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Gadamerian-Wittgensteinian Language Hermeneutics as Theoretical Frameworks and Heuristic Devices for Researching Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

This philosophical reflection stems from the conduct of a triangulated empirical practical socio-theological doctoral study conducted by the author that explored the Republic of Ireland's post-Catholic religious landscape and spiritual marketplace as perceived by random samples of young people. Contextualised within the broad discourse of religious decline and growth of spirituality in tandem with some secularised Western societies, the precise focus was on exploring how people are becoming more spiritual. Data revealed that young people in Ireland think deeply about spirituality as an anchor for life meaning, which they largely view as transcending organised institutional religious practices. This demographic trend constitutes a significant shift in contemporary macro-social structure and culture. The paper concentrates its analysis on the philosophical aspect of the study, which argues that employing Hans-Georg Gadamer's fusion of horizons concept (influenced by Martin Heidegger's Dasein) in addition to Ludwig Wittgenstein's language games hermeneutic as theoretical frameworks and heuristic devices contributed to understanding and interpretation of participant perceptions regarding the study constructs. The paper also discusses how Christian theologians George Lindbeck and David Tracy advocated language hermeneutics as cultural-linguistic systems for postmodern pluralist societies. Cohering with practical theology's concern for exploring the dynamics of particular human experiences and reflecting philosophically/theologically on those experiences, the paper sets out to contribute to a scholarly shift toward interdisciplinary practical, innovative qualitative research conducted and analysed for the meaning of a new paradigm of spirituality.

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 4 February 2026 | Revised: 14 June 2026 | Accepted: 21 June 2026 | Published Online: 28 June 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/prr.v3i2.102325

CITATION

Mc Bennett, P., 2026. Gadamerian-Wittgensteinian Language Hermeneutics as Theoretical Frameworks and Heuristic Devices for Researching Spirituality. Philosophy and Realistic Reflection. 3(2): 103–123. DOI: https://doi.org/10.55121/prr.v3i2.102325

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Keywords: Practical Theology/Philosophy; Spirituality; Hermeneutics/Phenomenology; Forms of Life; Language Games; Cultural-Linguistic Systems

1. Introduction

A quotation from Fernando Pessoa's[1] posthumously published modernist masterpiece sets the scene for the discussion that follows:

> I was born in a time when the majority of young people had lost their belief in God, for the same reason their elders had had it: without knowing why. And then, since the human spirit naturally tends towards judgments based on feelings instead of reason, most of these young people chose Humanity to replace God.

According to Hans Schilderman[2], one of the problems confronting theology is the fact that religion is studied from various interpretive universes that results in a variety of interpretations with strong historical roots. In his view, the advantage of phenomenological and hermeneutical qualitative approaches is that they inductively construct more reality-informed notions of contemporary beliefs and practices, while simultaneously doing justice to the immense variety of religious expression. Religious praxis entails aspects of individuals and groups such as affective and attitudinal elements. Empirical theology studies these aspects. Despite undeniable trends in religious decline over decades, a renewed interest in religion has taken place in recent years with a resurgence of the sacred, especially in New Age and other religious movements as a feature of postmodernity[3]. Extant research that predominantly used an empirico-analytic (quantitative) paradigm points to the fact that more individualized forms of spiritual expressions are replacing organized institutional religious practices among a younger demographic. A focus on institutional commitment as an indicator of religious decline has inordinately dominated discourse. Scholars such as sociologist Danièle Hérvieu-Leger et al. have argued that rather than this type of analysis, the focus should shift to exploring new ways in which people are becoming more spiritual[4]. In this context, a turn to spirituality has emerged in recent decades as a phenomenon distinct from religion. However, scholars such as Bernadette Flanagan considered it paradoxical that the growing interest in spirituality ran parallel with an ever-increasing lack of scholarly agreement on its meaning[5]. A theological debate began in the 1960s regarding whether there is one or various spiritualities, considered a ubiquitous and ambiguous term, largely retaining its original reference to life according to the Holy Spirit. Christian theologian Declan Marmion questioned whether a more universal definition is possible—one which could be applied to the spiritual life and experiences of non-Christians, where one keeps open the possibility of dialogue among people of very different worldviews regarding experiences that are perceived to convey ultimate meaning and value for individuals and groups—affective as well as cognitive, social as well as personal[6]. In my view spirituality is a universal human experience, embodied in those who may have no formal connection to a particular religion, or a personal connection or aspiration to any form of transcendence. Thus, in my view, spirituality is a construct that transcends traditional religious boundaries, defined as:

> Subjective and embodied lived experiences relating to the 'spirito' aspect of holistic human beings perceived either in theistic terms as the root and centre of personal religion, or in non-theistic privatized, individualistic affective experiences.

According to Vivenceo Ballano, individualized forms of spirituality have become dominant in today's liquid globalizing society[7]. Scholars have addressed issues of decline in religion, disaffiliation, and transition to secular forms of individualized spirituality with a focus on the identification as spiritual but not religious (SBNR)[8–10], and the spiritual struggles of this ever-growing and understudied cohort[11]. Stephen Bullivant apportions those who say they used to belong to a religious tradition but no longer do as "Nonverts"[12]. Others have concentrated their analysis on the growing population of religiously unaffiliated or "nones" and the complexities of this diverse group, which extends beyond atheism to include a range of beliefs and practices[13], including the politics of religious 'nones' in a US context[14]. Ronald Inglehart studied the pervasive nature of religious decline in the context of global economic and scientific de-

velopment, questioning how we move to a more benevolent society[15]. Other scholarship explored individualization and the social forces that influence, shape and control our lives[16]. Jonathan Fox studied the concept of religious freedom in Western and European liberal democracies and found that practice is different from theory[17]. However, a paucity of available literature exists exploring what precisely spirituality means to young people in an Irish context, which the present study sought to address.

Set against the weightiness of Irish Catholicism's past dominance as a significant social actor, the study explored a drift to irreligion and a turn to spirituality. The Government of Ireland census undertaken in 2016 revealed that, whereas 86% of the population self-identified with a faith group, there was a surge of 74% from the previous census in the no religion category, with almost 45% of those in the urban-dwelling 20–39 age bracket. The 2022 census figures revealed a further 26% increase from 2016 in this category, largely among a younger urban demographic. Not solely exploring whether a new paradigm (basic set of beliefs) of self-identification as SBNR is empirically rising in Ireland suggested by other Irish data[18–20]. It relatedly explored the meaning of this new paradigm, specifically whether participants construed spirituality in religious or secular terms, both or neither. The choice of setting for the study was based on the fact that Ireland was once considered the most Catholic country in the world (the population who were Catholic in 1961 was 94.9%) and decline in religious practice has been more rapid than in other societies. Scholars have studied the authority and predominant presence of the Catholic Church in all aspects of Irish social, political and cultural life, mainly focusing on the first and second half of the twentieth century. Others concentrated their analyses on various aspects of the historical interconnection between Catholicism and national identity, and the erosion of Catholicism's influence as Ireland became a more secularised society. Other scholars have expounded on the dark side of Irish Catholicism that came to light since the 1990s, when there were a series of criminal cases and government enquiries related to clerical sex abuse (CSA) allegations, suggesting that the scandals have irreparably damaged the Church's reputation, causing disconnection of personal faith from the institutional Church. Brendan McNamara and Hazel O'Brien examined the decline of Catholicism and rise of migrant religions and New Age movements and the effect of secularization on religions and society in Ireland[21].

