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Working Paper

Afterlives: Testimonies of Irish Catholic mothers on infant death and the fate of the unbaptised

QUCEH Working Paper Series, No. 2019-02

Provided in Cooperation with:

Queen's University Centre for Economic History (QUCEH), Queen's University Belfast

Suggested Citation: Kennedy, Liam (2019) : Afterlives: Testimonies of Irish Catholic mothers on infant death and the fate of the unbaptised, QUCEH Working Paper Series, No. 2019-02, Queen's University Centre for Economic History (QUCEH), Belfast

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/200504>

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AFTERLIVES: TESTIMONIES OF IRISH CATHOLIC MOTHERS ON
INFANT DEATH AND THE FATE OF THE UNBAPTISED

Liam Kennedy (Queen's University Belfast)

Working Paper 2019-02

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR ECONOMIC HISTORY
Queen's University Belfast
185 Stranmillis Road
Belfast BT9 5EE

July 2019

Afterlives: Testimonies of Irish Catholic Mothers on Infant Death and the Fate of the Unbaptised

Liam Kennedy*

Abstract

Children growing up in the Ireland of the 1950s will have a clear remembrance of a metaphysical space or place known as Limbo. For Catholics, though not Irish Protestants, this formed part of a spiritual cosmos which viewed Heaven and Hell as opposite poles, with Purgatory and Limbo occupying rather vaguely defined intermediate positions. Fast forward to the present day and hardly any of those born in the new millennium will have the slightest notion of what Limbo was (or is). Yet for generations of families, going back to the dawn of Christianity, there was the fear that failing to baptise an infant before death meant that the infant was condemned either to Hell or to a shadowy existence in a place labelled Limbo. Thus the belief, and associated practices such as the prohibition on burying unbaptised bodies in consecrated ground, is one that is replete with emotional, social, theological and gender implications. This study looks at how Irish mothers look back on these beliefs and their own experiences of Limbo, baptism, churching and the disposal of unbaptised babies. It wonders how and why a deep tradition within the Christian world, and Irish society more particularly, should disappear so quickly and so completely.

Keywords: social history, Ireland, religion, Limbo.

JEL Codes: N33, N34, Z12.

* Liam Kennedy is Emeritus Professor of Economic and Social History, School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, Queen's University Belfast. Email: l.kennedy@qub.ac.uk.

Introduction

Children growing up in the Ireland of the 1950s will have a clear remembrance of a metaphysical space or place known as Limbo. For Catholics, though not Irish Protestants, this formed part of a spiritual cosmos which viewed Heaven and Hell as opposite poles, with Purgatory and Limbo occupying rather vaguely defined intermediate positions. Fast forward to the present day and hardly any of those born in the new millennium will have the slightest notion of what Limbo was (or is), other than as a figure of speech. A belief in Purgatory has also gone into decline, though some residual consciousness of a place of purgation, prior to entry into Heaven, seems to have persisted. Beliefs in Heaven and Hell, by contrast, remain widespread, even in post-Catholic Ireland.

What was Limbo?

But Limbo appears to have disappeared off the spiritual map, which on the face of it is quite puzzling. So, what was Limbo? The green *Catechism*, in which generations of schoolchildren were schooled and which carried the imprimatur of the then Archbishop of Dublin, Joannes Carolus, dated 1951, contains the essential elements of belief.¹ The chain of concepts ran from the Fall of Adam and Eve, and hence Original Sin, and from there to Baptism and, in certain unfortunate circumstances, to Limbo.

The first parents of the human race were Adam and Eve. Adam ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Paradise and for this act of disobedience not only Adam and Eve but all subsequent humanity was punished. Here are the relevant excerpts from the *Catechism*. The time-worn format is that of a question, followed by an authoritative answer.

Q. 57: How do we call the state in which we are born because of the sin of Adam?

The state in which we are born because of the sin of Adam is called the state of original sin.

¹ *A Catechism of Catholic Doctrine: Approved by the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland* (Dublin, 1951). Nor was this of recent vintage. A catechism, written in Irish and Latin and published in Brussels in 1639, *The 'Catechismus' of Theobald Stapleton*, also speaks of the necessity of Baptism and of a place apart for unbaptized infants. This work was reproduced by the Irish Manuscripts Commission, Dublin, in 1945.

Q. 58: Why is original sin so called?

Original sin is so called because it comes down to us through our origin, or descent from Adam, the head of the human race.

The next phase in the argument involves the sacrament of baptism as the gateway into the Catholic community, and ultimately into Heaven.

Q. 344: Is Baptism necessary for salvation?

Baptism is necessary for salvation, because our Divine Lord has said: Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (John iii, 5).

This gives rise to a terrible dilemma. Because original sin is stamped on the souls of all, including still-births and the newly-born, these souls cannot enter heaven unless they have received the sacrament of baptism, which is the only means to eternal salvation. This perplexed both theologians and parents, and explains the rush to have infants baptised as soon as possible.

Origin of the Idea of Limbo

The term Limbo does not appear in the Bible or the New Testament and it seems the concept was developed over time by Christians to handle two problems: one was the fate of those who led just lives and who died before Christ came on earth to redeem humankind; the other was the fate of unbaptised babies in the event of death. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, published in 1967, saw the second as the prime issue. ‘The word [Limbo] in our times refers to the place or state of infants dying without the Sacrament of Baptism who suffer the pain of loss but not the pain of sense.’² Theological discussions of life after death for unbaptised infants go back at least as far as St. Augustine in the fifth century A.D. Because original sin was stamped on the souls of all the new-born, St. Augustine took the uncomplicated view that unbaptised children were plunged straight to Hell.³ Small wonder, as Diarmaid MacCulloch writes, that ‘creative Christian thinkers’ might speculate about some middle state.⁴ Out of the ferment of theological speculation there emerged in the early Middle Ages a notion of ‘Limbus Infantium’, a place where unbaptised babies were stored for all time, free from the torments of hell but unable to

² *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, vol. 8, 1967), p. 762.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 1056.

