better descriptors of the position in Ireland – liberalization in belief and individualization in practice are more the case here. And it was remarkable to me to see the extent to which Catholics in the lay person survey ground their religious thinking not in community and tradition but the individual. Sociologists of religion not only need to understand the process of secularization better they need on the basis of these findings to change their characterization of Catholicism.

Time limits me to one more example. It struck me how ecumenicalism was understood by respondents in religious and civic terms, as a resource for activism in sacred and secular spaces, dealing with deep issues of theology and in social relations.

The point about ecumenicalism in conflict situations is that it slips between the sacred and secular, transcending this dichotomy by its attention to garnering civic culture as much as religious tolerance. Religion is always thought of as a form of bonding social capital, providing networks of sociability within the group, and while ecumenicalists in Northern Ireland might be accused of restricting themselves to a constituency of the already converted peaceniks, they also exemplify the capacity of religion to be a form of bridging social capital, linking across networks to address sociability on a wider scale.

This attention to civic culture has been the significant contribution of ecumenicalism in Ireland up to now. 21<sup>st</sup> century ecumenicalism must have one difference: we need a civic culture that has to accommodate all sorts of difference – religious, ethnic, immigrant status, sexuality. Ecumenicalism in Ireland has had a noble past; its attention to these concerns, picked up well in the surveys, mark its relevance to our future