The study took a practical theological approach, guided by Gadamerian hermeneutical theory, incorporating Wittgenstein's socio-linguistic concept of religion in addition to insights on how contemporary Christian theologians have applied these concepts to the study of religious pluralism. Practical theologians Zoë Bennett et al. have argued that if qualitative research is fundamentally concerned with meaning making processes, it is academically unjustifiable to maintain silence about the spiritual meanings people place upon experiences. In their view, the heterogeneous, divergent, pluriform, confused and sometimes chaotic contemporary religious/spiritual praxis requires interdisciplinary inductive study. Congruent with Gadamer's hermeneutics, the distinct nature of the genre prizes moving and making, not mirroring, where the researcher is someone who sees, but also starts a self-direction of travel to clearer visions. As a discipline, practical theology engages in realistic theological/philosophical reflection on the complex dynamics of human experiences, often prioritizing social-scientific insights and methods to generate raw data, creating new knowledge (poiesis) that may benefit communities[22]. Practical theology's key thinkers have advocated a hermeneutical approach to theological reflection. Don Browning, for example, argued that Gadamer has helped us understand how all human (social and cultural) and natural sciences can best be understood as dialectical movements from traditions of theory-laden practice to theory and back to new theory-laden practices[23].

The author argues that data elicited from the present study provide a unique contribution to the discourse surrounding contemporary secularisation, in particular due to the focus on and within the Irish context. Thus, the paper seeks to advance practical theology's overall quest by reflecting philosophically on the study's general findings relating to religious decline and growth in spirituality as an aspect of significant social change in Ireland, thereby bridging the nexus between theory and real world innovative qualitative research conduct.

2. Theoretical Framework

According to Gadamer, Aristotle established the classical definition of the nature of man according to which s/he is a living being who has logos (the Platonic notion of the word of God). Gadamer argued, however, that its primary meaning is language. In his view, philosophical thought has not historically placed the nature of language at the centre of its considerations, suggesting that the Old Testament tower of Babel story encapsulates the fundamental significance of language for human life. Gadamer saw language as our fundamental way of being in the world, and the being that can be understood is language, so we cannot understand in any other way. The reconstructive methodological alienation of the knower from his own historicity (the concerns of the founding fathers of modern hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher in Biblical studies and William Dilthey in historical studies) were the precise criticisms of Gadamer. He traced his thinking to the Platonic and Socratic outlook and the Aristotelian conception of ethics as the true fulfilment of the Socratic challenge. Concerned with the place of culture in human life and influenced by Martin Heidegger's later philosophy, he was concerned with applying his own philosophy to the humanities and social sciences. In his development of phenomenology, Heidegger viewed language as a mode of interpreting the world. He presented his model of the self as being fundamentally temporal, hermeneutical, and language centred. Heidegger's understanding of being (Dasein—a technical term for 'being-there,' or the standard word for existence) was not simply the product of inner experiences. Heidegger postulated that Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being (which unfolds as time); Being is already an appeal to subjectivity [24]. Thus, understanding is the way in which the historicity of Dasein is itself carried out. It is concerned with addressing issues such as How am I 'being-there' in the world? What is my being? and I am not a 'what' or a 'thing' but a 'who.' Ontologically, Heidegger's concept (which Gadamer apportioned as a new epoch in philosophy) influenced Gadamer regarding the significance of understanding, who argued that Dasein transformed the nature of the task of metaphysics. According to Gadamer, our preconceptions are fragments of our individual linguistic experience, which makes understanding possible in the first instance. Thus, Heidegger's theorizing of the character of human facticity was a foundational metaphysics for Gadamer's own work, replete as they are with references to Heideggerian thought in various contexts. He developed Heidegger's theory that pre-understanding or prejudice is a precondition for understanding, seeing hermeneutics as a means by which understanding, perception, experience and knowing itself occurs.

2.1. Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutics is concerned with interpreting how humans make sense of their world. Researchers use a variety of philosophical perspectives to inform the process of hermeneutic phenomenology, which Gadamer saw as practical philosophy. The hermeneutical task is concerned with avoiding misunderstanding, with expressions of meaning primarily linguistic manifestations. Developing a fusion of horizons concept, Gadamer traced the word philosophically to Friedrich Nietzsche and Edmund Husserl to characterize the way in which thought binds to its finite determinacy. An ontological rather than merely epistemological position, the task of the researcher centres on entering into constructive, critical dialogue that potentially leads to a fusion of two horizons, which together with human consciousness (universality) make understanding conceivable. As all understanding occurs as a fusion of horizons, in order to understand a text, we need a fusion between the researcher's horizons and the text, as the world is itself given by, or is a function of language. For Gadamer, the fusion concept provides an accurate picture of what happens in every transmission of meaning and event of understanding. Gadamer's central concepts were pre-understandings (influenced by Heidegger's concept of fore-structures), the hermeneutic circle in addition to fusion of horizons. The hermeneutical situation for Gadamer centred on prejudices (present horizons) for openness to the world. The key question for Gadamer was what prejudices (or fore-structures) are good, and which are unhelpful, as interpretations are not all created equally.

Another important understanding that Gadamer brought to religion was the historicity of the human condition in which we find ourselves and from which we cannot escape; thus, as Jean Grondin suggests, our prejudices constitute the historical reality of our being [25]. Through dialogue with others, we can become critically reflective of our prejudgments, and, in turn, our traditions. We fuse horizons when we acquire a broader understanding, one inaccessible simply from the original viewpoint. According to Gadamer,

we are not seeking to reach agreement on the same subject because the specific contents of the conversation are only a means to get to know the other's horizons. We must already have a horizon in order to transpose ourselves into a situation. Thus, the hermeneutical situation for Gadamer centred on prejudices (present horizons) for openness to the world. In his view, understanding is always a fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves. However, the horizon is something into which we move and that moves with us, so horizons change for a person who is moving. Understanding comes about when one or both undergo a shift; the horizon is extended to make room for the possibility of other perspectives. Challenging personal opinions thus makes way for the accommodation of beliefs from a different culture. Gadamer implied that because of different understandings, a fusion of horizons does not mean reaching a consensus.

Although Gadamer proposed insights into how one may acquire a deep understanding of texts, he did not suggest a methodology or method for doing so, but nonetheless advocated a systematic approach in order to gain understanding. Suspicious of method, he argued that researchers are deeply influenced by the traditions of their culture and therefore act on their understanding of that way of being in the world. He postulated that method does not give rise to truth but rather understanding, modified in the light of further inquiry based on the ongoing Platonic method of ongoing (question and answer) dialogue, where one is engaged in his notion of, what Nancy Moules terms, genuine conversation [26]. There are tensions and differences between the perspectives of theological hermeneutics and phenomenology, in addition to important similarities. Gadamer suggested, for example, that in theological hermeneutics there is an essential tension between the fixed text—the gospel—on the one hand and the sense arrived at by applying it at the concrete moment of interpretation [27]. Tensions also relate to the lived experiences of people studied objectively versus the subjective interpretation, bias and prejudice crucial to the study of how humans interact with the world. Hermeneutics is steeped in intersubjectivity and alienation from meaning can occur in conversations just as much as interpretation of religious texts. Gadamer frequently alluded to a philosophical convergence between the phenomenological tradition and Wittgenstein's language hermeneutic. Emphasising language's centrality in this tradition, Gadamer suggested that only in Wittgenstein did it have its full effect.

2.1.1. Wittgenstein's Socio-Linguistic Language Hermeneutics

Widely regarded as the most important philosopher of this century, Alan Keightley underscores how Wittgenstein never gave an exhaustive philosophical analysis of religious belief [28]. Despite being a self-identified atheist, the grammar of religion was a topic that greatly interested him. Wittgenstein's philosophy showed how language is internally connected to life (in contrast to the causal external connections of realism) and how what language discusses is nonetheless an external reality (in contrast to idealism) [29]. Wittgenstein expounded his hermeneutic theory in his later *Philosophical Investigations* as opposed to his earlier *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. He saw religion as a "language game"—a language embedded in action [30]. This suggests, according to Elizabeth Anscombe, that aspects of social life such as beliefs, practices and uses of language are marked by agreement on certain presuppositions [31]. These concepts relate to the Heideggerian-Gadamerian concepts of understanding being. Wittgenstein began his central argument against private language in *Philosophical Investigations*, written as a perpetual dialectic [32] with a summary of Augustine's view of the learning of human language in *Confessions,* I.8:

> As if the child came to a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, if he already had a language, only not this one. Or again, if the child could already think, but not yet speak [33].