⁴ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700* (London, 2004), pp. 11-12.

enjoy the joys of Heaven or of being reunited with their brothers, sisters, mother or father ever again.⁵

At first sight much of this might appear as the preoccupations of theologians and clergy. The argument of this article is that these theological assumptions had important implications for people's lives, in Ireland and presumably elsewhere in the Catholic world. Thus for those who believed in Limbo it affected not only how they fared in the next world, in itself a vital consideration, but it influenced their inner lives and their behaviour in this life as well. What follows is a preliminary study, conducted in association with the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA). It seeks to recover some of the varied understandings of Limbo that can be found in later twentieth-century Irish society and goes on to show how these beliefs shaped people's lives, sometimes edging them with great sadness. It is a story of motherhood, childhood and anxieties surrounding child birth.

The Approach

This study is based on the recollections of 26 mothers, 23 of them members of the ICA, whose help is gratefully acknowledged. These were elicited using a questionnaire distributed by the ICA in the spring of 2017. Many of the questions were open-ended so that respondents might elaborate as they saw fit. Many did so, revealing a deep vein of knowledge and insight. In a small number of cases follow-up communication by phone or by e-mail was arranged. This allowed a more detailed exploration of some of the themes. Each respondent was guaranteed anonymity. There was no attempt to produce a representative sample, as this lay beyond the resources of the project.

The internal evidence suggests that the voices presented here extend to a broad cross-section of older Irish women, while making no claims as to their representative character. The diversity of responses, in part conditioned by generational status, is what might be expected. The incidental information on fertility captures the fertility transition evident in Irish society in the later twentieth century. The average number of children per mother was 4.1 for the sample as a whole; for those born in the 1960s the average was two children. This finding of a sharp decline in marital fertility, which mirrors (though not exactly) the larger population, is

⁵ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, p. 70.

reassuring. It is a tribute to the women who responded that virtually all of the questions were answered in a clear, often eloquent form.

The respondents were widely scattered across Ireland, and all four provinces were represented. The sample size is too small to engage in any kind of regional analysis, thus the results are presented at an aggregate level or given in individual detail. There may well be regional differences to the pace of change, there may be urban-rural differences, and there may be variation by socio-economic status. If so, teasing out such differences must await a larger study. As compared to large-scale, computer-assisted social surveys, where answers are plucked out of individual case context, there is the advantage that the completed questionnaires were sufficiently manageable as to allow each to be read as a complete document. The semi-structured nature of the questionnaire also allowed for a flow of remembrances that could not easily find its way into a more rigid format.

The opening question in the survey sought to get a sense of the age of the respondent because attitude and behaviour are likely to have varied as between generations. The age breakdown was as follows: two were born in the 1930s, nine in the 1940s, eleven in the 1950s and three in the 1960s, or twenty five in all. (One respondent did not include her decade of birth.) This is a good spread and, with the exception of those born in the 1960s, it is clear that we are dealing with generations of women socialised into beliefs in Limbo, who also experienced traditional understandings of Catholic teaching on this and other elements of belief.⁶

What kind of Place was Limbo?

Images of Limbo entered the imagination of young women but seemingly took different, sometimes phantasmagorical forms. It is not possible to do justice to the range of views and emphases, short of reproducing all of the responses, but the following are representative impressions. A mother who was born in the late 1940s visualised Limbo as ‘some dark place, never to see the sight of God. I imagined it like a cave, not to see any light again.’ Another respondent from the same era wrote as follows: ‘I didn’t think about it much. Perhaps visualised some sort of a dark corridor with strangely-shaped “people” – tiny creatures – waiting.’ The

⁶ On the fervent Catholicism of most Irish people across most of the twentieth century see Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin, 2nd edition, 1998), pp. 129-39 and Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London, 2004), pp. 517-23, 571-86.

implication may be of waiting for admission to Heaven and this expectation is mentioned in a number of the responses.

Some did not share this expectation, however. One writes: Limbo was 'A dark area where unbaptised babies went. They would not ever get to heaven.' A mother from County Cork, and one of the younger respondents (born in the early 1960s) viewed Limbo as 'A not so nice place where you were stuck forever because you had original sin! Scary place as a child.' This echoes the opinion of another mother, also born in the 1960s, who saw Limbo as a 'No Man's Land.' She goes on to say that those who went there were 'locked out of Heaven and had nowhere to go.' She places Limbo in a celestial setting, located 'between Heaven and Purgatory', adding that it was a lonely place. A response from County Meath that reflects Church teachings at the time ran as follows: 'Asked my mother what limbo was, as a child. Explained by my Mother that babies couldn't go to church or be buried at the cemetery, if not baptised. As they still had original sin.' The theme of burial grounds for unbaptised babies is one we will return to.

Most respondents recalled Limbo as a gloomy state: 'Darkness. No pain or punishment but the loss of God'; 'a dark, lonely place of waiting'; 'not a very nice place'; 'a place where one never saw God'. Another elaborated: 'I think it was a place where lost souls floated around indefinitely, no pain, no feelings, just an aimless existence, neither a good nor a bad place, the main point was that they were lost souls going nowhere with no escape route, unlike purgatory where there was hope that at some time they might be released. However, it was always instilled in us that these lost souls were blameless.'

But not all viewed Limbo as inhabited by 'lost souls' of one kind or another, though admittedly the following are minority viewpoints. A County Donegal woman who would no longer consider herself a practising Catholic mentions: 'I don't recall thinking too long and hard about the subject to be honest! But it wouldn't have been a negative place to my young mind.' The childhood recollection of another mother was of a 'lovely peaceful place but lonely'. A more detailed account was furnished by a mother who was born in the 1940s:

Limbo was a place where babies and people who had died without their sins forgiven went to before they were clean enough to enter heaven. A happy enough place! We spent our childhood at All Souls Night in and out of the church praying for the relatives who had died, to send them from Limbo and help them enter Heaven. All the Parish did this! Saying 1 Our Father, 10 Hail Marys and 1 Glory be to the Father each.

