

# Rival Jerusalems

The Geography of Victorian Religion

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K. D. M. SNELL  
AND PAUL S. ELL



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## The 1851 *Census of Religious Worship*

### Introduction

On Sunday 30 March 1851, for the first (and last) time as part of the decennial population census, questions were asked about the religious composition of Great Britain.

Despite the unique importance of the resulting *Census of Religious Worship*, it has received remarkably little sustained analysis. Quite a number of articles, and edited works on particular counties, have assessed its reliability and used it to describe basic patterns of worship, but this book is the first to enter into thorough investigation of it.<sup>1</sup> A number of considerations have inhibited prior analysis.

<sup>1</sup> Among the main publications on the source are K. S. Inglis, 'Patterns of religious worship in 1851', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 11 (1960), 74–86; J. Rogan, 'The Religious Census of 1851', *Theology* (1963), 11–15; D. M. Thompson, 'The 1851 Religious Census: problems and possibilities', *Victorian Studies*, 11 (1967), 87–97; W. S. F. Pickering, 'The 1851 Religious Census – a useless experiment?', *British Journal of Sociology*, 18 (1967), 382–407; R. M. Goodridge, 'The religious condition of the West Country in 1851', *Social Compass*, 14 (1967), 285–96; W. T. R. Pryce, 'The 1851 Census of Religious Worship: Denbighshire', *Trans. of the Denbighshire Historical Society*, 23 (1974), 147–92; R. W. Ambler, 'The 1851 Census of Religious Worship', *Local Historian*, 11 (1975), 375–81; D. W. Bushby (ed.), *Bedfordshire Ecclesiastical Census, 1851*, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, vol. 54 (1975); I. G. Jones and D. Williams (eds.), *The Religious Census of 1851: a Calendar of the Returns Relating to Wales*, vol. 1: *South Wales* (Cardiff, 1976); D. M. Thompson, 'The Religious Census of 1851', in R. Lawton (ed.), *The Census and Social Structure: an Interpretative Guide to Nineteenth-Century Censuses for England and Wales* (1978); C. D. Field, 'The 1851 Religious Census: a select bibliography', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, 41 (1978); R. W. Ambler (ed.), *Lincolnshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship, 1851*, Lincolnshire Record Society, 72 (1979); B. I. Coleman, *The Church of England in the Mid Nineteenth Century: a Social Geography* (1980); I. G. Jones (ed.), *The Religious Census of 1851: a Calendar of the Returns Relating to Wales*, vol. 2: *North Wales* (Cardiff, 1981); B. I. Coleman, 'Southern England in the Census of Religious Worship, 1851', *Southern History*, 5 (1983); K. Tiller (ed.), *Church and Chapel in Oxfordshire, 1851*, Oxfordshire Record Society, 55 (1987); M. Seaborne, 'The Religious Census of 1851 and early chapel building in North Wales', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 26 (1990); E. Legg (ed.), *Buckinghamshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship, 1851* (1991); K. D. M. Snell, *Church and Chapel in the*

Foremost among these have been the awesome scope of the source, its highly quantitative nature, and the inter-disciplinary skills and facilities necessary to undertake such a study. There have also been problems concerning the measures needed for the source, and doubts have sometimes been expressed about the accuracy of some of its details. Religious studies as a subject has been slow to adopt the quantitative methods necessary to analyse the census. And linked to this has been a feeling that its data are of limited relevance for studies of religion which concentrate on belief and faith, rather than external action and attendance at services.

However, for the most part objections and hindrances of these kinds can now be overcome. The 1851 data can be checked via internal statistical tests and managed in ways which surmount doubts about their accuracy. There is enormous scope for religious history to advance methodologically, in ways long accepted within the social sciences, without losing sight of many of its long-standing arguments and themes. For the latter have often been essentially quantitative rather than qualitative in nature. And, towering above all other sources for the modern history of English and Welsh religion, the 1851 *Census of Religious Worship* stands as a supreme endeavour of its period, a source ripe for close scrutiny and historical analysis.

