

# Through a glass darkly? Modern Catholicism in Britain and Ireland through the *Catholicism in Numbers* datasets

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Numbers—church attendance rates, use of sacramental rites of passage measurements (those ‘hatched, matched and dispatched’), and conversion figures—have traditionally been the battle ground for combatants on either side of the secularisation debate. The mostly downward trend of such statistics across the twentieth century was taken, until a decade or so ago, as unequivocal proof of the erosion of the public salience of religion. The empiricist authority of quantitative evidence, often annexed to declinist narratives, has made the availability of robust, reliable, and contextualised data on various aspects of church life essential. As tools for calibrating confessional identity and levels of church practise, numerical data offer a powerful (but not absolute and somewhat functional) analytical framing for viewing institutional change across the long twentieth century.

## *i. The genesis of the Catholicism in Numbers project*

When Harris was commissioned to edit the ‘modern’ volume (1914–2021) of the five-volume *Oxford History of British and Irish Catholicism*<sup>1</sup>, the somewhat daunting task of assembling contributors to survey a century of profound social, cultural, and political change spanning two global conflicts and the watershed of the Second Vatican

<sup>1</sup> Alana Harris, ed. *The Oxford History of British and Irish Catholicism: Volume V: Recapturing the Apostolate of the Laity 1914–2021* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).



Council (1962-65) prompted a recognition of the patchiness of existing datasets relating to 'Britain's largest minority' and the difficulties of disaggregating 'Catholicism' within Irish (Republic) statistical databases. Extant survey datasets on Catholicism were dated and problematic,<sup>2</sup> limited in their concentration on church attendance figures, and plagued with issues around comparability and unreliability.<sup>3</sup> It was also challenging to identify and disentangle figures and trends across the three bishops' conferences, four nations and five political jurisdictions to be covered by volume V of the *Oxford History*, a difficulty exacerbated by distinct gaps in the scholarship around Scottish and Welsh Catholicism. The paucity of stable denominational figures across time also hindered an aspiration to calibrate Catholicism's presence and determinative dynamic within fields such as fertility demographics, migration, public schooling, and military service. A statistical optic on the qualitative surveys and quantitative data assembled by scholars in these broader fields was imperative to situate the profound denominational transformations across the century within broader structural changes and socioeconomic settings.

This quite specific and immediate need provided the impetus for a wider project to create the first, open-access UK and Ireland-wide database of essential statistics and pastoral profiles for the Catholic Church in these Isles. While an application (with Stephen Bullivant) to the British Academy Small Grant scheme to close this notable gap in religious scholarship in the United Kingdom and Ireland was ultimately unsuccessful (with final round, reserve candidate listing), the need for a consolidated statistical source to explore phases and trends in the pastoral life of the Church for the *Oxford History* allowed the case to be made to Harris' University for supportive funding. King's College London, with supplementary monies from the Catholic Family History Society, the English Catholic History Association, and the Catholic Record Society (CRS), employed Kinnear as a part-time research assistant over three years to construct a diverse, multi-faceted, and comprehensive resource for scholars, local and family history researchers, and interested members of the public alike.

## ii. *State of the Field and Slippery Statistics*

Extensive numerical data regarding Catholicism are available, but many are fragmented across sources and publications from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries, compiled using heterogeneous methodologies, and hindered by varying degrees of public access. This

<sup>2</sup> Robert Currie, Alan Gilbert and Lee Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> A. H. Halsey and Josephine Webb, *Twentieth-century British Social Trends* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

complicates life for researchers who incorporate measures of Catholic religious belief, identity, and devotions into their research. Concomitantly, the prominence of research using numerical data, and the attribution of weight to such data in scholarly arguments, grew in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Some theories of secularisation argue that the visibility and/or practise of religion, and the extent to which people take religion *seriously*, has declined, and root this in changes in society, economy, and other forces (cf. the paradigm set out by Steve Bruce).<sup>4</sup> These theories often take a macro level perspective on the decline of religion within nations and large religious traditions, while acknowledging microlevel countervailing trends, marshalling quantitative data in support of these theoretical perspectives. This helps position numerical data prominently in sociology of religion scholarship. Some countervailing perspectives to secularisation theories also utilise numerical data,<sup>5</sup> and other scholars draw upon an economic paradigm of rational choice theory.<sup>6</sup>