Arguing that we cannot give language a universal rule for its use, Wittgenstein used the concept of family resemblance clusters to replace the ideal of a universal grammar, suggesting that essence (Wessen) is expressed by grammar. Both Gadamer and Wittgenstein underlined that the rules of a game are discovered in its use in interpersonal communication, which Gadamer emphasised was the locus for the real determination of meaning, thus bears similarities to Gadamer's concept of prejudice structures. The concepts that are familiar in religion are supposedly available only to those who share the form of life where employing them, so religious talk constitutes a distinctive and autonomous language game, unintelligible to outsiders. In contrast, Gadamer saw learning our native language as a basis for socialization into

a new language game that broadens our horizons, and not in isolation from each other. The language rules have arisen in the context of community practice, so likewise learning and understanding the Christian faith in terms of its discourse and grammar requires immersion in the community of faith. Just as one should not impose the grammatical rules of one language on another, likewise with theology. Mutual respect in the course of dialogue does not imply mutual belief and commitment. Both Gadamer's and Wittgenstein's language hermeneutics impinge on key theological issues, specifically the learning (or not) of Christian faith. These philosophers influenced the thinking of Christian theologians, notably Lindbeck and Tracy, in relation to issues of theological pluralism, truth claims and philosophical reflection on language and experience.

2.1.2. Lindbeck's Postliberal Theology and Tracy's Analogical Imagination

According to Tim Labron, Wittgenstein's philosophy retreated from the prevalent Western philosophical tradition toward Jewish and, finally Christian thought. Crediting Wittgenstein with being a major stimulus for his thinking, Lindbeck advocated a postliberal, narratival way of conceiving religion/religious doctrine. A return to pre-modern sources influenced his thinking about doctrine as a working grammar, calling for a renewal of the ancient practice of absorbing the universe into the biblical world in a post-traditional mode. Although shaped largely by theological concerns, it was consonant with contemporary anthropological, sociological and philosophical thought. Postliberal theology sees narratives as sense-making forms of language, like language games. Lindbeck viewed religion as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought:

> Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals … just as a language (or 'language game,' to use Wittgenstein' s phrase) is correlated with a form of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and behavioural dimensions, so it is also the case with a religious tradition […] All this is involved in comparing a religion to a cultural-linguistic system [34].

Outlining his cultural-linguistic/regulative rule theory of doctrine as working guidelines for Christian discourse, he described a set of rules underlying the development of theologies, permitting and conditioning the articulation of Christian faith language. This contrasted with normative cognitive-propositional and experiential-expressive approaches. The latter of these is where practical theology traditionally located itself.

Tracy argued that theological analysis of contemporary life experiences should not be allowed to assume a descriptive and implicitly prescriptive force without rigorous empirical social-scientific support; hence, the need to employ some form of ideology critique in social science, philosophy and theology. He argued that all claims for praxis over theory must allow empirical social-scientific analysis to check theories against the prevailing concrete situation, frequently referring to the Heidegger-Gadamer position. The concept of truth was central to Tracy's work [35], cohering with one of Gadamer's philosophical ideals, arguing that theologians and scholars of religion must bear the obligation of rendering explicit the question of truth as paramount. Underscoring Gadamer's trust in conversation based on the disclosing power of the classical Platonic Greek tradition, he suggested that if Gadamer was correct, it follows that hermeneutical reflection would suffice not only for questions of aesthetic meaning but also as an adequate strategy for societal praxis, referencing Gadamer's singular clarity regarding the reality of praxis (and thereby of ethical and political philosophy) in his appeal to Aristotelian phronesis as praxis. Tracy identified the principal sources of theology as Christian texts and common human experience and language, where the theological task involves a critical correlation of the results of the investigations of these two sources. The principal method of investigating these, in his view, is best described as a phenomenology of the religious dimension present in everyday experience and language. To determine the truth-status of the results of one's investigation into the meaning of these, the theologian should employ an explicitly transcendental or metaphysical mode of reflection. The phrase "philosophical reflection" can then be further refined to mean explicitly philosophical reflection upon language and experience [36].

3. Literature Review

Researchers have conducted empirical studies of European and North American religious/nonreligious worldviews.

Scholars have traditionally viewed religion and secularity as a binary conception. According to Gary Bouma et al., social science analysis of religious diversity including the religious-spiritual has struggled to move beyond simple binaries[37]. Sociologist Nancy Ammerman identified social scientist Stefania Palmisano as among few researchers who did not begin with the assumption that European spirituality has taken an inward turn away from Church authority towards a personal journey. Retreating from this assumption, Palmisano used Ammerman's typology to empirically investigate the distinction between Italian religion and spirituality, eliciting the meanings her sample attributed to the words spirituality or spiritual life. Her research sought to uncover how spiritualities are/are not related to traditional institutional ideas—whether unconventional spirituality in contemporary Italian Catholicism was a symptom of secularisation or a durable counterforce to it. Her cross-sectional sampling strategy included a high younger demographic cohort of 73%. In general, she found that belonging to Catholicism was an important part of Italian life, despite participants not officially or formally identifying with the tradition. According to Palmisano[38], the trend revealed in her data did not necessarily indicate that growing engagement and participation in the holistic milieu or alternative spiritualities meant an increase in a spiritual quest. The significance of this research is that, similar to Ireland, Italians have traditionally displayed high levels of orthodox religious belief, unlike the French and Spaniards. Brian Zinnbauer et al.[39] empirically measured how individuals defined the terms religiousness and spirituality, examined how respondents defined their own perceptions of the constructs, and analysed whether these definitions were associated with different demographic, religious-spiritual and psychosocial variables. Key findings were that the terms partly described different concepts but were nonetheless inter-dependent. Additionally, despite a finding that 93% of respondents self-identified as spiritual and 78% as religious, there were group differences in self-rated religiousness and spirituality, and variations in the definitions of the terms. They considered that their findings illustrated the necessity for researchers to elicit the many meanings attributed to the two concepts by different religious and cultural groups, and the different ways in which these groups considered themselves religious and/or spiritual. A mixed-methods study conducted by Penny Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway explored the relationship between being religious and being spiritual in a national sample of American Protestants. They found that participants viewed the relationship between being religious and spiritual as additive rather than zero-sum, where they viewed the concepts as distinct and independent. These scholars entered an important caveat regarding existing studies of the constructs. Conducted from the late 1980s through 2000, they had variation in questions, wording and sample; therefore, no definitive conclusions were possible[40]. More recently, scholarly analysis of the heterogenous varieties of nonreligious positions have been conducted globally. Gastón Espinos conducted a study of those who identify as SBNR or religious 'none' among the Latino community[41]. Olga Breskaya and Valentina Pereira Arena undertook a comparative study of religious nones and spirituality between Italian and Uruguayan Youth[42]. Amir Freimann et al. studied the multivalent and elusive nature of spirituality exemplarity in relation to the sacred and the mundane[43]. From a psychological perspective, Annette Mahoney et al. used meta-analysis techniques to summarize the strength of correlations between sanctification and psychological functioning across diverse aspects of life as manifestations of God[44]. In the context of the transformed landscape of American religion where more people embrace spirituality or nonreligion, Penny Edgell suggests that a new framework is required to accounts for these changes integrating the study of these new trends with religion in the midst of this changing landscape[45]. Joseph Blankholm, concerned with the "paradox" of being secular, argues that being nonreligious is also to engage religion in the quest for life meaning[46].

The next sections set out to present materials and methods used in the present study before presenting quantitative and qualitative data findings, accompanied by my own analysis and commentary, and contextualizing findings with extant scholarship on the current state of affairs, followed by conclusions based on the foregoing discussion.