You spoke to no-one while doing this. It was always very dark, you could only barely make out the other hundred people doing the same. But it was a ritual I liked doing. I felt I was helping the relatives who had died. It made a connection with them.

The eschatology may be a little awry as two distinct states, that of Purgatory and that of Limbo, are being fused and confused, but this is a wonderfully vivid picture of popular Catholic pietism as it related to communion with the dead and the plight of souls in the ‘other world’. It is in accord with a long-standing Christian belief in a community of the living and the dead, a belief found in many religions. Time-wise it relates either to the end of the 1940s or the early 1950s (as the respondent’s decade of birth was the 1940s). She concludes by saying: ‘But I don’t believe the innocent babies go to Limbo or anywhere else. I believe my granddaughter who was miscarried is with my mother happy and content – wherever they are.’

Another expressed a positive assessment of Limbo, though with the qualification that she hadn’t given the different manifestations of the ‘other world’ much thought. There is also possibly a strain of scepticism (taking the totality of her responses into account). Here is what she had to say:

I thought it was a place of happiness. I never thought too deeply on these places, “heaven, hell, purgatory, limbo”. I could never figure the whole thing out so I just went along with it. My parents were Catholic and practised as was laid down. .. The previous generation, my granny, thought all these departments were up in space and wondered did the astronauts see any sign of Heaven.

Clearly Limbo meant different things to different people, though there is little doubt that most viewed it as an undesirable place or state of being. There is an impression also from the various testimonies, irrespective of the standpoint adopted, that the characteristics of Limbo were only weakly sketched by those who felt a responsibility for passing on these beliefs. The contrast with traditional Catholic teaching on Hell, for instance, is marked. There was nothing vague or shadowy about the terrors of Hell.⁷⁷ A majority of the respondents saw Limbo as an intermediate state: ‘a place where children were in until they went to heaven.’ Some however did not take Heaven to be the ultimate destination, and so entertained the frightening prospect that there was no escape for all of eternity.

⁷⁷ A celebrated literary depiction of Hell is that by the writer, James Joyce, in his *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London, 1973) but as many can testify these images of excruciating suffering were not confined to the pages of fiction.

The Timing of Baptism

In view of the potential danger of one's child ending up in Limbo and facing the prospect of loss of one kind or another, there was an admirable emphasis on having the infant baptised as soon as practicable. This was all the more important in periods of high infant mortality, as was the case in most parts of Europe until after World War II.⁸ In Ireland, at the beginning of the twentieth century, one in ten children died within a year of birth. There had been only limited improvement in the Irish Free State, later Irish Republic, until the widespread use of antibiotics after World War II. In 1943 infant mortality stood at more than 80 in every 1,000 births, before entering a largely uninterrupted decline thereafter. Still, it was not until the 1970s that infant mortality dipped below 20 per 1,000.⁹ Thus the communal experience of child mortality and popular understanding of religious duties served to reinforce each other in favour of early baptism. This was Church orthodoxy but was it translated into practice? So far as we know, it was, and with remarkable rigour. What little research there is points unequivocally in the direction of a practice of early baptism, at least down to the 1960s.¹⁰

Baptism was normally administered by the parish priest or his curate but in the event of danger of death parents and other lay persons could perform the ceremony. One mother speaks of 'my dear little angel who died ten minutes after birth. The baby was baptised by a lovely nurse after birth.' This, incidentally, is the only instance in the survey where a reference is made to baptism by a lay person, though we know that Catholic nurses and other medical practitioners were instructed in how to respond to a spiritual as well as a medical emergency. One retired hospital consultant told me that on the labour ward there was always a bottle of holy water to hand, should the occasion arise.¹¹

This survey presents some information on parental behaviour in relation to the timing of baptism, though it should be noted that most of these births were occurring from the 1970s onwards when notions of Limbo were undergoing change. As is apparent from Table 2, most of the first-born children (76%) were baptised within a month of birth; in a minority of cases

⁸ B.R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics, 1750-1970* (London, 1978), pp. 39-44.

⁹ Annual reports of the Registrar-General for Saorstát Éireann and the later publication by the Central Statistics Office, edited by Adrian Redmond, *That was Then, This is Now: Change in Ireland, 1949-1999* (Dublin, 2000).

¹⁰ Based on an examination of three Catholic baptism registers by the author in widely separated parts of Ireland. These are a parish in central Belfast, a parish in North Tipperary and a parish on the Dingle peninsula in County Kerry. Unless these are highly unrepresentative, the records indicate that typically the date of birth and the date of baptism were within a few days of each other in Catholic Ireland up to the early 1960s.

¹¹ Conversation in August 2016, and again in August 2017, with a retired consultant who worked for many years at Portlaoise Hospital, in the Irish midlands. He added that sometimes, in the event of a stillbirth, the remains were placed secretly in the coffin of an adult corpse so as to gain access to sacred ground.

(24%) the interval between birth and baptism was more than one month. The number of cases is twenty five as one return omitted this information. Thus traditional baptismal practices were undergoing change but not yet to the extent apparent nowadays. The pattern for the last-born child shows a shift over time towards late baptism. The two mothers, for instance, who had had their first child baptised within three days delayed baptism for the final child by more than a week in one instance and by more than a month in the other. What this tells us is that behaviour within the *same* family in relation to baptism could change by birth order and over time.

