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Shifts in denominational differences in student attitude toward Christianity  
in Northern Ireland 1979-2011

Leslie J. Francis

University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Ursula McKenna

University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Christopher Alan Lewis

University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Author note:

\*Corresponding author:

Leslie J. Francis

Warwick Religions & Education Research Unit

Centre for Education Studies

The University of Warwick

Coventry CV4 7AL United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)24 7652 2539

Fax: +44 (0)24 7657 2638

Email: [leslie.francis@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:leslie.francis@warwick.ac.uk)

**Abstract**

John Greer first introduced the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity in 1979 into his programme of research designed to chart the religious trajectory of students attending Protestant and Catholic schools in Northern Ireland. The present study conducted in 2011 builds on earlier studies conducted in 1979, 1984, the early 1990s, and 1998. While in the early studies both male and female students in Catholic schools recorded a more positive attitude toward Christianity compared with students in Protestant schools, the 1998 study drew attention to a marked decline in attitude toward Christianity among female students in Catholic schools. The new data from 2011 found that this decline in attitude toward Christianity among female students in Catholic schools also extended to male students in Catholic schools.

*Keywords:* Christianity, young people, Northern Ireland, attitudes

## Introduction

The Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity was designed during the 1970s to conceptualise and operationalise a measure of religious affect appropriate for use among males and females during childhood and adolescence (Francis, 1978a, 1978b, 1989) and through adulthood (Francis & Stubbs, 1987) within both Protestant and Catholic communities. The Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity has been widely employed throughout the English-speaking world (Francis, 2009) and also translated for use within a number of other languages, including: Arabic (Munayer, 2000), Chinese (Francis, Lewis, & Ng, 2002; Tiliopoulos, Francis, & Jiang, 2013), Czech (Francis, Quesnell, & Lewis, 2010), Dutch (Francis & Hermans, 2000), French (Lewis & Francis, 2003, 2004), German (Francis & Kwiran, 1999; Francis, Ziebertz, & Lewis, 2002), Greek (Youtika, Joseph, & Diduca, 1999), Italian (Crea, Baiocco, Ioverno, Buzzi, & Francis, 2014), Norwegian (Francis & Enger, 2002), Portuguese (Ferreira & Neto, 2002), Romanian (Francis, Ispas, Robbins, Ilie, & Iliescu, 2009), Slovakian (Lewis, Adamovová, & Francis, 2008), Slovenian (Flere, Klanjsek, Francis, & Robbins, 2008), Spanish (Campo-Arias, Oviedo, Dtaz, & Cogollo, 2006), Swedish (Eek, 2001), and Welsh (Evans & Francis, 1996; Francis & Thomas, 2003). Subsequently, the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity became the foundation from which comparable measures were developed to assess attitude toward Islam (Sahin & Francis, 2002), attitude toward Judaism (Francis & Katz, 2007), and attitude toward Hinduism (Francis, Santosh, Robbins, & Vij, 2008).

In 1979 John Greer introduced the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity into a programme of research in Northern Ireland concerned with assessing and monitoring differences in religious affect among students educated within the segregated school system that distinguished historically between two main categories of schools, one primarily serving the Catholic community and the other primarily serving the Protestant community. Working

in this context, Greer recognised the value of employing an instrument that set out to assess affective responses to five key components of the Christian tradition (God, Jesus, Bible, prayer and church) in a way that is equally appropriate among Protestant and Catholic communities and avoids matters of doctrinal content and controversy. The reliability and validity of this instrument has been supported in Northern Ireland among Protestant students by Francis and Greer (1990) and among Catholic students by Greer and Francis (1991).

Greer's research was stimulated by the earlier work conducted and reported by Turner (1970) **in Northern Ireland**. Turner's original research was conducted in 1968 among males attending secondary schools in Belfast. Turner found significantly higher scores on his scale of attitude toward religion recorded by males at Protestant schools compared with males at Catholic schools. When this study was replicated 11 years later, in 1979, the findings of the original study were confirmed (Turner, Turner, & Reid, 1980).