Other research, such as scholarship focusing on lived religious experience, raises questions about the authority claims of large-scale quantitative measures of religiosity.<sup>7</sup> These concerns include (1) potential inaccuracies in data collation and (2) limitations in the categories and type of numerical data typically compiled. Regarding the former, researchers administering surveys measuring religious beliefs or faith practices quantitatively typically do not directly observe the religious behaviour counted, such as Mass attendance, or interrogate the interpretation or understanding of religious precepts, which respondents may over- or under-estimate depending on their perception of a virtuous or desirable response. Similarly, those tallying up participation in religion, such as attendance at church services, may, even incidentally, over- or under-estimate. Regarding the latter, measures of formal religiosity may serve as limited proxies for an individual's personal beliefs, which may find expression in ways not captured quantitatively — though Catholicism retains a nexus to the public life of the parish so may be less exposed to this limitation than more individualistic and privatised religious traditions. Furthermore, numerical measures may not capture the ways in which religion shapes

<sup>4</sup> Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and *British Gods: Religion in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Eric Kaufmann, Anne Goujon and Vegard Skirbekk, 'The End of Secularization in Europe?: A Socio-Demographic Perspective', *Sociology of Religion*, 73(1)(2012): 69-91.

<sup>6</sup> Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), Avril Baigent and Marcus Pound, 'Why do we need Lived Catholicism?', *Ecclesial Practices*, 9(1)(2022), 1-8 and 9-27.

public life beyond the parameters of activity designated ‘religious’, though faith schools are an exception here. And social media-framed and digitally mediated interactions with religion take place across diverse platforms and accessing and aggregating data regarding these religious expressions or experiences can be infeasible. This is a particularly pressing difficulty in relation to our virtually mediated, post-Covid world, but online interactions from the 1980s onwards are also relatively untapped as sources of research data.

Nonetheless, qualitative research on religion benefits immeasurably from the wider picture afforded by large scale quantitative data. In one cautionary example, James Lewis identified that, for some time, scholars of new religious movements (NRMs) primarily undertook qualitative research into NRMs without updating higher level insights on the characteristics of people who typically join such groups and consequently scholars have operated with an outdated understanding of the demography of religious converts.<sup>8</sup> As this example demonstrates, there are distinctive strengths of high-level and calibrated quantitative datasets on religion, including:

- their utility in gesturing towards **macro changes and marked trajectories** of future developments, though we must not assume the future from the past due to phenomena such as immigration, which can change social demography;
- their versatility in enabling **comparison and contrast between regions and nations**; and
- their clarity in the identification of **aberrant or anomalous patterns and trends**, enabling scholars to identify geographic areas or demographic groups which would benefit from closer examination.

With these perspectives in mind, many extant datasets can be repurposed as aids to answer questions about religious practice and identity. The initial datasheets for the *Catholicism in Numbers* project, discussed presently, drew upon the following sources,<sup>9</sup> amongst others:

- Anthony Spencer’s compilations, whose work through the Newman Demographic Survey and continued within the Pastoral Research Centre, developed datasets of pastoral statistics regarding Britain and Ireland for the latter half of the twentieth century with granular detail. Spencer’s digests provide

<sup>8</sup> James R. Lewis, *Sects & Stats: Overturning the Conventional Wisdom about Cult Members* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> For fuller information on the datasets used, see the link to the bibliography and methodological note at <https://www.crs.org.uk/catholicism-in-numbers> (accessed 19 February 2024).

a broad and detailed survey,<sup>10</sup> along with critical commentary, on the strengths and limitations of underlying sources;

- Peter Brierley's extensive, longitudinal statistical research and edited volumes,<sup>11</sup> providing data on religious affiliation, belief, and practice, indicating change across time (using the same calibration measures) and enabling contrast between nations and denominations;
- *British Religion in Numbers*, a British Academy project directed by Clive Field and David Voas,<sup>12</sup> creating a searchable database of numerical data sources regarding religion, frequently updated, along with guides on understanding sources and direct access to sets of statistical datasheets;
- The Latin Mass Society datasets and accompanying graphs and commentary, using the recapitulations of statistics in volumes of *Catholic Directory* for England and Wales;<sup>13</sup> and
- Church sources *Annuario Pontificio*, *Catholic Directory* and educational sources (historical and present), offering statistical data estimates, often at diocesan level, though researchers note the methodological limitations regarding Church estimates of the Catholic population.