The shift to longer birth-baptism intervals had important implications of a gender-specific kind, some of which are not immediately apparent. It meant that the mothers could attend the baptism ceremony, something that was not possible under the traditional regime of almost immediate baptism. In another sign of the changing times, all of the births were in hospitals or nursing homes: the era of home births had passed, though this had been commonplace in rural districts as late as the 1940s. Nonetheless most of the baptism ceremonies were performed at the baptistery in the church, as prescribed by ecclesiastical law.

Table 2. The interval between birth and baptism

	Within 3 days	4 to 7 days	8 to 31 days	Greater than 31 days
	%	%	%	%
First-born	8	20	48	24
Last-born	0	8	56	36

‘Churching’ of the Mother

This brings us to a controversial area relating to the rituals surrounding childbirth and one on which there are divided opinions. This was the practice of ‘churching’ the mother after birth and before she could be permitted to participate fully in the sacrament of the Mass. The modern

version is described as ‘a blessing given by the Church to mothers after recovery from childbirth.’¹²

Not all of the mothers in our survey experienced ‘churching’. Less than one-third reported they had undergone the ceremony after the birth of their first child. This was seven of the mothers, and six in the case of last-births. A mother who was born in the 1930s was churched after the birth of her first child in 1963, but the birth of her seventh and last child in 1977 was followed by a ‘blessing’ rather than the traditional ceremony.

One of the respondents, while still a schoolgirl, happened to observe a ceremony in her convent chapel that she took to be a case of churching. The observations are intriguing, because they suggest a consciousness of churching among some schoolchildren circa 1960 and also because it is not clear if this really was a case in point. Could nuns for instance administer a form of churching?

I recollect attending day secondary school, Middleton, Co Cork 1959-1964. One day, possibly in 1960, the cleaning lady, Mrs O’Reilly, had another baby, maybe her fifth child. She was back cleaning up after us quite soon after the birth. I remember one day visiting the Convent chapel before we left for the train and saw Mrs O’Reilly in there with her baby and one of the nuns praying over her and giving them both a blessing. One of my wiser friends said she was being ‘churched’. That’s my only brush with the activity.

How mothers experienced churching is an important consideration. There is an eloquence to many of the testimonies but it may be helpful before reading on to recall the two questions that were posed in the survey. First, were you churched after the birth? If so, how did you feel about this at the time? This is the response of a mother who gave birth for the first time in 1969: ‘Very strange it was the first time. I’d heard of churching, my mother took me to the Church, we sat in the back seats. A priest came out to church me, this had to be done before I could enter the Church for mass or sacraments.’ This is a good summary of the practice, and there is an implication that she was ‘churched’ on more than one occasion.

¹² <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03761a.htm> [accessed 12 June 2017]. On ‘churching’ and its meaning in early modern Ireland see Clodagh Tait, ‘Safely Delivered: Childbirth, Wet-Nursing, Gossip-Feasts and Churching in Ireland c.1530-1690’, *Irish Economic & Social History*, XXX (2003), pp. 19-23.

Other responses indicate a depth of emotion, bordering on anger, towards this Church practice. These are the words and feelings of three of the women: [I felt] ‘terrible, easily known priests didn’t have babies’; ‘Angry, as it was only the woman (not the man)’; ‘Upset. Made me feel it was sinful to have created new life’. But one mother whose first child was born in 1976 simply responded to the question on how she felt after being ‘churched’: ‘Good’.¹³ Another of an earlier generation, who had her first child in 1960, said she felt ‘OK’.

Some women who were not ‘churched’, and hence typically younger, held strongly gendered views on the subject. According to one, she was ‘very annoyed that there was churching of women only.’ Another mother – her first child was born in 1981 – had more wide-ranging criticisms. She recalls: ‘when I read somewhere about this practice I was truly horrified. It laid the ground stone for regarding sex, reproduction and women [as] unclean. It quite put males on a different upward level.’

Some were simply dismissive of the notion of churching. ‘I had heard about it but thought it was ridiculous.’¹⁴ However, the modern replacement for ‘churching’, that of offering a thanksgiving blessing by a priest after birth, drew a favourable response from three of the mothers. So a distinction was being drawn between a traditional practice which some at least saw as misogynistic and a more modern adaptation.

An attempt at summarising these varied responses might run as follows. A minority of the women who had been churched found it acceptable and perhaps even a positive experience. But most found it objectionable, at least in retrospect and possibly at the time. (There is always the danger, here as elsewhere, that current attitudes are being projected backwards to an earlier period in time, though some of the criticisms are so forthright that they suggest long-standing feelings on the subject.) Moreover, some women who had not been churched went out of their way to pour scorn on the very idea of the practice. There are certainly flashes of resentment along gender lines at a ceremony that was perceived as discriminating against women. Though the survey was not designed to explore the issue in any detail, it seems unlikely that the view

¹³ This may, however, be a reference to the new rite of thanksgiving for a safe birth (though the term ‘churching’ is used in her response.)

¹⁴ Her first child was born in 1975 which gives a rough indication of the generation to which she belonged.

expressed above by one of the respondents, linking churching to repressive clerical attitudes towards sex and reproduction, was or is an isolated opinion.¹⁵

The Burial of Unbaptised Babies

The Irish countryside contains many reminders of how unbaptised babies were disposed of in the past. The Irish-language term, *cillín*, refers to patches of ground where unbaptised babies, and sometimes suicides and strangers whose baptismal status was unknown, were interred.¹⁶ Pregnant women who died before giving birth might also be excluded from consecrated ground. Some parishes had more than one *cillín*, so there may well have been thousands of these sites dotted across the island at one time or other. Many have softened into the landscape with the passage of time and their very existence is now forgotten but on the Dingle peninsula, for instance, the outlines of *cillíní* are still visible to the eye and locally-knowledgeable people can point out locations in other parts of Ireland.¹⁷

The practice of excluding unbaptised babies from Catholic cemeteries goes deep in time, probably to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the aftermath of the Counter-Reformation. The unbaptised were not part of the Christian community, by virtue of not having had the stain of Original Sin expunged from their souls. As a consequence, they were deemed unfit to share consecrated ground with baptised Catholics. A compromise in some localities was to designate an obscure part of the cemetery as a burial ground for unbaptised babies. In Middleton, County Cork, for instance, it is related in the survey that there was a ‘communal area for babies in a corner of the cemetery – with no names’. These infants were typically stillbirths or neo-natal deaths. The so-called ‘Angels Plot’ in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin is said to contain the remains of more than 50,000 babies.¹⁸ Milltown cemetery in the west of Belfast has a boggy area, situated away from the main burial grounds where thousands of unbaptised babies are said to be buried.¹⁹

¹⁵ Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly* (1998).