In 1979 Greer (1981, 1982) extended Turner's **(1980)** original concept by conducting a survey among 11- to 15-year-old girls as well as boys attending first-, second-, third- and fourth-year classes in both Protestant and Catholic secondary schools in Belfast, and by employing the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity. Greer (1981, 1982) draws two main conclusions from the 1979 study. The first conclusion was that, from the first year to the fourth year of the secondary school, students attending Catholic schools recorded a significantly more positive attitude toward Christianity in comparison with students attending Protestant schools. The second conclusion was that throughout the age range females recorded a significantly more positive attitude toward Christianity in comparison with males across both school systems.

Greer conducted a second study in 1984 among 14- to 17-year-old students in years 4 and 5 and lower sixth-form attending ten Catholic and ten Protestant secondary schools. Greer and Francis (1990) found, once again, from the 1984 study that females held a more

positive attitude toward Christianity in comparison with males, and that students attending Catholic schools held a more positive attitude toward Christianity in comparison with students attending Protestant schools.

The finding that females held a significantly more favourable attitude toward Christianity than males is consistent with one of the best attested findings in the psychology of religion. For example, in their classic review, Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975, p. 71) concluded that "the differences between men and women in their religious behaviour is considerable". This finding has been found to hold true within Christian and post Christian societies in the more recent review reported by Francis (1997) and Francis and Penny (2014).

The finding that students attending Catholic schools held a more positive attitude toward Christianity than students attending Protestant schools suggests that during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s the Catholic school system may have been more successful than the Protestant school system in the process of faith transmission and in maintaining the image of Northern Ireland as a highly religious society. This is consistent with the view that Catholic schools, which cater largely for Catholic students, are expressly confessional, whereas state schools, which are attended chiefly by Protestant students (and which are widely referred to as Protestant schools), are excluded by legislation from pursuing Christian confessional aims. (It should be noted the confessional orientation of Catholic schools and the Christian contribution to Protestant/state schools have been steadily eroded since the 1980s: see Barnes, 2005).

Greer reported on a third study during the early 1990s among 13- to 17-year-old students attending years 3, 4 and 5 and lower sixth-form classes in a random sample of 12 Protestant and 12 Catholic grammar schools. The findings from this study, reported by Francis and Greer (1999), confirmed the persistence of sex differences in scores of attitude

toward Christianity, but began to question the persistence of denominational differences. According to this study, while males attending Catholic schools maintained a more positive attitude toward Christianity in comparison with males attending Protestant schools, females attending Catholic schools did not report a more positive attitude toward Christianity in comparison with females attending Protestant schools.

Francis, Robbins, Lewis, Barnes, and ap Siôn (2007) reported on a fourth study conducted in 1998 among 16- to 18-year-old students attending lower and upper sixth-form classes attending seven Protestant schools and nine Catholic schools. These data demonstrate that, while males attending Catholic schools maintained a more positive attitude towards Christianity than males attending Protestant schools, females attending Catholic schools reported a less positive attitude toward Christianity than females attending Protestant schools. Another way of interpreting these data suggests that female students in Catholic schools in Northern Ireland may be losing their confidence in the Christian tradition more quickly than female students in Protestant schools.

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to examine the extent to which these differences between sex and between denomination persisted into the 2010s.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

A sample of 17 Protestant schools and 16 Catholic schools in Northern Ireland were invited to administer the research instrument to their lower and upper sixth-form students. The questionnaires were administered by teachers within the schools according to standardised procedures, emphasising confidentiality and anonymity and with the assurance that the responses would not be inspected by school staff. Students were given the choice whether or not to participate in the research project.

### **Instrument**

Religious affect was assessed by the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity developed by Francis (1978a, 1978b, 1989). The 24 items are concerned with affective response to God, Jesus, Bible, prayer and church. For example, "I know that Jesus helps me" (item-2). Each item is assessed on a five-point scale: "agree strongly", "agree", "not certain", "disagree", and "disagree strongly". Higher scores on the scale indicate a more positive attitude toward Christianity.

