

# THEOLOGISCHE REVUE

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**Clements, Ben / Bullivant, Stephen: Catholics in Contemporary Britain.** Faith, Society, Politics. – Oxford: Oxford University Press 2022. (VIII) 222 S., geb. £ 81,00  
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The study by Ben Clements and Stephen Bullivant provides the most up to date differential diagnosis of Catholics in Britain. The authors analyse the status quo of Catholics in Britain in six chap.s followed by an epilogue reflecting on the changes of Catholic religious life in Britain as a result of the pandemic.

In the introduction, the authors claim that “in this book we showcase findings from the first wide-range empirical study of British Catholics in over forty years. It aims to offer a sociologically-informed study, placing the contemporary Catholic community in the wider contexts of their society and the global faith of which they are a part” (2). As such, the study is framed as a reconfigured “Hornby-Smith and colleagues’ pioneering survey-based study of the Catholic community in England and Wales” (1) which was conducted in the 1970s.

In the first chap., entitled “Definition and Demography”, the authors discuss the definition and demography of Catholics in Britain. In methodological terms, the authors decided to solve the problem of defining a Catholic by focusing on people who self-identify as Catholic. “For the purpose of the ‘Catholics in Britain’ survey, ‘a Catholic’ is someone who answers ‘Catholicism’ when asked: ‘Which religion, if any, do you consider yourself as belonging to?’” (10, 56). This fundamental methodological categorisation forms the basis of all other analyses of the study. After an illuminating discussion of other ways in which a Catholic can be defined, the authors present an empirically founded summary of the diversity of Catholics in Britain.

In chap. two, “Behaving and belonging”, C. and B. concentrate on the actual religious practice such as regular Mass attendance (46, Fig. 2.4), frequency of prayer and regularity of Confession. In this second chap., dedicated to the discussion of behaving and belonging the guiding research question is, what Catholics actually do. The main parameter is that of Mass-going, further demarcated according to sex, age and geography.

The third chap. “Believing”, analyses what religious beliefs are held by Catholics in Britain. Here the survey focuses on four topics: What beliefs and views of God are held by Catholics in Britain, what are their personal beliefs in doctrinal matters, Catholics’ views on married or women priests and Catholics’ views on sex and sexuality with regards to the official documents of the magisterium. The chap. concludes with a caveat. The authors write: “As noted several times, ‘religious believing’ can and should not be regarded as something sealed-off from other forms of moral, social, metaphysical, or value-related believing. Sharp distinctions are not possible.” (92)

In the next, the fourth chap. “Social Moral Issues”, the study provides empirical data on Catholics’ attitudes on abortion, assisted suicide, contraception, marriage and divorce, gender roles and same-sex rights or relations. The study correlates Catholics’ attitudes toward the aforementioned issues with the participants’ religious behaviour according to sex, age, and level of education. Not surprisingly, the authors conclude that a shift toward a more liberal attitude to same sexual-relationship, especially among Catholic women and younger Catholics of both sexes can be detected. The authors state with regards to the focus on differing views according to sex rather than age: “[...] women tended to be more liberal in their views than men, in particular, in the pronounced differences in levels of approval or acceptance for same-sex relationships and associated rights for same-sex couples.” (120)

In the penultimate fifth chap., entitled “Party Support and Voting Behaviour”, C. and B. present an in-depth analysis of the party loyalties and voting behaviour of Catholics. Traditionally, a majority of Catholics supported the Labour party in Britain and Scotland, “but this party-denominational linkage seems to have been significantly weakened electorally”, the authors conclude (142). What has changed is the fact that electoral behaviour runs along demographic lines rather than religious conviction of moral attitudes.

In the final sixth chap. “Popularity and Performance: Pope Francis, Bishops, and Catholic Schools” the overall issue of religious authority is debated with a special focus on what the authors call the “Francis effect”. The findings show that there “is a common pattern across the different indicators, whereby those Catholics showing the highest levels of commitment [...] were more likely to take the view that Francis had embarked—to some extent—on a change in direction for the better” (147). The study also shows that the “balance of opinion in relation to Catholic schools was very positive“ and there is generally a high level of support for public funding of Catholic schools, in England, Wales, and Scotland (169).

In the epilogue, C. and B. raise the very interesting question of how the pandemic has changed and will change the religious landscape in Britain with regards to all three “Bs” (64), that is Believing, Belonging, and Behaviour, as mentioned above.

Overall, this meticulously researched empirical study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is beautifully presented and well structured. Every chap. is prefaced by an introduction of the leading research question(s) and concluded by a concise summary. All statistics are presented in clear charts, graphs, and tables, which make it easy, even for the non-specialist, to understand. The study is presented *lege artis* in all respects.

Broader methodological considerations, nonetheless, remain. For instance, the reader might question why the study focuses on Mass-going, frequent prayer, and confession as indicators that have been chosen. Why have surveys of the number of baptisms, confirmations according to the relevant age group, or the celebrating of the sacrament of the last rites and the number of people who might not have belonged to the Catholic Church but still consider themselves as Catholics in their *hora mortis*, not been included?

Nevertheless, this is clearly a landmark study on the Catholic community in Britain which cannot be overlooked by those working in sociology of religion, pastoral theology, or political science.

Reviewer:

*Michael Hoelzl*, Dr., Senior Lecturer in Political Philosophy and Religion, Religions & Theology at the University of Manchester (Michael.Hoelzl@manchester.ac.uk)