¹⁶ Eileen M. Murphy, ‘Children’s Burial Grounds in Ireland (*Cillíní*) and Parental Emotions towards Infant Death’, *Irish Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 15, 2011, pp. 409-28; Aidan O’Sullivan *et al.*, *Early Medieval Ireland AD 400-1100: The Evidence from Archaeological Excavations* (Dublin, 2014), p. 311.

¹⁷ Conversations on the subject with two Dingle-based scholars, Dr Breandán Mac Suibhne and the late Monsignor Pádraig Ó Fiannachta, are gratefully acknowledged.

¹⁸ *Irish Times*, 2 February 2011. An article in the *Cork Examiner*, 15 August, 2012, mentions ‘Angel Plots’ in a number of other cemeteries.

¹⁹ *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 May 2010.

The survey sought to get some sense, not of the origins but of how recent the exclusionary practices might have been. It is worth bearing in mind that we are drawing our information from mothers who gave birth in the second half of the twentieth century. So perhaps the really surprising finding to emerge from Table 3 is that only a minority of infant corpses may have been placed in the family grave (the presumption being that these were unbaptised babies). At least that is the impression conveyed by these respondents in relation to their own localities. The quantitative estimates presented in the table should not be given too much emphasis – the sample is small, a few did not answer, and a quarter of respondents were not acquainted with their local parochial burial protocols – but what information there is points in the direction of practices that discriminated against unbaptised babies, not just in earlier times but into the second half of the twentieth century. Of the five who mentioned that stillbirths and early infant deaths were totally excluded from sacred ground, one mother was born in the 1930s, two in the 1940s and two in the 1950s. There is an age gradient to the responses as younger mothers either had no direct personal experience – a consequence of declining neo-natal mortality – or burial practices had been liberalised locally.

Table 3. Disposing of the corpses of the unbaptised infants

	Number of responses	Proportion of responses
Family grave	7	30.4%
Other part of the cemetery	4	17.4%
Outside of the cemetery	5	21.7%
Unsure/do not know	7	30.4%
	23	100%

These were the practices, at least in some localities. It is now time to consider how these practices were experienced. The testimony of one of the mothers has such a piercing quality it is worth documenting at length.

I was born in 1948 in my grandparents' house on a Sunday morning [and] was baptised the following Sunday in Church. I was the eldest of ten children. But in 1954 I had a sister born named Marian (as it was Marian year in Ireland). She was born on a Saturday but died the next day. As was customary then my Dad had to take her little body late at night well after dark to

an old graveyard and on the perimeter of the graveyard my Dad had to bury her with no grave markings (an unknown grave). But at the time he made a little cross shape tied together with twine, made from two sticks and stuck them in the ground. Every year my Dad used to take me to Marian's grave to say a little prayer.

He used to say she was a little "angel in Limbo". All because she hadn't been baptised. That old Churchyard has been tidied up and over the last ten to fifteen years the local priest says a mass/prayers once a year. Many people go along and some of us have placed little crosses/markers where our little angels have been buried back in the '50s....'

This tallies with another account from a mother who was born in the 1950s: 'they were buried outside the cemetery, maybe in a ditch.' A 'modern' mother, born in County Monaghan in the 1960s (her first child born in 1999), mentions in the case of her mother that she lost a child soon after birth. The remains were buried soon after in the family grave but the family did not attend the burial. In further correspondence she kindly outlined some further circumstances. Her father got a little coffin and set off for the hospital. He and her uncle buried the infant, in what must have been a lonely funeral at the family grave. In Ireland funerals are usually large gatherings of family, kin, neighbours and friends – an occasion of sociability and communal solidarity. The difference on this occasion underlines the abnormality of these kinds of furtive burials. Nor was there any religious ceremony at the graveside. It was 'a private thing', she says, and it wasn't spoken about much. 'My mother's baby was carried to full-term even though it was known that the baby had died approx six weeks before its due date.' She continues:

Our neighbours would have known she was pregnant but no one would speak about her loss. It was such a private matter at that time and the only conversation she would have had would have been with my Dad, the nurses and doctor. My mother never seen the baby and the nuns in the nursing home told her that it was for the best. The baby was deformed-looking. My mother accepted this. We were told about the death at the time and that Dad was going to bury the baby.

Despite or perhaps because of the sense of grief and loss, Limbo was not far from their thoughts:

We were aware even though we were young at the time that the baby was gone to Limbo. ... The nurses were nuns and my mother said they were very kind and looked after the mothers

very well. The baby boy was never named. We don't really talk to my mother about it as we know it would be sad to remind her about that time. My mother and mothers of my friends who had lost babies would have the same experience.

Our baby brother would have been born in the late 60s or early 70s. I am not sure of the date. I went to a mission where all unbaptised babies were remembered and you could name the baby. I told my mother about the special remembrance I attended and she was delighted. I put my own name on the baby and participated in the prayers and candlelit procession. In Cavan hospital every year they have a mass for unbaptised babies and they are remembered. It's such a lovely way to remember those babies who didn't make it and are now acknowledged. My mother is in her 90th year and is a very resilient lady.