This chapter appraises the Religious Census as a source of statistical information on worshipping patterns. It examines the context in which it was undertaken, the ways in which the data were gathered, the nature of those data at different spatial levels, their reliability and limitations, and how any such limitations may be dealt with. When we have assessed the source, and become more familiar with it, we can move in subsequent chapters to a survey and analysis of the huge body of data it contained.

Horace Mann made clear much of the purpose of the Religious Census when he wrote that 'it would be difficult to over-estimate the importance of authentic facts upon this subject [religion]; since, for

Footnote 1 (cont.)

*North Midlands: Religious Observance in the Nineteenth Century* (Leicester, 1991); J. A. Vickers (ed.), *The Religious Census of Hampshire, 1851* (Hampshire Record Series, Winchester, 1993); M. Tranter (ed.), *The Derbyshire Returns to the 1851 Religious Census* (Derbyshire Record Society, vol. 23, Chesterfield, 1995). An admirable bibliographical survey is C. D. Field, 'The 1851 Religious Census of Great Britain: a bibliographical guide for local and regional historians', *The Local Historian*, 27:4 (1997), 194–217.

many reasons, the religion of a nation must be a matter of extreme solicitude to many minds. Whether we regard a people merely in their secular capacity, as partners in a great association for promoting the stability, the opulence, the peaceful glory of a state; or view them in their loftier character, as subjects of a higher kingdom, – swift and momentary travellers towards a never-ending destiny; in either aspect, the degree and direction of religious sentiment in a community are subjects of the weightiest impact: in the one case to the temporal guardians of a nation – to its spiritual teachers in the other.<sup>2</sup> The first half of the nineteenth century brought growing concern that Britain, as a Christian country, was failing to meet the moral standards demanded by such a premise. The period was one of significant religious change and development, illustrated for example by the Evangelical Revival, the Oxford Movement, the growth and divisions within Methodism, the substantial expansion of Nonconformity generally, and the spread of agnosticism and secularisation. Dramatic economic, industrial, urban and demographic changes put severe strains upon the churches, presenting them with major problems of adaptation and reform. There was particular concern that religious provision was failing to keep pace with the growth and changing distribution of population. Coupled with this was a pervasive fear among many commentators that the voluble working classes were increasingly falling outside the scope of organised religion, or were gravitating towards anti-establishment denominations. As Rawding commented: 'Religious belief was often central to the lives of labouring men, and so the control of the religious environment by the ruling classes had an importance which can easily be missed today.'<sup>3</sup> Contemporaries were faced with pressing issues that required an assessment of the strength of Nonconformity, and there were many who hoped that a Census of Religious Worship would demonstrate the continuing predominance of the Church of England.

We need to remember that it was not unusual for the government or political parties to be deeply engaged with religious issues. As Blake pointed out, the Tory Party was closely associated with the interests

<sup>2</sup> *Census of Great Britain, 1851: Religious Worship, England and Wales, Report and Tables*, LXXXIX (1852–3), p. viii. Henceforth this census volume will be referred to simply as *Census of Religious Worship*.

<sup>3</sup> C. Rawding, 'The iconography of churches: a case study of landownership and power in nineteenth-century Lincolnshire', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 16 (1990), 158.