4. Materials and Methods

The present mixed-methods study was conducted in two sequential phases. Phase one sought to elicit general descriptive quantitative grounding data (n = 178) for qualitative exploration from a 43-item Google Forms questionnaire

(**Appendix A**) distributed between 28 February–31 March 2023. Questions sought to explore the perceived nexus (if any) between spirituality and the 'three B's' of religion (behaviour, belief and belonging), targeting the responses of random samples of a younger demographic aged 18–39, representing a subset of the population of interest, recruited through an advertising campaign via social media outlets. I specifically targeted this population on the basis that previous international research suggested that they were the demographic who best exemplify the trend towards irreligion in addition to the findings of the most recent census reports in Ireland regarding the growth in the category of 'no religion' adherents as cited above. Questions sought perceptions of respondents' views on religion and spirituality, beliefs about God, religious affiliation, the meaning of religion and spirituality and their interrelationship (if any). While inspired by surveys previously used, I made amendments to accommodate the specific nuances of an Irish context. Some questions specifically targeted Roman Catholics, the majority religion in Ireland, but most were applicable to all respondents. Where appropriate, an option was available to provide free-text, brief write-in qualitative responses. Following options for gender self-identification, I asked respondents to denote their religious affiliation (if any), including a 'no religion' option. This was based on the first wave of the European Social Survey (ESS, 2002/2003). If respondents ticked this particular box, I provided them with three options for nonreligious self-identification: atheism, agnosticism and secular humanism. I included questions to elicit perceptions of nominal religious affiliation, influenced by the work of Abby Day[47]. I then asked respondents to complete two 4-point Likert-type option columns according to the degree to which they considered themselves religious or spiritual, similar to previous studies. As a fundamental research aim was to extract meanings attached to the word spiritual and cohering with previous research, I used a four-category, two-by-two typology devised by Ammerman—neither religious nor spiritual, religious, but not spiritual, spiritual, but not religious, and both spiritual and religious[48]. Influenced by Palmisano's study of Italian Catholicism, I asked respondents to choose one option among six statements about the existence of God, with options eliciting belief in a personal relationship with God, a higher power or a life force, and so forth. I based questions on Ammerman's study, which had the aim of isolating meaning clusters. These questions sought perceptions of theistic spirituality (God, practices, mystery), extra-theistic (naturalistic) spirituality concerned with meaning, connection, and Belief and Belonging spirituality connected to a religious tradition. I used Hérvieu-Leger's 'Validation of Faith' thesis to elicit the extent to which a self-referential relationship existed between personal belief systems and traditional faith. The spirituality oriented questions aimed to elicit views regarding issues of existential life meaning, the holistic milieu, engagement in Eastern religions and philosophies or New Age holistic spiritual practices. I included a series of options that sought to determine if and why respondents participated in these practices. This attempted to ascertain whether a religious or spiritual quest, both or neither, motivated respondents to engage. I included questions on horoscopes, astrology, fortune telling and tarot reading in addition to a question on whether respondents perceived spiritual energy as emanating from physical objects. A 5-point Likert scale question that sought responses to the statement "God is everywhere and within everything" was an amendment to a similar question used by Paul Heelas[49]. A final section relating to the dimension of affectivity and emotion sought respondents' experiences of sacred, numinous, heightened forms of spiritual experiences, including epiphany and Awe and Wonder (AW) moments, and situations that evoked these experiences. I based the existential search for identity and purpose question: "Please state why you think you are in the world" on a UK study of marginalized people. The General Social Survey (GSS) tool prompted a question asking respondents for one response to three statements regarding beliefs about the Bible. This quantitative phase sought general descriptive data only and constituted a subordinate, albeit important element of the study. On the advice of the Research Ethics Committee, different participant populations were recruited for each phase of the study. Additionally, insufficient numbers of questionnaire respondents opted in as volunteers for interviews. **Table 1** below shows the gender breakdown of questionnaire responses.

Table 1. Gender breakdown of quantitative responses.

Male	Female	Prefer to Self-Describe
78 (44%)	92 (52%)	8 (4%)

Phase two, the major integrated qualitative aspect entailed the conduct of 22 audio-recorded interviews (12 female, 10 male), of which 20 were valid, between June and October 2023. One interview was conducted online and the remainder in person. As the sample was not a homogenous group, the sampling strategy was primarily random, with an evolving small snowball element from volunteer participants aged 18–39 following an advertisement through various social media outlets. I conducted most interviews on the Dublin City University and Trinity College campuses in addition to a small number for those living in border areas to capture an urban-rural divide. My sample clustered mainly around 19–22-year-old, urban dwelling participants. Ammerman suggested that college campuses can be important settings in which one can encounter a broad extra-theistic discourse about spirituality. Sociologist Gladys Ganiel, whose research found evidence of highly religious young people in Northern Ireland, suggested that the university experience can prompt change in religious practices and thus constitutes a fertile research milieu [50]. The interview questions (see **Appendix B**) were inspired by a review of the literature on spirituality. The steps involved in data triangulation were: planning the research design, collecting data by means of a questionnaire distribution and conducting qualitative interviews, analysing each data set separately, and merging/comparing results to identify areas of convergence and divergence of religious and non-religious worldview horizons or outlooks, discussed below in the results section. The specific procedures used to analyse the qualitative data involved adherence to a specific Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutic analytic framework. This involved identifying pre-understandings (before data collection), gaining understanding through dialogue with participants (interviews and field notes), gaining understanding through dialogue with text (interview transcripts), and establishing trustworthiness. This process involved generating initial codes, coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set and collating data relevant to each 'free' code. Free codes are the totality of participant narratives across the entire data set, which also involved auto coding where I identified different aspects coming into different parts of the topics under discussion. These free codes formed the basis of creating categories. An abstraction analytic stage involved integration of second-order horizon constructs, grouping free codes into higher categories. The synthesis and theme development (aggregation) stage involved establishing a hierarchy of five major developing themes and integrating these with extant literature. These themes were: participant perceptions of religion and spirituality, subjective drift from and return to religion, creative and individualist Irish Catholicism, the culture of youth wellness and the evocation of awe wonder and epiphany moments. In essence, employing hermeneutic phenomenology for data gathering, an unstructured interview approach sought thick descriptions (relating to understanding the social world) to add hermeneutic substance to quantitative findings without imposing any a priori categorization that might limit the field of enquiry as suggested by seminal qualitative research authors [51]. Phenomenological interviewing is a framework that integrates qualitative interviews with phenomenological philosophy. A rigorous scientific process, its purpose is to bring human experiences to language, gaining a deeper understanding of their meaning. Conscious of Gadamer's ontological view that the traditions of their culture deeply influence researchers, the study was also based on heuristic reflection, bringing to consciousness how personal life experiences influenced my belief systems in an era when religion was (in Wittgenstein's terms) a form of life that had to be accepted. As a bricoleur, this required researcher autoethnography and reflexivity regarding embodied experiences in order to reach an understanding of participants' spirituality, adhering to Gadamer's view of a hermeneutical task including a reflective dimension from the very beginning. Gadamer's framework as an ontological process of dialogic engagement was helpful in the analysis of interview data in the sense of achieving an understanding of the horizons of participants regarding the study constructs. Philosopher John Caputo argued that reaching understanding and meaning is tentative and dynamic in the hermeneutic endeavour, necessitating using a hermeneutic circle to trace the researcher's movements in the process [52]. A dialogic approach enabled free expression of participants' personal narratives, uninhibited by the researcher's personal agenda or the boundaries of fixed questions. In Gadamer's approach, by bridging historical or personal distance between minds, the entire conversation is shaped by practical concerns that emerge from the current situation [53]. Thus, understanding as the first condition of hermeneutics required the fundamental

suspension of my own prejudices for openness to the world of research participants. The approach reflected Gadamer's trust in conversation for philosophical and hermeneutical reflection. Meaning as theological data sources completed the hermeneutic circle, where interview segments related to the whole and the whole in relation to the parts. Gadamer's argument is that horizons happen naturally in the very structure of dialogue—where we cannot help but fuse two horizons. Practical theologian Pete Ward underscores that qualitative research is not a fixed method that researchers simply apply to situations but rather an evolving and shifting dialogical approach or attitude[54]. Qualitative researchers working to a constructivist epistemological paradigm are committed to an emic, case-based position, concerned with specifics of particular cases. Thus, in my doctoral study, two juxtaposing worldview case studies were included in the presentation of data. A reputable audio transcription company with whom I signed a confidentiality agreement transcribed a portion of the longer interviews.