While not used for the datasheets discussed here, readers may also consult a recent monograph, *Catholics in Contemporary Britain*,<sup>14</sup> exploring the recent Catholics in Britain survey and reports freely available from the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society.<sup>15</sup>

The *Catholicism in Numbers* project hosted at the CRS website,<sup>16</sup> complements these existing resources by developing a repository of freely available digital datasets regarding the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. The starting point is a set of ten datasheets with accompanying bibliographical notes which provide estimated figures (typically decadal) for baptisms, Catholic population, conversions/receptions into the church, marriages, Mass attendance, ordinations, places of worship, priests, religious congregations, and schools and pupils. Where feasible, figures are provided for each nation with accompanying diocesan level data, spanning some or all decades in the twentieth century and the start of

<sup>10</sup> Anthony E. C. W. Spencer, ed., *Digest of Statistics of the Catholic Community of England & Wales, 1958-2005. Volume I: Population and Vital Statistics, Pastoral Services, Evangelisation and Education* (Taunton: Russell-Spencer Ltd, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.brierleyconsultancy.com> (accessed 19 February 2024).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.brin.ac.uk>, (accessed 19 February 2024).

<sup>13</sup> <https://lms.org.uk/statistics> (accessed 19 February 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Ben Clements and Stephen Bullivant, *Catholics in Contemporary Britain: Faith, Society, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/about.aspx> (accessed 19 February 2024).

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.crs.org.uk/catholicism-in-numbers> (accessed 19 February 2024).

the twenty-first, with a small number of figures for the nineteenth century.

The initial datasheets and graphs provide a starting point and indicate trends, continuity, and contrast within and across dioceses and nations. Further insights may be gleaned when considering datasheets together. For example, the numbers of convents/communities of women in Scotland declines from approximately 147 in 1980 to 90 in 2021, though the numbers of *religious* declined in a greater proportion within this period, from approximately 1,237 to 311, suggesting attrition due to their aging demographic profile and indicating the shrinking size of these communities.

There is one datasheet for each category of statistics with each sheet presenting, where feasible, data for each nation. This helps illuminate any distinctiveness about that category of statistics for each jurisdiction. And since many data are presented at diocesan level and in simple spreadsheet format, researchers can review data from more micro to macro levels and generate their own graphs for the regions and categories of data that interest them. Alongside the presentation of this data as an Appendix within the *Oxford History of British and Irish Catholicism* and its deployment by contributors in multiple chapters,<sup>17</sup> independent scholars such as Melanie McDonagh have already utilised the cross-decadal data on converts within her prosopographical, intellectual history of Catholic interwar political conservatism.

Assembling data to show change over time is challenging since (1) the categories recorded in *Catholic Directory* and other sources vary across volumes and (2) in some instances the manner in which data are presented and their completeness change over time. Schools provide such an archetypal example. In England and Wales, for example, the types of school recorded include elementary/primary schools, independent schools, secondary modern, grammar, technical, and comprehensive, direct grant schools, and special schools. The schools and pupils datasheet aggregates categories where feasible, focusing on elementary/primary and total numbers of Catholic schools and students, since individual types of school changed frequently across the decades, reflecting evolutions in government education strategy. This brings the second challenge to the fore. The aims of historical volumes of *Catholic Directory* (and similar sources such as *Annuario Pontificio*) do not, of course, always align with the completeness that benefits statistical research. For example, in the 1881 volume of *Catholic Directory* for England and Wales, schools are advertised though compiling these records is unlikely to indicate the total number of schools reliably. Similarly, on consulting Irish volumes for 1881,

<sup>17</sup> Harris, ed. *The Oxford History of British and Irish Catholicism: Volume V*, 357-76.

1893, and 1901 it was found that some diocesan level information about schools was included but appeared incomplete and/or the data included were not consistent, prohibiting their compilation into aggregated figures. A less tentative approach using the *Catholic Directory* is to include data only where the volume states in summary the total number of a particular type of school, rather than counting individual records. This nonetheless may not capture full totals of all types of school as they appear in *Directory* statistical summary pages for later decades. Consequently, estimates of schools and pupils presented in the initial datasheet and extracted from *Catholic Directory* are included for decades in which such fuller and more stable statistical summaries were available.

In contrast, some figures for recent years are provided in more granular detail, specifically for England, Wales, and Ireland. This was enabled by using data published by official Church and government sources. This also illuminates a further complication in using the *Catholic Directory* as a source of national estimates since figures are typically recorded for each diocese in the nation(s) relevant to each national *Directory*. Some diocesan boundaries do not align entirely with national boundaries between England and Wales, and the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This affects many categories of statistics recorded on the datasheets, including figures for schools and pupils. In these cases, figures for the dioceses that cross the national boundaries were apportioned to approximate how much of those dioceses' activities take place within the nation. Brierley's figures were used for the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland,<sup>18</sup> and figures for England and Wales, in which the Archdiocese of Cardiff straddles the boundary, were estimated using a directory of churches from the Archdiocese. Adjustments and assumptions such as this are explained in fuller detail within the introductory note on the *Catholicism in Numbers* webpage.