It's all there, is it not? We notice the silences, the awkwardness, perhaps a touch of shame, the pain of grieving, the emotional imprint on the next generation, and the efforts of the Catholic Church in more recent times to address the deep sadness affecting parents and the wider family. There is support for the value of these rites and practices from a perhaps unexpected quarter, that of modern psychology. One strand of bereavement theory recognises that 'death ends a life, not necessarily a relationship', as indeed orthodox Catholics have always believed. This approach to grieving assumes that 'the relationship and the emotional link with the loved one can be continued and this has been found to be especially important in the case of losing a child'.²⁰

Nor were the barriers to giving support and understanding, either in liturgical or in personal forms, confined to the Catholic community in Ireland. The Bishop of Meath and Kildare, the Most Rev. Pat Storey, has written of the prevailing culture in previous generations whereby people 'seldom talked about or acknowledged miscarriage or loss.' She herself had undergone the pain of losing three babies through miscarriage. In her view 'society has been slow to acknowledge the loss of a baby through miscarriage, stillbirth or neonatal death...Indeed, in the church too we have had no liturgy that might help to navigate the turbulent waters of this kind of loss.'²¹

²⁰ Marie Rooney, 'Where do the Dead Go?', *Dublin Review of Books*, no. 111, May 2019. The adaptive or therapeutic value of 'continuing bonds' is, however, the subject of controversy, and may vary by cultural context and circumstance. For further discussion see Briana L. Root and Julie J. Exline, 'The Role of Continuing Bonds in Coping with Grief: Overview and Future Directions', *Death Studies*, 31 (2014), pp. 1-8.

²¹ 'New service lets parents voice grief at losing a baby', *Irish Times*, 11 June 2019.

The Fading of Limbo

For generations of Irish Catholic mothers the pain and the joy of giving birth was closely associated with infant mortality and fear of Limbo. Adherents of Irish Protestant denominations, it may be noted, entertained no such apprehensions as these faiths did not include a belief in Limbo.²² Within Catholic Ireland the existence of cillíní and the exclusion of unbaptised babies from sacred ground pointed to fear-dominated connections between birth, baptism and the world beyond the grave. Limbo was the spectre that haunted motherhood and birth-giving. This was in addition to other concerns of a kind common to all mothers around the time of birth. Yet few subscribe to notions of Limbo nowadays and the days of early or immediate baptism are largely gone.

So when did these once all-pervasive beliefs regarding unbaptised infants give way to different conceptions of the afterlife? The survey results suggest considerable vagueness on the timing of the transition, and quite a few added that they were unsure. This in itself is significant as it suggests that the fading of Limbo was a largely unremarked process within Irish society. There was no watershed moment, as with the acceptance of same-sex marriage (to take a recent example), but rather a progressive and barely perceptible decay of a once powerfully-held belief. A larger survey might well find variations in the process of change as between different parishes and dioceses. A host of social variables might be at play, including differences in age, gender, education, socio-economic status, and much else besides. Moreover, as with birth control nowadays, different priests and nuns might communicate differing interpretations as to what was morally correct.

It is perhaps appropriate that the decline of a nebulous nether world, such as Limbo, should itself be subject to an uncertain, extended and barely perceptible demise. Of one thing, though, we can be fairly sure. It is that belief in Limbo and the associated fears for the eternal welfare of the unbaptised infant persisted into the 1960s, and in the hearts and minds of some parents for longer.

²² The Church of Ireland baptism records for St Werburg's and St Mary's in Dublin city and of Dingle in County Kerry, as well as the Presbyterian records for Clonmel, County Tipperary show a wide and widening gap between baptism and birth dates over the last two centuries. For a larger sample of parishes and some discussion see William Paul Gray, *A Social History of Illegitimacy in Ireland from the Late Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century* (Ph.D. dissertation, Queen's University, Belfast, 2000).

Why the decline of belief in Limbo?

Now we come to a crucial question. Why were deeply-rooted beliefs in the existence of Limbo simply neglected or discarded in the later twentieth century? A preliminary point may be made. Tracing change in religious beliefs is a notoriously elusive enterprise, as is identifying the determinants of change. The responses in the survey fall into two broad categories. Only one expressed no view. A clear majority (three-quarters) placed the emphasis on changing beliefs and values on the part of the laity. The remaining quarter saw the source of change as coming from on high, from the clergy and hierarchy of the Catholic Church. To simplify a little, the explanatory sketches ran in terms of Priests or People.

The People were viewed in the survey as responding to a variety of influences, located mainly at the societal level. Several mention the importance of education in coming to new ways of thinking about Limbo. The result according to one respondent was that ‘more people [were] less accepting of Church/Catholic myths’. Linked to education but not only to education was a more questioning attitude. As one mother put it: ‘Young people became more educated and began to question stuff that did not make sense to them. They were no longer afraid of the “fire and brimstone” that our previous generations were afraid to question.’ Another felt that people could not believe that the unborn baby could have sin on its soul.

What was viewed as the inherent cruelty of Limbo was picked up, unprompted, by three respondents. ‘People think Limbo is a ... cruel place and don’t think that children go there. They believe in a more merciful God and that children will go to Heaven directly.’ The related comments were: ‘People became more educated and realised that people cannot suffer in a manner like [as] is described in Hell’; and ‘People began to think it was too cruel to have innocent babies going there [Limbo].’ In a somewhat similar vein, a mother added pithily: ‘Because people didn’t buy it anymore’ while another, from County Tipperary, felt the radio and television presenter, Gay Byrne played a role in liberalising attitudes. She also drew attention to the declining moral authority of priests in Irish society. Finally, a few respondents mentioned more vaguely ‘change in society’ as the reason for the decline in belief in Limbo without indicating what they regarded as the vital influences.