of 'Anglican exclusivity',<sup>4</sup> and we will see how closely linked that party was with the geographical strongholds of the established church. Government involvement in religious matters was much more conspicuous than it is today, and the Anglican Church and Nonconformist denominations were far more politically active. This was true with regard to education, slavery, disestablishment, the Marriage Act (1836), Test and Corporation Act repeal, Catholic emancipation and the Irish question, the Church Reform Act (1836), tithe commutation, pluralities (1838, 1850), licensing, municipal cemeteries, dissenters' burial services and much else. Earlier in the nineteenth century, there had been Lord Sidmouth's concerns over the political consequences of religious itinerancy (concerns shared by many in the established church), his bill in May 1811 to restrict it, and the opposition against that bill from groups like the Protestant Society for the Protection of Religious Liberty, and the Methodist Committee of Privileges.<sup>5</sup> The licensing of dissenting chapels under the Toleration Act was of course politically motivated, and closely monitored by Sidmouth and many others.<sup>6</sup> In 1818 Parliament voted £1,000,000 for Anglican church building, followed by a further £500,000 six years later.<sup>7</sup> In 1834 Peel appointed a commission to examine the state of the established church in England and Wales, its report largely responsible for the creation of the sees of Ripon and Manchester, and for further diocesan reorganisation. Religious issues had been very prominent indeed during the agitation for the 1832 Reform Act.<sup>8</sup> After that Act, dissenters probably comprised about a fifth of the electorate;<sup>9</sup> a point not lost on Melbourne's ministers as

<sup>4</sup> R. Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill* (1972), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> The best discussion is D. W. Lovegrove, *Established Church, Sectarian People: Itinerancy and the Transformation of Dissent, 1780–1830* (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> See for example Sidmouth's demands for an account of the number of licences issued each year at Quarter Sessions from 1809 to the end of 1820, under Wm. & Mary c. 18 and 19 Geo. III, c. 44. Letter to the Clerk of the Peace, Leicestershire, November 1821: Leics. C.R.O., QS 95/1/3/3.

<sup>7</sup> See M. H. Port, *Six Hundred New Churches: a Study of the Church Building Commission, 1818–1856, and its Church Building Activities* (1961), and the Church Building Acts, notably those of 1818–19, 1822, 1843, 1856.

<sup>8</sup> R. Cowherd, *The Politics of English Dissent, 1815–1848* (1956); R. Brent, *Liberal Anglican Politics: Whiggery, Religion and Reform, 1830–1841* (Oxford, 1987); J. A. Phillips, *The Great Reform Bill in the Boroughs: English Electoral Behaviour, 1818–1841* (Oxford, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> R. Anstey, 'Religion and British slave emancipation', in D. Eltis and J. Walvin (eds.), *The Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1981), pp. 51–3.

they tried to gain dissenting support on marriage law, the universities issue, civil registration, church rates and so on. 'The Church in Danger' was a major issue during the 1841 election, as it was to be in 1868. Church rates were the subject for open confrontation over an extended period.<sup>10</sup> The Anti-State Church Association, connected with Edward Miall, which in 1853 became the Liberation Society, aimed to separate the Church of England from the state and establish the 'voluntary principle', and so end many advantages and privileges of the Anglican Church. It gained strength noticeably from the 1840s.<sup>11</sup> The highly political appointment of bishops was always contentious, particularly in the early nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, it is hard to find political issues that were *not* overlaid and influenced by religious debate, and nobody could be in any doubt that religious conformism or dissent carried as their corollaries strong voting predispositions.<sup>13</sup> The political importance of the *Census of Religious Worship* was manifest to all, and its politicised

<sup>10</sup> R. Brent, 'The Whigs and Protestant Dissent in the decade of reform: the case of the Church Rates, 1833–1841', *English Historical Review*, 102 (1987); O. Anderson, 'Gladstone's abolition of compulsory church rates: a minor political myth and its historiographical career', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 25 (1974). After a campaign of over thirty years, their payment became voluntary with the Compulsory Church Rate Abolition Act of 1868.

<sup>11</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics, 1870–1914* (1982), pp. 22–30.

<sup>12</sup> In 1816 for example, Herbert Marsh was appointed to Llandaff, it would appear largely as a result of his services as an economic advisor during the Napoleonic Wars. W. Gibson, 'The Tories and church patronage: 1812–30', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 41 (1990), 266–7.