Relatedly, throughout the datasheets, omissions and obvious anomalies in individual datapoints in the primary data were addressed by critically reviewing figures for proximate years and imputing those where feasible and suitable. Nonetheless, a cautious approach was taken and consequently some gaps in individual datapoints remain. The decisions to include/exclude and aggregate datapoints in the manner summarised here masks the granular evolution of individual types of school, but enables statistics and graphs that estimate the contours of change in Catholic primary and secondary education across the decades. We hope this will be a stimulus to further tailored and contextually specific research in this critical, but profoundly under

<sup>18</sup> Peter Brierley, ed. *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends No. 7 2007/2008* (Swindon: Christian Research, 2008), 8.7.

researched, area of church life and its impact on Catholic children and young people.

### *iii. Future Directions*

The CRS intends to build on these important datasets to create a wider project under the umbrella of *Catholicism in Numbers*. As well as hosting the aforementioned materials, the webpage aims to be a platform for other repositories and search tools, culminating in a wide-ranging and important digital resource that is freely accessible to the public. We know, for example, that many members of the CRS have undertaken important research at the micro level, producing their own statistics and quantitative profiles relating to the history of individual parishes. This data, if shared and reproduced on the *Catholicism in Numbers* webpage, could bring important nuance to the wider picture of Catholicism at a macro level that the first datasets have provided. Others have gathered data on the history of specific religious orders (including histories of local convents, monasteries, or friaries), or undertaken research into the membership of local confraternities and guilds, producing valuable statistical information on Catholic religious life in its diversity and variety. We are hoping that the publication of these first datasets in *Catholicism in Numbers* is the start of a wider conversation with members of the CRS and the scholarly community more generally about the value of making available a wide range of quantitative, statistical, and mapping materials relating to the history of Catholicism.

While existing datasets are very much welcome, we are also hopeful that this emphasis on data might generate new research avenues. Wider historiographical trends point towards a rich variety of potential digital projects that could greatly add to our understanding of the history of Catholicism in Britain, and here we want to suggest just two immediate potentials. The first relates to the role of digital spaces in Catholic religious worship. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when everyone adjusted to a new online digital world during various lockdowns, the Church also had to adapt to this new reality. There is important research to be undertaken about this profound change, including data relating to the widespread introduction of digital worship. How does data relating to online Mass attendance, as well as participation in other digital church activities (such as virtual pilgrimage and prayer petition websites), alter our understanding of Catholicism in Britain and Ireland in the last decade? Does a healthy attendance at these online services hint at a wider perseverance of the faith that has not been captured in data relating to ‘Mass attendance’? Or does a poor attendance suggest that religious worship did not easily make the digital transition? How is the availability of online services



impacting in-person numbers and liturgy formats more generally? The continuation of digital prayer, *lectio divina*, bible study and rosary groups after the pandemic, for example, could also provide important perspective on the place of the digital in personal and communal devotion.

The second potential avenue draws on important contemporary historiographical emphases on histories of immigration, race, and transnationalism. What could data collected about, for example, the provision of Mass in languages other than English, tell us about the transnational nature of Catholicism in Britain and Ireland? Could local data about this provision suggest parishes and diocese where the Catholic community is gradually becoming more diverse? What data could be collected that reveals the important role played by immigrant communities of Catholics to the continued survival of the faith or the revival of certain devotional practices? As discussed above, the first datasets offered for *Catholicism in Numbers* do not advance our understanding of these important issues, suggesting much more detailed and focused work needs to be undertaken for this analysis. This perhaps suggests ways in which data collected at the micro, or parish level, or around ethnic chaplaincies (and shrines) could bring new perspectives to many themes and analyses at the macro level, as well as contribute to our wider understanding of longstanding heterogeneity of British Catholicism.