Then there is the minority who saw change as endogenous, that is, as coming from within the Catholic Church itself. By the beginning of the 1970s, according to one such response, ‘there was a new way of baptism where the priest welcomed the Mam, Dad, baby and other members

of the family at the door of the Church [and] the priest blessed the whole family.’ According to another mother: ‘it must have been something to do with a change of focus within the catholic church – possibly combined with more hospital births and lower mortality rates.’

Not wholly surprisingly, Vatican II and the reforms it introduced is mentioned as a well-spring of renewal. ‘Before Vatican II people had to adhere to strict regulations in the Church. After Vatican II Rules were relaxed.’ There is an edge of criticism from another mother: ‘Church changed its attitude, and not before time.’ The most elaborate explanation of the evolution of Church teaching, and not necessarily approving of the direction of change, came from a mother in County Dublin. It also helpfully outlines some of the theological considerations.

As you know, Limbo was never a defined dogma of the Catholic Church but was a theological consequence of the dogma of Original Sin and the necessity of Baptism. There is no doubt it was a heart-breaking conclusion for any involved in such a death. But the teaching said that the child would remain in a state of perfect happiness in Limbo, a place Jesus visited between His death and His resurrection. ..

After Vatican II, when churchmen decided it was to be a NICE Church, the very idea that a child born dead or a child dying before baptism did not go straight to heaven was seen as UNACCEPTABLE. Limbo was downgraded from a THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSION to a THEORY.’ [Capitals as in the original.]

From early to late baptism

The winds of social change blew increasingly strongly through Irish society in the second half of the twentieth century. Rising living standards, increased access to secondary- and tertiary-level education, the widespread adoption of contraception, greater equality between the sexes and a decline in clerical vocations are just some of the manifestations of social change. If anything, the pace of change has been accelerating in the early twenty-first century with the recognition of divorce and same-sex marriage, and an acceptance of abortion under certain circumstances. Not all would agree that all of these revisions to traditional attitudes and practices – what might loosely be termed a process of secularisation – have been for the good. The diversity of responses in the survey suggests as much. And to put this in a wider context, in many respects what has been happening in Ireland is part and parcel of a wider European

pattern of social and cultural change since the 1960s, or what some might term the increasing secularisation of society.²³

Within this context of change, one of the least remarked shifts within Irish society in the last fifty to sixty years has been the transition from early to late baptism. Yet it is one replete with emotional, social, theological and gender implications. The gradual and largely unremarked movement towards late baptism meant that the mother, who after all bears the burden of childbirth, can be present at the joyous moment of introducing the infant into her community of faith, an occasion enhanced by the presence of friends, relatives and loved ones. She is no longer excluded, in effect if not in formal terms, from the ceremony as in times past. The associated matter of churching, a source of resentment to some mothers, has been abolished and a different blessing ceremony substituted in its place. The rejection of Limbo in *popular* understanding of the fate of the unbaptised infant – the theological position is more open-ended²⁴ – has also served to reduce a part of the anguish surrounding infant mortality.

Relaxing the belief in Limbo clearly mattered. ‘Younger parents today have a different outlook. They no longer believe that an unbaptised baby will go to hell.’ More pointedly, another mother observed: ‘Because the doctrine of Limbo is no longer believed within the modern Church ... there is no real hurry to baptise children nowadays.’ If so, this suggests that instruction in belief in Limbo, at a pastoral level, is no longer carried out and that even the possibility of the existence of Limbo has been quietly set aside.

The health and presence of the mother are also given prominence. ‘Parents, especially mothers, wish to be fit and healthy to attend [the] baptism of their child. Years ago children were baptised in their mother’s absence.’ Or, as another put it, baptism is delayed to allow the mother to recover after childbirth and allow both parents to participate in the festivities. One mother provided a spiritual rationale: ‘Parents need time to understand the sacrament’, while several raised concerns as to the depth of religious conviction in contemporary society: The ‘value of

²³ The notion of secularisation is itself contested. See Callum G. Brown and Michael Snape (eds) *Secularisation in the Christian World* (Surrey, 2010).

²⁴ International Theological Commission, *The Hope of Salvation for Infants who Die Before Being Baptised*. See www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en.html [consulted 20 June 2017]. This authoritative statement from the Vatican sets out the current theological understanding of Limbo whose existence has now been downgraded to that of a ‘hypothesis’. In other words, it is no longer an article of faith (if it ever was) and there are grounds for believing that unbaptised infants may enter Heaven. Still, and contrary to much lay Catholic opinion, there is no certainty of entry to Heaven.

the sacrament has gone for most young people’, said one; ‘The new generation don’t believe’ reported another. One simply wrote ‘Lack of Faith’.

The occasion of baptism has been elaborated into an occasion of celebration and festivity for the extended family, with the centre of gravity moving from the baptistery to the home: ‘Nowadays Baptism of a baby seems to be geared towards a party and celebration’, observed one mother ‘and the Sacrament is not thought about as much.’²⁵ Moreover, in view of the importance of migration and emigration, particularly from rural and small-town Ireland, there are undoubtedly dilemmas of timing and location for some families. One mother explains: ‘I would consider that parents nowadays would consider the convenience aspect of having their friends and families attend, rather than any consideration of the Church teachings.’ Another mother, while critical of the modern tendencies, largely agrees on the importance of the social. ‘Nowadays Baptisms are like Weddings, a big show. I don’t think it’s about the Sacrament of Baptism any more. It’s all about the show, dressing up, the party after, celebrating for the wrong reasons. It’s a pity.’

Implicit in many of the testimonies, one suspects, and finding explicit recognition in three of the accounts is an emphasis on improved infant mortality. In all three cases a modernisation-type argument is combined with an altered vision of Limbo and its terrors. Thus, according to one of these, the retreat from early baptism has to do, firstly, with the superior health-care provided for babies nowadays – falling infant mortality – and secondly, a shift in religious consciousness (‘parents don’t fear or know about Limbo any more’). And another: ‘There is no pressure to bring forward the event as there is no fear of limbo, infant mortality is probably lower so the fear of something happening the baby may not be as great as previously.’