### Participants

The Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity was thoroughly completed by 1,600 students attending Catholic schools (834 males and 766 females) and by 1,587 students attending Protestant schools (759 males and 928 females).

### Results

The Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity achieved very good internal consistency reliability in terms of the alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951) among the participating students ( $\alpha = .97$ ). On this basis it is appropriate to compare the scores recorded by students attending Protestant schools and students attending Catholic schools.

- insert table 1 about here -

Table 1 presents the mean scale scores recorded on the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity in the 2011 survey for male and for female students attending Protestant and Catholic schools. It is these scores recorded in 2011 on which the statistical significance tests are subsequently reported. Table 1 also reproduced the mean scale scores recorded by students in 1998 as reported by Francis, Robbins, Lewis, Barnes, and ap Siôn (2007). Two main findings emerge from the 2011 data. First, in 2011 significantly higher mean scale scores on the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity are recorded by female students than by male students both in Protestant schools ( $t = 8.25, p < .001$ ) and in Catholic schools ( $t = 9.75, p < .001$ ). Second, in 2011 there were no significant differences recorded on the



Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity in Protestant schools and in Catholic schools among either male students ( $t = .50$ , ns) or female students ( $t = .69$ , ns).

### **Conclusion**

The present study builds on a long-established series of studies employing the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity designed to assess the changing trajectory of religious affect among students attending Catholic and Protestant schools within Northern Ireland. The early studies in this series conducted in 1979 (reported by Greer, 1981, 1982) and conducted in 1984 (reported by Greer & Francis, 1990) established two consistent findings, namely that female students recorded a more positive attitude toward Christianity compared with male students, and that students attending Catholic schools recorded a more positive attitude toward Christianity compared with students attending Protestant schools. The conclusion drawn from these studies was that Catholic schools were more successful than Protestant schools in maintaining a Christian ethos and Christian climate within the schools. In this context faith transmission (in terms of promoting more positive religious affect) was more effective in Catholic schools.

The continuing stability of this conclusion was questioned by the survey conducted in the early 1990s (reported by Francis & Greer, 1999). According to this study, although male students in Catholic schools held a more positive attitude toward Christianity compared with the male students in Protestant schools, no significant difference was found among female students attending the two types of schools.

The next study conducted in 1998 (reported by Francis, Robbins, Lewis, Barnes, & ap Siôn, 2007) continued to question the stability of the earlier findings. According to this study, while male students attending Catholic schools held a more positive attitude toward Christianity compared with male students attending Protestant schools, female students attending Catholic schools reported a significantly less positive attitude toward Christianity

compared with female students attending Protestant schools. Those findings suggested that a loss of confidence in the Christian tradition was occurring most quickly among female students in Catholic schools.

The present study conducted in 2011 has now found that there is no significant difference in the levels of religious affect in Catholic schools and in Protestant schools among either male students or female students. The data presented in table 1 demonstrate that between 1998 and 2011 a large drop occurred in the mean scores of attitude toward Christianity among male students in Catholic schools from 81.4 in 1998 to 73.2 in 2011. The conclusion from the 2011 study, therefore, is that the accelerated loss of confidence in the Christian tradition found among female students in Catholic schools in the 1998 study has now extended to male students in Catholic schools in 2011.

The present study was conducted as part of a well-established sequence of studies initiated by John Greer in 1979 generating comparable data over time by employing a consistent measure of religious affect within a nation in which the educational system had been segregated on denominational grounds. With increasing diversity emerging within the religious, political and educational climate of Northern Ireland during the opening decades of the twenty-first century, there would be every value in continuing to foster this specific research tradition.

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Table 1

*Mean attitude scores by sex, school type and survey year*

	Protestant			Catholic		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
<i>Male</i>						
1998	702	76.8	23.4	488	81.4	18.0
2011	659	73.9	27.2	834	73.2	23.6
<i>Female</i>						
1998	391	87.0	20.9	778	84.4	16.5
2011	928	84.6	24.3	766	83.9	19.7