<sup>13</sup> See for example T. J. Nossiter, 'Aspects of electoral behaviour in English constituencies, 1832–1868', in E. Allardt and S. Rokkan (eds.), *Mass Politics: Studies in Political Sociology* (New York, 1970), p. 180, on the political implications of dissenting or Anglican affiliation; or see his 'Voting behaviour, 1832–1872', *Political Studies*, 18 (1970), 385; P. F. Clarke, 'Electoral sociology of modern England', *History*, 57 (1972); D. W. Bebbington, 'Nonconformity and electoral sociology, 1867–1918', *Historical Journal*, 27 (1984), 633–56; D. Beales, 'The electorate before and after 1832: the right to vote, and the opportunity', *Parliamentary History*, 11:1 (1992). See also H. Faulkner, *Chartism and the Churches: a Study in Democracy* (1916, 1970 edn); G. I. T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1832–1868* (Oxford, 1977). There is a very large literature on religion and politics after 1851, and notable among such studies have been H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885–1910* (1967), e.g. pp. 3–4, 74, 97, 101, 107–8, 122, 127, 226, 420–34, 433; K. D. Wald, *Crosses on the Ballot: Patterns of British Voter Alignment since 1885* (Princeton, 1983); G. I. T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1869–1921* (Oxford, 1987); E. F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992).

interpretation echoed through the years after 1851. Given the political quandaries and religious rivalries that it aroused, it is small wonder that the exercise was never repeated.<sup>14</sup>

There was also a considerable thirst for quantitative data during this period, which was crucial for a more rigorous, empirically grounded and factual understanding of regional societies, religious cultures and economic life. Such figures appealed 'to the heart of a generation which . . . had a veritable passion for "facts"', as J. F. C. Harrison has written.<sup>15</sup> In 1847 G. R. Porter published a new edition of his *Progress of the Nation, in its Various Social and Economical Relations, from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century*. He argued that it would almost seem to be a duty to gather such 'well-authenticated facts'.<sup>16</sup> Something of that attitude pervades the parliamentary debates on the Religious Census. It is also clear that comparable religious censuses in very many other advanced countries were on British legislators' minds, and there was a distinct sense that Britain should also conduct one.<sup>17</sup> The public appetite was revealed by the remarkable fact that 21,000 copies of the *Census of Religious Worship* were sold almost as soon as it was published.<sup>18</sup> The data collection of the Religious Census was a logical outcome in a Christian age of the concerns that had already brought so much poor-law, welfare, industrial, demographic and agricultural data into the public domain, via a formidable and completely unprecedented array of Select Committee and other investigative reports.

### The organisation of the Religious Census

George Graham, the Registrar General for the 1851 Population Census, had expressed concern about the lack of accurate statistics on

<sup>14</sup> For further discussion of this point, see appendix F.

<sup>15</sup> J. F. C. Harrison, *The Early Victorians, 1832–51* (1971), p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Summarised in *ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>17</sup> Comparable religious censuses were held around this time for Austria, Bavaria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Prussia, Saxony, Sweden, and Württemberg. Ireland had such a census in 1834. In Spain, such information was obtained through the civil administration. Religious censuses were also taken in some British colonies, although in some such cases – like Australia – there were doubts as to their accuracy. See the speech by Sir George Lewis, in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CLIX (11 July 1860), 1703–6. On the unsatisfactory Australian religious census, see M. H. Marsh, in *ibid.*, 1720–1. America conducted counts of churches and sittings: see Sir John Trelawny's speech in *ibid.*, 1728.

<sup>18</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CXXXV (11 July 1854), 32.

religious worship. He suggested that the 1851 census should include sections on both religion and education, arguing that there was a need for such information, and that any attendant costs would be minimal.<sup>19</sup> He pointed out that the existing administration used to gather statistics for the population census could be employed in gathering the additional data. Graham's enthusiasm for a religious census was matched by the eagerness of Lord John Russell's government. Although the planned Census of Religious Worship was not included in the original Census Act,<sup>20</sup> the Secretary of State was empowered under that Act to make any additional enquiries that he thought necessary. On this authority, Graham initiated planning for a census of religion.