Table 2 shows age and gender breakdown of interviewees.

Table 2. Age and gender profile of interviewees.

Age	Number	Male	Female
18	6	4	2
19	4	2	2
24	1	1	-
25	2	1	1
26	1	1	-
27	1	-	1
30	2	1	1
35	2	-	2
37	1	-	1

5. Results

The first questionnaire section sought to elicit respondents' perceptions of the interrelation of spirituality to religion through a number of questions posed iteratively. I sought responses to two 4-point option columns according to the degree to which respondents considered themselves spiritual (options were not, somewhat, spiritual and especially spiritual). Data revealed that the majority (76%) considered themselves 'somewhat spiritual' (39%) or 'spiritual' (37%).

Conversely, only 20% of the sample considered. themselves as 'religious,' 43% did not consider themselves as religious, with 34% self-identifying as 'somewhat religious' as **Figure 1** illustrates with superimposed key qualitative trends.

Probing this issue, I asked participants to choose from one of four statements that best defined their own religiousness and spirituality according to the typology used. I then asked respondents to denote what the word spirituality meant to them. Respondents appeared to perceive the construct more in terms of moral uprightness, holism, inner peace and meaning, in contrast to the two lower rates relating to belief in God, His teachings, or the church. A significant number of respondents believed in a higher power or life force, but not God. A 5-point scale question sought to elicit views on the extent to which God and organised religion were important in the lives of respondents. Data revealed that 79.5% either strongly disagreed, disagreed or held no opinion regarding the importance of God and organised religion. Data also revealed low levels of attendance at religious services for those affiliated with Roman Catholicism.

One of my research aims was to elicit whether my sample construed spirituality in religious terms or as something beyond the ontology of daily experiences. I was interested in whether respondents connected holistic practices/phenomena to either religion or spirituality, or alternatively with health, personal development and wellness. Thus, my interest was in ascertaining whether respondents linked these experiences to forms of sacrality. I sought data regarding whether Yoga, mindfulness and other wellness practices link to religious or spiritual dimensions. Data revealed that only 8.62% of the sample regarded wellness practices as having a religious association, while the majority (54.91%) associated them with spirituality. A menu option sought to elicit reasons why respondents participated in these activities. The majority partook to improve general health and wellness (61.34%), while 58.82% partook specifically to overcome stress and break up life's routine. Over thirty-five percent of the sample participated out of curiosity and 28.57% participated for spiritual growth reasons. I included a section on mysticism, awe and wonder to elicit responses relating to the dimension of affectivity and emotion. Almost sixty-two percent of participants responded that they had experienced awe and wonder, with a further 22.41% indicating that they possibly had. Asked if they thought the experience related to God/gods, 51.33% did not, while 31.33% considered this a possibility. An option to provide a short qualitative elaboration for those respondents

who related the experience to God/gods followed. Some responses were:

> I think it was love. I was with my girlfriend in Amsterdam. We were wandering at night; place was very busy. Then a Church started playing a song with its bells. There was no one else around. It was just us standing on a bridge. The air felt heavy or surreal. I can't describe it. Then when the song finished, we could hear and see people again, and a car drove past us (free-text survey response).

> These were either moments of seeing an incredible panorama or having a moment of realisation about how much I love someone and/or how happy I am to be in that moment. I don' t know if at the moment I thought it was related to God, but when looking back, it seems like it could not be unrelated and such amazing phenomena are intrinsic to God, in whatever form God is (free-text survey response).

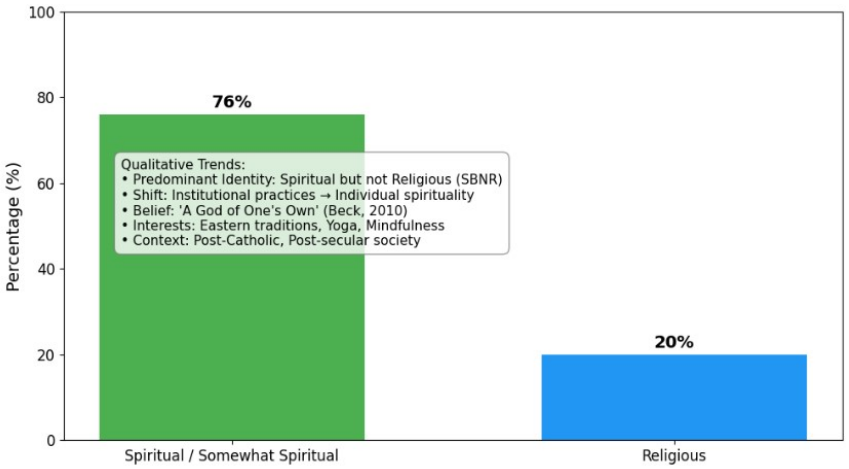


Figure 1. Religious and Spiritual Identification in Ireland (Young People).

Note: 'A God of One's Own,' a view from Beck [55].

Analysis and Data Evaluation

Despite reaffirming religious decline trends evident in previous Irish studies [18, 19, 56], qualitative data revealed that young people living in Ireland thought deeply about extra-theistic spiritual forms, which they largely viewed as transcending normative institutionalised religious boundaries. Participants mostly self-identified as SBNR. Data also suggested a dynamic, as opposed to static belief system and the potential for repositioning of worldviews. These data suggested that similar to some European and North American cultures, young people in Ireland are not abandoning religion altogether, but increasingly adopting a mix and match mentality to religion in a rapidly transforming cultural and religious landscape and spiritual marketplace. It appears that irreligious trends persist because of rejection of an a priori commitment to Catholic dogmatism no longer construed as relevant. Importantly, this does not necessarily entail rejection of God, but rejection of organized religion. Following Hugh Turpin, an ex-Catholic view suggests the emergence of a new model of the good, secular Irish person that is rapidly being adopted in Irish society [57]. A major theme elicited was belief fluidity and the subjective drift away from and, in some cases, return to religion and religious practices among some young Catholics, particularly following the COVID-19 global pandemic. However, generally, my samples appeared to reject authority beyond their own experience, constructing, in Ulrich Beck's terms, "A God of One's Own" [55]. A hollowing-out of faith means that it is now one human belief possibility among a multitude of others. Both quantitative and qualitative data revealed a strong attraction to Eastern traditions, especially Buddhist philosophy and a trend towards holistic New Age spiritual practices, a search for wellness through cultural practices, notably yoga and mindfulness, to fulfil social, emotional and belonging needs and a sense of community in the absence of normative religious beliefs and practices. The following interview excerpts illustrate

examples of these trends:

> I think a lot of young people experience depression and anxiety. But they're also addicted to their phones and the internet. People my age are very drawn to yoga retreats and go to therapy or spirituality and yoga, because we all are seeking this sense of community that I think is hard to find for young people these days, without a Church to go to (Lucia, pseudonym).

> There's a lot of young people these days influenced by TikTok who believe in manifesting, and it's gaining a lot of popularity. I don't believe that's my religion. But some people really do. It's getting a bit out of hand. You can even go on a shopping website and basically pay someone to manifest for you, because they're very energetically aligned with the world, so they're able to bring things in for you. There's always people taking advantage of others, whether it's a really old religion like Catholicism or whatever, or a kind of new age religion, like manifestation and spirituality (Ria, pseudonym).

