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## **Conventional Christian belief and unconventional paranormal belief among teenagers in Northern Ireland: a personality and individual differences approach**

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### **Background**

Northern Ireland has been and remains a country deeply divided, historically, politically, religiously and socially (Cairns and Darby, 1998). Of these it is the religious division between Catholics and Protestants that is regarded by many as the most basic and fundamental (for discussion, see Barnes, 2005). This religious division is reflected in different ways, in housing and geographical location, for example, and even in sport and employment choices (Dunn, 1995; Hargie, & Dickson, 2003). One of the most obvious and striking illustrations of the religious divisions within society is that of education, where for the most part schools are religiously segregated: only about 5% of pupils attend 'Integrated' schools (Barnes, 2004). John E Greer (Greer, 1981, 1982, 1988; Greer, & Francis, 1990) began an empirically driven research tradition in the 1960s and 1970s that began to explore the differences between the religious, moral and social development of young people brought up within the two distinctive faith communities to illuminate similarities and differences in their fundamental worldviews. This tradition of research has continued (Francis, Robbins, Barns, & Lewis, 2006). To date this research has focused on conventional Christian belief rather than unconventional belief. In part this has been as a result of the persistence of higher levels of conventional belief and practice within Northern Ireland compared with England and Wales, but this persistence of conventional religiosity is now beginning to erode (Mitchell, 2004).

### **Research Questions**

Against this background the present study plans to extend a research model recently reported among young people in England and Wales by Francis, Williams, and Robbins (in press) which proposed two indicators of conventional Christian belief and two indicators of unconventional paranormal belief and found that these two forms of belief occupied contrasting locations within Eysenckian personality space. The research question posed by the present study concerns whether these findings also hold good in the contrasting social and religious climate of Northern Ireland where conventional religiosity remains much stronger than is the case in England and Wales.

### **Methods**

A total of 3,110 Teenage Religion and Values Survey questionnaires were completed by pupils attending Catholic and Protestant secondary schools in Northern Ireland. Of the 3,096 questionnaires 49% were completed by females and 51% by males, 52% were completed by year-nine pupils and 48% by year-ten pupils, 45% were completed by pupils attending Catholic schools and 55% by pupils attending Protestant schools.

#### **Measures**

The present analysis draws on the following key components included in the questionnaire administered to all the pupils.

Unconventional paranormal belief was assessed by two items rated on a five-point Likert type scale, ranging from 'agree strongly', through 'agree', 'not certain', and 'disagree', to 'disagree strongly'. The items were: I believe in black magic; I believe that it is possible to contact the spirits of the dead.

Conventional Christian belief was assessed by two items rated on a five-point Likert type scale, ranging from 'agree strongly', through 'agree', 'not certain', and 'disagree', to 'disagree strongly'. The items were: I believe in God; I believe that Jesus Christ really rose from the dead.

Personality was assessed by the short-form Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Francis and Pearson, 1988). This instrument proposes four six-item indices of extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, and a lie scale. Each item is rated on a two-point scale: 'yes' and 'no'.

## **Frame**

Two subsets were created from the data. The first subset consisted of the 1,400 pupils attending Catholic schools. The second subset consisted of 1,710 pupils attending Protestant schools. Reliability analysis and partial correlation analysis were conducted on these two subsets.

## **Research findings**

Two main conclusions emerge from this study.

First, the findings from this study support the conclusions drawn from earlier research in Northern Ireland that pupils attending Catholic and Protestant schools hold significantly different levels of conventional Christian belief. However, with regard to levels of unconventional paranormal belief, there is no difference between young people attending Catholic schools and young people attending Protestant schools. In other words, unconventional paranormal belief is not as divisive an issue between the two communities as conventional Christian belief.

Second, the findings from this study support the findings of Francis, Williams and Robbins that unconventional paranormal beliefs 'do not simply fail to occupy the same personality space as conventional Christian beliefs, they occupy the mirror image of that personality space.' This finding remains consistent across the original sample from England and Wales and the present sample from Northern Ireland, even though the Northern Irish pupils report higher levels of conventional Christian belief and lower levels of unconventional paranormal belief than their English and Welsh counterparts. Thus, conventional Christian belief is associated with the personality profile of the tenderminded socially conforming individual, and unconventional paranormal belief is associated with the personality profile of the toughminded, non-socially conforming individual.