The Registrar General appointed as his agent Horace Mann, a 28-year-old barrister, making him responsible for organising the census. It was Mann's view that 'There are two methods of pursuing a statistical inquiry with respect to the religion of a people. You may either ask each individual, directly, what particular form of religion he professes; or, you may collect such information as to the religious acts of individuals as will equally, though indirectly, lead to the same result. The former method was adopted, some few years ago, in Ireland, and is generally followed in the continental states when such investigations as the present are pursued. At the recent Census, it was thought advisable to take the latter course; partly because it had a less inquisitorial aspect, – but especially because it was considered that the outward conduct of persons furnishes a better guide to their religious state than can be gained by merely vague professions.'<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> In fact the total cost of the population, religious and educational censuses of 1851 appears to have been well in excess of £100,000. This was subsequently cited as part of an argument against having another educational census in 1861, although it seems not to have been part of any case then against a repeated religious census. See *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CLIX (11 July 1860), 1739–40. It is worth bearing in mind also that in 1851 the high proportion (about 70 per cent) of census costs hitherto carried by the parishes (covering enumeration) were to be paid by a grant from Parliament, so that the whole expense of the 1851 census fell for the first time upon the national exchequer, rather than falling heavily on local funds. The Treasury had hitherto only paid for the central office. See G. C. Lewis' speech in *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CXI (6 June 1850), 870–1. This appears to have given the government more leeway in the range of census questions it felt able to ask in 1851. On the enumeration and other census allowances payable, see *Census of Great Britain: Instructions to Enumerators*, XLIII (1851), pp. 4, 39. <sup>20</sup> 13 & 14 Vic. c. 53.

<sup>21</sup> *Census of Religious Worship*, p. cxix. This was later cited at fuller length in the House of Commons by E. Baines in 1860, when he argued in its favour, and for the 'perfect success' of the 1851 Religious Census. *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CLIX (11 July 1860), 1700–1.

Accordingly, it was decided to hold a census of religion based upon attendances rather than stated profession. As Mann argued, a census of profession would probably have gone beyond the accepted role of the British state at that time.<sup>22</sup> For the historian of religion, a census of religious actions is certainly far more valuable than a census of profession. In the nineteenth century it is likely that there would have been such a stigma attached to atheism and agnosticism that the vast majority of those who rarely, or never, attended worship would have professed allegiance to the established church. This would have dramatically and unrealistically inflated its actual strength. In addition, the often complex patterns of attendance, with some worshippers attending both established church services and Nonconformist services, would have been completely lost. As we shall see, such multi-attendance remains a problematical area in the interpretation of the Religious Census. But there can be little doubt that attendance rates, associated as they were by contemporaries with faith and a desire to practise that faith, provide the most satisfactory outcome for the historian.<sup>23</sup>

The stated purpose of the census was to discover how far the means of religious instruction had kept up with the growing population over the previous half century, and to what extent the spiritual needs of the population were being met. It aimed to provide information on the number of places of worship belonging to each denomination, and their numbers of attendances and sittings. These were considered the most essential matters, although there were many lesser questions. Originally it was planned to make completion of the religious returns compulsory, with any failure to complete the returns being an offence. Queries were raised about this however, for example about whether the clergy should have to disclose their incomes,<sup>24</sup> and other matters which might 'excite needless alarm'.<sup>25</sup> Having taken legal advice, the government felt that as a census of religion was not specifically prescribed in the Census Act, penalties could not be imposed on those failing to make returns. Nor did the government wish to act in an 'inquisitorial manner'.<sup>26</sup> Lord Brougham and others indicated that questions posed which were not compulsory would still yield 'information of considerable value' and

<sup>22</sup> On this issue, see appendix F.

<sup>23</sup> R. M. Goodridge, 'The religious condition of the West Country in 1851', *Social Compass*, 14 (1967), 287.

<sup>24</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CXIV (14 March 1851), 1316–17.