The most striking example of the subjective return to Catholicism and its practices is the narrative of a 19-year-old student. He described how he drifted towards atheism in his mid-teens because of questioning theodicy, or why God allows catastrophic events such as genocides or famines to happen:

> I came back to religion through the beauty and aesthetics of it. I realise that's not a mainstream way to come to religious belief. I wouldn't be a very mainstream Catholic; I'd have a lot of gripes with it that I'm constantly tussling with (Liam, pseudonym).

Relating to a question posed on his perception of spirituality, Liam stated:

> I think it's a new trend. For a lot of people, it's starting to become over saturated, the spirituality thing, and I think that might manifest itself in a slight trend back towards religion, towards traditional religious practice. Because I think people will start to realise that there's no point making up new stuff when all you need is already there. It's like throwing the baby out with the bath water. So much bad has happened with religion, but there is so much good to be salvaged from the ashes of it, and I think people will gradually and very slowly, start to realise that. I think it's the way our society is trending, kind of hyper individualism, because spirituality is intrinsically an individual act.

Liam described how he "dabbled in other things like Buddhism and stuff like that when I was re-finding my faith." I was anxious to explore this further in light of his reconnection to Catholicism, (and the fact that so many respondents and participants made reference to Buddhism in my free text survey data):

> I think the reason why Buddhism has come out is because it's so de-centralised with no overarching institution. I think that's another big contributor to why young people are drifting away from Catholicism because it's very institutional. I think people are drawn to Buddhism because it is a very personal faith. I think it aligns with spirituality. Buddhism would be more religious than many secular practices like mindfulness and things like that, but it is just on the fringes of that category as well.

Sociologists of religion who studied Ireland's religious landscape used Pierre Bourdieu's anthropological/sociological concept of habitus to capture religious change. Bourdieu's[58] concept is the principle that negotiates between objective structures and practices. In essence, it refers to the habituation of values, a movement from belief and ritual to the formation of habits. Data also accorded with Heelas' concept of theistic humanism, experiencing relationships with God's creations, common in believers who emphasise the human values and sentiments of their faith rather than abstract doctrines and dogmas[49]. As stated, both the research instruments explored affectivity and emotion regarding the study constructs (mysticism, epiphanies, numinous and awe and wonder experiences). The awe and wonder section was based on a neurophenomenological interview technique (the study of mind, experience and consciousness) derived from the

philosophical traditions of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, in addition to other techniques derived from the physical sciences conducted to explore astronauts' experiences in simulated space environments [59]. Regardless of worldviews (theistic or atheistic), data revealed that most participants had forms of spiritual and mystical experiences. Data revealed that while sacred emotions may occur in religious settings, they can also be experienced in nonreligious settings and that spiritual emotions of gratitude, awe and reverence, and love and hope are more likely when people perceive sacredness in various aspects of their lives, as suggested by psychology of religion scholars [60]. Thus, the fullness of contemporary experience, including experience of the divine, is diverse and complex and not a simple, linear matter. In summary, the overall picture suggested by these data is that contemporary Ireland is largely post-Catholic, post-secular and Westernised, analogous to other European countries, Canada and Australia. While young people no longer take for granted the worldview into which they happen to be born, they will shape the future of religious and spiritual trends in Ireland and have a very important voice. Based on data and following Caputo, the distinction between theism and atheism is a little more unstable than people think [61].

There were areas of convergence and divergence between quantitative and qualitative data. Convergence mainly related to the extent to which survey respondents and interviewees viewed spirituality in non-theistic terms, relating it to the material world. Quantitative data suggesting that respondents appeared to perceive spirituality more in terms of moral uprightness, holism, inner peace and meaning was borne out in the interviews. Additionally, the attraction to Eastern philosophies and New Age practices was evident in both samples. Conversely, divergence largely related to the theme of subjective drift to, and reconnection to religion and normative Catholic practices emerged solely from the qualitative data.

6. Discussion

My approach accorded with Tracy's argument that research in theology should employ an explicitly transcendental or metaphysical mode of reflection when determining the truth-status of the results of investigations into the meaning of human experiences. The theme of human experience was one of Tracy's concerns in the context of the sources of fundamental theology as philosophical reflection in the search for adequate criteria and modes of analysis, and the ensuing task of critical correlation. He argued that theological analysis of contemporary life experiences should not be allowed to assume a descriptive and implicitly prescriptive force without rigorous empirical social-scientific support. Here, he agreed with the need to employ some form of ideology-critique in social science, philosophy and theology.

Discussing divergence between radically distinct, apparently incommensurable competing theistic and non-theistic worldviews, John Cottingham underscored how the theist will hold the view that the meaning of an individual's existence lies in her relationship to a loving creator God [62]. This will be completely at odds with the Buddhist view that the very idea of an individual self is an illusion. Underlining a considerable degree of convergence at the level of praxis as opposed to theory among varying religious traditions, Cottingham argued that the broad category of spiritual praxis is not restricted to those who would describe themselves as religious, as witnessed by the growing number of SBNR adherents. This group includes many of the so-called new atheists, some of whom have underlined the importance in their lives of certain heightened forms of spiritual experience, the significance of which, they contend, does not depend in any way on theistic or other metaphysical beliefs. Describing a remix culture and discussing the difficulty in defining what exactly a religion is, Tara Burton [63] drew a distinction between "intuitional" and "institutional" religion, implying that young people's sense of meaning is based on narratives that simultaneously reject clear-cut creedal metaphysical doctrines and institutional hierarchies and place the locus of authority on instinctual experiential emotions. She argued that ticking a box does not elicit what a religion is, just what society considers a legitimate and institutionalized form of one. Similarly, Lindbeck suggested that authority claims made by Churches to dictate codes of behaviour do not sit easily in modernity, where the modern mood is antipathetic to the very notion of communal norms. He suggested that the mere idea of becoming religious might, on occasion, seem alienating and oppressive, an infringement of freedom and choice, a denial of creativity, and repugnant to all the most cherished values of modernity. In this regard, postmodernism does not adopt a totalizing or oppressive exclusive attitude

towards belief in transcendence. Instead, it considers the holding of these beliefs as one option among many others.

The philosophical/theological theories discussed above were lenses through which I read data and helped illuminate the present study's findings. Heidegger's Dasein concept is philosophically relevant to issues relating to affectivity, existential angst and human attunement to the world and is thus relevant. It is evident that contemporary life poses particular challenges for young people, particularly angst or anxiety about being-in-the-world, evident in my data, but outside the scope of this paper. Gadamer's subjective, existential and integrative ontological view was a push back against the norms of a purely objective, positivist disinterested scientific paradigm that does not allow for any possibility of interpretation or understanding. In that sense, his fusion concept provided a useful framework within which to conduct dialogic, unstructured interviews and analyse data in a theological context. Regarding Wittgenstein's socio-linguistic vision of religion, in contrast to Catholicism's historical influence and authority, which traditionally permeated all aspects of Irish religious and social life as a form of life that had to be accepted, data suggested that this is no longer the case. Participants largely do not take for granted the worldview into which they happen to be born. From a Christian theological perspective, Lindbeck advocacy of a postliberal, narrative way of conceiving religion, influenced by Wittgenstein's theory, takes cognisance of contemporary anthropological and sociological, in addition to philosophical thought in a pluralist age. Tracy's insights were important in the context of philosophical reflection on the religious dimension present in experience and language and the need for empirical, practical theological approaches to their study.