Conclusion

The conventional understanding of childhood is that of a period of life between birth and adolescence, though as Philippe Aries demonstrated long ago for medieval and post-medieval Europe meanings have varied over time and between cultures.²⁶ The Limbo controversy, which is inextricably bound up with notions of the human soul and the afterlife, suggests that we

²⁵ The *locus classicus* for Catholic beliefs and practices in pre-Famine Ireland, including sociability surrounding vital events, is S.J. Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland* (Dublin, paperback edition, 2001).

²⁶ Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (translated from the French, London, 1973).

might reconsider the idea of childhood as embracing life in the womb, life after birth, as well as the afterlife of the foetus or infant in the event of death. Some grieving families, as we have seen, believed in a continuing existence for their departed child, albeit translated into another but equally real world (according to their lights). Thus, protective feelings and relationships enveloping child and family did not cease with death. Such imagined states may seem strange when viewed from the perspective of secular western culture but it bears emphasising that perceived realities of the kind recounted here presented few challenges to the religious world view of earlier generations. Maybe the boot should be on the other foot. Perhaps what is needed is more imagination on the part of sceptical historians and others, allowing a deeper appreciation of the complex inner lives of believers whom we know believed without reservation in the simultaneous existence of different worlds, of which only one was of the earthly kind. The sentiments of Sheridan Gilley, if nuanced a little, are worth recalling: ‘The secular mentality ... cannot grasp the self-understanding of a religious people who live not only for this life but for another.’²⁷

Among Catholic parents in Ireland, in the Irish diaspora and in the Catholic universe more generally, religious and hence social assumptions and practices surrounding miscarriages, stillbirths and neonatal deaths formed part of the understanding of childhood, though presumably to varying degrees. For orthodox Catholics, the foetus was and is an unborn child. This assumption has obvious and contested implications for fertility behaviour within the Catholic universe but these need not concern us here. Less well known are some of the baptism practices under medical care that were validated by this belief system. It was permissible, for instance, to baptise *in utero*; it was permissible also to rupture tissues and membrane surrounding the foetus, so as to allow the baptismal waters to find direct contact with the unborn.²⁸ How these interventions were experienced by the foetus or child it is hardly possible to say but some tangible effects on sentient beings may be presumed in view of the use of instruments such as syringes and pipettes.

The driving force for early baptism and even pre-natal baptismal procedures was a belief in Limbo, though fear of exclusion from burial in sacred ground also mattered.²⁹ In some ancient

²⁷ Sheridan Gilley, ‘The Roman Catholic Church and the Nineteenth-Century Irish Diaspora’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 35, no. 2 (1984), p. 206. See also the references to ‘continuing bonds’ in fn. 20.

²⁸ *Catholic Medical Guardian: The Quarterly Journal of the Guild of St. Luke, St. Cosmas, and St. Damian*, 2 (1924), pp. 117-20.

²⁹ The latter seems to have been the dominant motive in the case of Quebec Catholics. See Marie-Aimée Cliche, ‘Les Limbes: Opinions Théologiques et Croyances Populaires au Québec du XV^e au XX^e Siècle’, *Revue d’Histoire de l’Amérique Française*, no. 3-4, 62 (2009), pp. 351-76.

maps the legend ‘here be monsters’ denoted the edges of the known world, only to be banished by advances in cartography. In somewhat analogous fashion, and under new theological and humanitarian understandings, Limbo has disappeared from lay people’s spiritual and mental maps. How the belief fares with pastors is less clear-cut but there are no hints, from this survey at any rate, to suggest that traditional teachings are being perpetuated.³⁰ To all intents and purposes Limbo is a forgotten place; it is one of those worlds, to paraphrase Peter Laslett, which we have lost, almost unconsciously so.³¹

In this study, twenty-six women have sketched a tapestry of many colours. The darker colours relate to fear of a child descending into an uncertain and possibly dismal state, that of Limbo. Many, though by no means all, took the arguments about the fate of unbaptised babies to constitute a cruel doctrine, and one not perhaps consistent with the notion of a benevolent God or a modern sensibility. It is impossible to read through the body of testimonies as a whole without making the inference that many Irish mothers suffered silently the intense pain of miscarriage, of stillbirth, and of infant deaths. This hidden suffering, which is part of the history of childhood as well as of motherhood, surfaces from time to time in the responses. For a variety of reasons, including long periods of exposure to pregnancy in a largely non-contraceptive society, including exposure to pregnancies towards the end of the child-bearing years, many Catholic mothers in the past must have experienced one or more of these life tragedies. In addition to the normal human experiences of grief and loss, some mothers appear to have been burdened by feelings of guilt regarding the fate of the unbaptised. Speaking of Limbo, the Irish theologian, Professor Eamonn Conway has acknowledged: ‘I do understand why many people of a particular generation found this cruel and damaging.’ While the ultimate objective, in his view, was ‘to protect the freedom of faith’, he concluded that the teaching of Limbo was a well-meaning attempt to solve a theological problem but one that caused many mothers to suffer.³² This might serve as an epitaph for a time and a belief that burdened some, possibly many parents, and women most of all.

³⁰ I have spoken to a small number of Irish Catholic priests about the ‘doctrine’ of Limbo. None expressed a belief in its existence; two seemed to regard it as a quaint notion from the past. That said, it is worth recalling that as late as the 1990s the catechism produced by Veritas, Ireland’s leading religious publisher and retailer, still insisted: ‘The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude’. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Dublin, 1994), p. 285.

³¹ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1971).

³² *Irish Catholic*, 15 November 2018. The headline to the article ran: ‘Limbo was harmful solution to a theological problem, says priest’.