The creation of *Catholicism in Numbers* represents an important step for the CRS in its endeavour to create a range of digital resources for its members. Historically, the society has played a central role in making available in print a rich variety of sources relating to the history of Catholicism in Britain. Through its 'Record Series', first published in 1905, the CRS has encouraged and facilitated research into British and Irish Catholicism by the publication of scholarly editions of primary source material, with the ninetieth volume of the series due for publication this year.<sup>19</sup> Francis Aidan Gasquet, OSB, in that first edition of the Record Series in 1905, stated that one of the principle aims of the CRS was 'the transcription of papers, registers, etc., in order to preserve them from the decay to which all such records are subject'.<sup>20</sup> Now, as the Society celebrates its 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary (1904-2024), it is important to reconsider this original intention in light of the flowering of new technologies, including digitization and optical character recognition (OCR), as well as the proliferation of digital

<sup>19</sup> While the earliest publications in the Record Series referred specifically to material on 'English Catholics', the CRS and BCH have gradually evolved to include material and research relating to Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, as well as connections between British and Irish Catholics and the wider global Catholic Church.

<sup>20</sup> See his 'Introduction' in *Catholic Record Society Miscellanea I* (London: Catholic Record Society, 1905), p. viii.

databases, digitized newspapers and interlinked archival catalogues. This technology is redefining how Catholicism in Britain and Ireland is researched and understood. Readers will be familiar with important work being undertaken by the National Institute for Newman Studies to create a digital collection of archives;<sup>21</sup> with projects such as ‘Who Were the Nuns?’<sup>22</sup> and ‘Monks in Motion’ that created important prosopographical databases and digital resources;<sup>23</sup> and the ‘Catholic Heritage’ online database connecting the holdings of Catholic archives by the Networking Archives and Libraries in the Catholic Church (NALCC) project.<sup>24</sup> Even material in Rome, once considered difficult to access or unknown to the majority, is beginning to become more accessible and transforming research as a result. This includes the Venerable English College, where processes of cataloguing and digitization are underway,<sup>25</sup> and the Vatican Apostolic Library, where the ‘DigiVatLib’ project aims to digitize its entire collection of 80,000 codices.<sup>26</sup>

As a result, the CRS is seeking to reposition itself within this digital landscape by hosting and facilitating new digital projects, of which *Catholicism in Numbers* is only intended to be the first. In recognition of the important work of the late Michael Hodgetts, who for many years edited the Record Series, the CRS is supporting work being undertaken by his son Paul Hodgetts towards the creation of a digital database of priest holes and hides in Britain based on Michael’s research and updated by Paul. The CRS is also exploring avenues to improve the quality of its existing digital resources, including enhancing the digital editions of the Record Series available on its website (up to 2006) through OCR, making them more easily searchable and giving them a higher visibility on search engines by improving their search engine optimisation (SEO). It is also exploring the possibility of digitizing local Catholic history journals that might be inaccessible to a wider readership, preserving the important work contained in them, especially when local societies have disbanded or are facing an uncertain future.

We would encourage any members who have their own datasets to share, as well as those who are considering a potential digital, mapping or crowd-sourced online project and would like to partner with the CRS in the creation and hosting of their research, to get in touch with us via our new email address. We would also greatly welcome feedback on

<sup>21</sup> <https://digitalcollections.newmanstudies.org/> (accessed 19 February 2024).

<sup>22</sup> <https://wwtn.history.qmul.ac.uk> (accessed 19 February 2024).

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/monks-in-motion/> (accessed 19 February 2024).

<sup>24</sup> <https://archive.catholic-heritage.net/> (accessed 19 February 2024).

<sup>25</sup> The Venerable English College is currently fundraising for important work in this area, see <https://www.vecarchives.org/> (accessed 19 February 2024).

<sup>26</sup> <https://digi.vatlib.it/> (accessed 3 January 2024).

*Catholicism in Numbers*, reports on its use within research, and any ideas members have for future digital projects and useful resources the CRS could provide. The contact email is: [communications@crs.org.uk](mailto:communications@crs.org.uk).

Numbers, statistics, graphs, and datasets are only part of the evidence base and tools required to write more nuanced, granular and inclusive histories of British and Irish Catholicism in the modern era. Yet without this refined optic – refracted through macro and micro lenses – we will certainly ‘know only in part’ and pass up the opportunity to map key contours and collective trends in the wider Catholic historical landscape. We commend the *Catholicism in Numbers* datasets to readers and hope this detailed and carefully constructed evidence base will shed light on new perspectives on ‘Catholic modernities’,<sup>27</sup> thereby illuminating more clearly and vividly pressing historical agendas for future excavation, fresh compilations, and collective scholarly collaborations.

<sup>27</sup> See James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 2018) and Brenna Moore, *Kindred Spirits: Friendship and Resistance at the Edges of Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021).