Based on the premise that no human world exists without worldviews, chosen or assumed, and influenced by the creative, subjective ethos of practical theological research, this paper presented a snapshot of empirical data for philosophical/theological reflection. By engaging in fruitful dialogic interviews for data co-production, it sought a practical theological hermeneutic of how young individuals made sense of their lives, the ultimate significance of the universe and their place within it, creatively reimagining the spiritual character of qualitative research for philosophical/theological reflection. Gadamer and Wittgenstein's language hermeneutics as theoretical frameworks and horizons of inquiry facilitated the establishment of a nexus between high-level philosophical theory and real-world qualitative research by contributing to understanding and interpretation of how young individuals uniquely sense, reason, think and behave regarding the constructs. The paper suggests an original approach to address the question of how religion is experienced by young people living in contemporary Ireland in a context where nuanced forms of spirituality appear to transcend normative institutional boundaries as an anchor for life meaning. Co-opting a research turn when scholars began to explore the degree to which the terms religion and spirituality mean the same or different things to people, the present study on which this paper is based critically examined meta-narratives proposed by sociologists and argued that these overarching explanations for secularisation failed to consider the specific Irish context. Analysing the bespoke factors involved in this epochal social change, the study findings provide a unique contribution to the discourse surrounding religious decline and growth in spirituality, in particular due to the focus on and within the Irish context. Following some Western trends, it appears that young people in Ireland increasingly assemble an individualist religious outlook, pulling together different threads from the staggering number of ideologies and faith options competing for their attention. Data reflect the extent to which Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular now compete with an array of spiritual marketplace options and choices, increasingly driven by social media outlets and peer influences. Data reflect Peter Berger's[64] argument that secularity and religion are not mutually contradictory in the experience of most individuals. He suggested that people make choices about their religious identities, challenging Church relationships and boundaries that were once secure, pushing for greater democratisation, stating:

> Since pluralism means that individuals put together their religious beliefs like a child uses Lego pieces to construct an idiosyncratic edifice, it is not surprising that some of the ensuing constructions look a bit odd[64].

Thus, there are antinomies, juxtapositions and some contradictions and paradoxes evident in my data that explored complex constructs that, in truth, defy simple clear-cut analysis. It is important to state that my intention here is not to polarize good spirituality and bad religion or vice-versa, but to present reflections that juxtapose cultural eras.

My reflections contrast my experiences of Catholicism when I was a similar age to the demographic of the present study against the current state of affairs. At that historical juncture, Ireland was largely considered a perfect society in what was perceived as an enchanted era. Wittgenstein argued that people adopt or lose their faith not because of arguments for or against the existence of God but because of experience, or ways they live their lives. Data suggest that a value pluralism exists among young people, embracing a sense of all that is good including an interest in eco-spirituality, where contemporary forms of spiritual practices draw their central reference point from an awareness of and desire to improve ecological relations. The demographic from which samples were drawn will shape future religious and spiritual trends in Ireland. In this regard, future research could empirically build on and extend the findings from the present study. I consider that there are important, creative possibilities with my research that can be developed, involving affirming or questioning worldviews and practices because contemporary experience, including experience of the divine, is diverse and complex and not a simple, linear matter as my data suggests. Practical theology provides another take on this, making a practical difference to the life of the church and the world. Jos de Kock and Mirella Klomp see practical theology as a theological discipline that focuses on the hermeneutics of lived religion[65]. Practical theologian Leah Robinson is concerned with what she terms "bad" theology, that is theology that is oppressive or damaging, where hurt or oppression is taking place in the name of God[66]. Robinson began a conversation about bad theology in a time of Coronavirus. Focusing on the moral good, Robinson views all theology is a human construct that is subjective. In her view, practical theology is "breathed" or incarnated in this world[67]. According to Heather Walton, it is a diverse discipline, and many different concerns and approaches are active and generative within it[68].

Researchers might use these creative methodologies and methods when conducting research in the area of spirituality as a distinct construct or as part of theological/religious studies research. Additionally, qualitative research conducted in the discipline of systematic theology, incorporating Tracy as a major Christian theological voice and centred on the doctrine of Providence, might focus on questions such as where God's grace can be found, where revelation is encountered, what Divine revelation is, the extent to which Divine revelation is accepted by young people and perceptions of how the Spirit may be at work in their everyday lives. Outlining points of convergence and divergence between the disciplines of systematic and practical theology, Tracy suggested that a radical, if not chaotic, pluralism of paradigms on what constitutes theology as a discipline and thereby on the public character of theology is likely to occur. Underscoring Gadamer's trust in conversation based on the disclosing power of the classical Platonic Greek tradition, he suggests that systematic theologians effectively model Gadamer's retrieval of classical Greek texts in their hermeneutical and literary-critical retrieval of classical Christian texts. An additional suggestion for future creative research is the use of philosopher Karen Barad's agential realism theoretical framework from quantum physics, reframing understanding of and interrelationship between scientific and political practices to actually do science[69].

7. Conclusions

The decision to choose particular paradigms reflects a researcher's particular worldview. My methodological approach accorded with the view that rigorous empirical theology requires some statistical analysis to help triangulate findings. As a piece of practical theology, the study drew on more than one, sometimes revised or recanted methodological tradition, as suggested by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln[51]. Contesting previous reticence towards naming spiritual concerns in research, the approach used cohered with the emergent scholarly view that normative textual analysis should not be the primary object for theological/philosophical reflection. Social-scientific insights are not peripheral to philosophical and theological discourse but are central to the disciplines in their quest to research real world issues in a spirit of mutual correlation. These approaches and methods have their own ontologies, epistemologies and anthropologies that affect the understanding and analysis of reality. This means there is already an epistemological commitment to the empirical and the contextual by using insights and methods from disciplines and approaches that will facilitate better understanding. According to practical theology pioneer Johannes van der Ven[70], because the object of practical theology is not biblical or historical but present

religious praxis, empirical methods are at stake, and from this perspective, practical theology is empirical theology. In his model, the relationship between theory and empirical research is dialectical, as they are never on the same level. This approach implies the richness of the empirical-theological approach, which, in his view, is a fascinating way of doing theology. Practical theological research is an ethical undertaking, part of constructing a value-laden moral worldview by bringing the voices of research participants into being and affirming or questioning worldviews. Browning advocated a hermeneutical approach to theological reflection, allowing thick descriptions to emerge. This implies that we recognize our pre-understandings and accept that all our conclusions are tentative interpretations. This is where the relevance of Gadamer becomes apparent in Browning's model. He references Gadamer's belief that all human understanding is achieved through dialogue or conversation, underscoring Gadamer' assertion that it is both impossible and unhelpful to hold neutral or objective stances. In Gadamer's approach, practical concerns that emerge from the current situation shape the entire conversation. According to Browning:

> (Gadamer) has helped us understand how all human (social and cultural) sciences and many, if not all, natural sciences can best be understood as dialectical movements from traditions of theory-laden practice to theory and back to new theory-laden practices [23].

Browning advocated correlation of descriptive and historical theology, where systematic theology seeks a fresh interpretation of the Christian faith that is contemporaneously relevant. He argued that with the rebirth of practical philosophy (phronesis), practical theology itself was reborn.

Charles Taylor distinguished two contrasting scientific conceptions of human life. One was through a sociobiological lens that explains cultural variation, the other prioritizing the influence of cultural difference (of which Gadamer was an advocate, as human science could never consist exclusively of species-wide laws). Taylor suggested that the difference between the two kinds of science relates to the fact that the languages of human science always draw from their intelligibility on our ordinary understanding of what it is to be a human agent, live in society, have moral convictions, aspire to happiness, and so forth. He emphasised the inner complex, dynamic nature of Gadamer's contribution to overcoming barriers to understanding, which requires identification of the systematic differences in construal between two different cultures. He considered that this is what Gadamer achieved, allowing travel, change and extension of horizons, applicable to attempts to understand different eras and societies. Because these horizons are not necessarily inherent in our own culture, the challenge is to acknowledge the humanity of others from different cultures, thereby increasing our self-understanding, without forfeiting our own cultural identity. Regarding his suspicion of method, Gadamer advocated not jumping out of the range of human meanings altogether, and trying to take things in through a bleached, neutralized language of social science, as such an approach just bolts the door against new insights. According to Taylor, by allowing ourselves to be challenged by the ways they fail to fit into our recognized range of meanings, we can begin to discern how this range has to be broken open and transformed if we are to understand them [71].

In conclusion, the central argument of my study can be encapsulated in practical theologian Clare Watkins' assertion that if we want to know more fully what God is doing in God's world, we need to attend to the diversity of places of grace, including those on the peripheries of, or even clearly outside, the Church's organisational bounds [72].

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Irish Data Protection Commissioner and Dublin City University Ethics Committee on 22/06/2022 (Reference: DCUREC/2022/104), which stated "DCU REC is pleased to issue approval for this research proposal."

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data is publicly available via open access in Dublin City University's research digital repository (DORAS): https://doras.dcu.ie/30631/1/Mc%20Bennett%2C%20P.%20_19215496_03012025.pdf.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

The author declares that AI was not used in the research and writing of this manuscript.

Appendix A. Google Forms Questionnaire

The questionnaire introduction sought demographic information and gender identification. used tick boxes, 5-point Likert scale type statements, and short qualitative 'free text' options to allow participants to elaborate on answers where appropriate. The first major section sought to elicit data on religious affiliation/non-affiliation in order to represent theistic, atheistic and other nonreligious worldviews. I included all the major world religions in addition to the 'no religion' category in the tick-box options. I then asked respondents to denote one of three options regarding religious affiliation: whether they never affiliated to a religious tradition, were previously affiliated or currently disaffiliated. I included questions aimed at eliciting perceptions on nominal religious affiliation. I included a 5-point option to elicit the degree to which respondents displayed commitment to their religious tradition by attending its services. Another question asked respondents to denote which (if any) service they attended the previous weekend. The next section posed two separate questions to elicit respondent perceptions regarding whether religion is a private or public affair.

Statement 1: Religion is a private affair and does not need to be expressed by adhering to a specific religious tradition.

Statement 2: Religion is a public affair to be expressed in a specific religious tradition.

The next section sought to elicit respondent perceptions of the interrelation of spirituality to religion by a number of questions posed iteratively. Firstly, I sought responses to two 4-point option columns according to the degree to which respondents considered themselves spiritual (options were not, somewhat, spiritual and especially spiritual). Using a similar 4-point option format, I then asked respondents to denote the degree to which they considered themselves religious. I then asked participants to choose from one of four statements that best defined their own religiousness and spirituality according to the two-by-two typology used: (1) neither religious nor spiritual (2) religious, but not spiritual (3) spiritual, but not religious (4) both spiritual and religious. I then asked respondents to choose one among five sets of options that best described the ways in which they believed that the constructs of religiousness and spirituality interrelate. I asked respondents to denote what the word 'spirituality' meant to them providing the following options:

To strive for a state of harmony and inner peace, seek the meaning of life, strive for holism of mind, body and spirit, seek to be a good person, believe in God and follow His teachings, help and give time to others, distinguish between right and wrong, believe in a higher, transcendent power, affirm a sense of personal worth.

A major section posed a number of questions that sought to elicit respondents' beliefs about God. Firstly, I asked respondents to tick one of six available options that came closest to their beliefs about the existence of God. The following were the options: I believe that God does not exist, I have no interest in whether God exists or not, I believe in a higher power or life force, but not God, I believe in God from time to time, I believe in God with some doubt, I believe in God without any doubt.

A further 5-point scale question sought to elicit views on the extent to which God and organised religion were important in the lives of respondents. Probing this issue further, I asked respondents to choose one option among six statements about the existence of God: A personal relationship with God, higher power or life force, God as one with the soul and nature, no belief in any kind of God or life force, don't know what to believe, belief in something out there.

I then used a 5-point Likert scale to elicit responses to the statement "Jesus Christ is God's Son." The next question sought responses to the question "What comes after death." Options were: There is something, but I don't know what,

nothing—death is the end, not possible to know, after death there is new life and we are reincarnated.

The next Likert scale question sought to elicit responses to the statement "God is everywhere and within everything."

The next question asked respondents to tick one response to three statements relating to their beliefs about the Bible:

Statement 1—The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken word for word.

Statement 2—The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally.

Statement 3—The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by human beings.

As some of my questions specifically targeted Roman Catholics, I sought to elicit views of how Catholicism relates to social/personal identity. I presented a menu of options: I am Catholic although I do not attend any services, Catholicism is still an important part of Irish life, Belonging to Catholicism is an ethnic/cultural rather than religious membership, Catholicism is no longer of any importance as part of the Irish way of life, identifying oneself as Catholic but not engaging in its traditions/rituals is hypocritical and although I do not consider myself Catholic, I occasionally attend Catholic services for special events.

I included questions eliciting Catholic beliefs about heaven and hell. The statements were as follows:

Statement 1—I believe in heaven as understood by the Roman Catholic tradition.

Statement 2—I do not believe in heaven.

Statement 3—I believe in hell as understood by the Roman Catholic tradition.

Statement 4—I do not believe in hell.

The final section, open to all respondents, sought to elicit perceptions of holistic, New Age practices, mysticism and Awe and Wonder to elicit responses relating to the dimension of affectivity and emotion. I then asked respondents about their experiences (if any) of a presence or power outside normal everyday experience. My interest was in ascertaining whether respondents linked these experiences to forms of sacrality. I then asked if respondents engaged in one or more of the following menu of options within the past year: Yoga, mindfulness, reiki, aromatherapy, shiatsu, transcendental meditation, shiatsu, Zen, or other practices. I further attempted to elicit whether respondents read texts or participated in meetings on Eastern religions, philosophies and spiritualties. I sought data regarding whether Yoga, mindfulness and other wellness practices link to religious or spiritual dimensions.

Appendix B. Interview Guide

Opening Questions

In your own words, what is spirituality?

Could you please recount a situation when you had experiences of something spiritual?

What do you link to the word 'spirituality' today?

In your own words, what is religion?

Could you please recount a situation when you had experiences of something religious?

What is your view of the interrelation between religion and spirituality?

Which of the following comes closest to describing your personal self-identification? (Two-by-two typology on Google Forms survey).

In your view, is religion a private or public affair?

If you pray or reflect/contemplate on the meaning of life, what form does this take?

Views on Catholicism and National Identity

Do you believe that Catholicism is still an important part of the Irish way of life?

How often do you attend services?

Do you consider Catholicism as an ethnic and cultural as opposed to a religious membership?

What (if anything) do you find interesting or attractive about other religions, beliefs, or practices?

What mistakes (if any) has Catholicism made in recent decades?

Questions on Holistic Practices

Which, if any, have you participated in? (List from Google Forms survey).

Do you believe that activities/practices have any connection to religion?

Do you believe that activities/practices have any connection to spirituality?

What motivated you to participate? (List from Google Forms survey).

Could you recount a situation, if any, when you were conscious of a presence or power outside normal everyday experience? Please, could you describe the experience?

Questions on Mystical Experiences and Awe and Wonder

Have you ever experienced Awe and Wonder?

(Probe—If not, explore spiritual emotions such as love, joy, happiness, the good and the beautiful).

(Probe—Exploring the mundane—do you perceive sacredness in the everyday mundanity of life: studies, job, family, relationships?)

Have you ever engaged in horoscopes, astrology, fortune telling, tarot, consulted a psychic? (List from Google Forms survey).

Questions on Life Meaning

(Probe—changes brought about by advancing science and technology affect most areas of human life including belief systems).

In your view, is there incompatibility between the findings of the natural sciences and the truth claims of revealed religion?

In your view, what is the telos (ultimate aim) of a human individual's life? (Probe vertical and horizontal transcendence).

Concluding Questions

Is there anything you would like to add or say about religion or spirituality in Ireland?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

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