<sup>25</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CXV (18 March 1851), 113.

<sup>26</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CXIV (14 March 1851), 1308.

'great utility'.<sup>27</sup> A voluntary system in connection with the religious returns was therefore introduced, although this may not have been made entirely clear by enumerators to those making the returns. Sir George Grey was among those who took the view that even without strict compulsion, all clergy would still 'give full information on such important matters as the amount of provision for education and religious worship in their respective districts'.<sup>28</sup>

Returns were requested from every place of worship in Britain, and they contain an enormous body of statistical information. Three different returning forms were devised by Horace Mann.<sup>29</sup> The established-church form, to be completed by clergy of the Church of England, had more questions than those addressed to ministers of dissenting chapels. It requested the date of construction of the church or chapel of ease, if erected after 1800; the number of sittings contained in the building, with a distinction being made between free and other (or appropriated) sittings; the number of people at morning, afternoon and evening services on Sunday 30 March 1851; the number of Sunday scholars present at the same times; and the average attendances over a stated period for both general congregation attendances and Sunday school scholars. There were also questions referring to church endowments and sources of income like pew rents, fees, dues or Easter offerings.<sup>30</sup> The Nonconformist

<sup>27</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CXIV (14 March 1851), 1308–10.

<sup>28</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CXV (18 March 1851), 114.

<sup>29</sup> The Church of England form was blue, the general Nonconformist form was blue and red, and the Quaker form was black and white to avoid confusion. See for example E. Legg (ed.), *Buckinghamshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship, 1851* (1991), p. vii.

<sup>30</sup> The information on Anglican income provided by the census was very extensive indeed, but for this book it was decided not to analyse it. The subject is extremely complex, given the varied sources of income then available to the Anglican Church: tithe (with all the complexity of that, given parochial differences in commutation, rent charges, etc.), glebe, land and property rents, fees, other dues, Easter offerings, pew rents, bishops' augmentations, endowments, annuities, and the like. Some incumbents declined to submit such details, a few clearly taking offence at the request that they do so. More commonly, they submitted differing personal assessments of their income that were not standardised across parishes, and many were evidently in some confusion as to what they ought to be returning. There was some puzzlement over whether net or gross income should be returned, and how these ought to be defined. A few rather self-defensive clergy submitted detailed lists of their expenditure and costs as well, like curate charges, rates, property and land taxes, buildings repair, insurance and so on. The census information on all this is extensive (and supplements that in other sources, like the data on values of the living in the *Imperial Gazetteer*, computerised at parish level for the second half of this book). The subject of nineteenth-century clerical income has long deserved a book in its own right.

return was comparable, except that information on income was not requested, and it was asked whether the building was used exclusively as a place of worship. A separate return was sent to Quaker meeting houses requesting similar details, the measurements of the building (as a guide to standing room), and the estimated number of persons capable of being seated. All forms permitted further remarks to be made by the informant if he wished, and these supply a fascinating additional range of information, covering as they do issues like rivalries between denominations, the Welsh language at services, endowments and income, the condition of the place of worship, pew rents, Sunday scholars, special conditions operating on that Sunday, and other observations.

### ***The published Census of Religious Worship***

The Religious Census, and a report by Horace Mann, was published on 3 January 1854.<sup>31</sup> It was divided into several sections. In a fairly substantial discussion, Mann deliberated on the origins and growth of the key denominations and sects. He then examined spiritual provision and destitution, considering in turn accommodation and attendance, although placing more emphasis on the former. He calculated that accommodation was required for 58 per cent of the population, and discussed areas where an appropriate level of accommodation had not been reached. This drew him into differentials between urban and rural seating provision. Accommodation was clearly insufficient in general terms to house an 'ideal' worshipping community. In the remainder of this section of his report, Mann concentrated upon the alleged absence of the working classes from worship. Finally, he examined the disparate levels of accommodation provided by denominations. His account of attendance was less extensive. Here Mann attempted to calculate what would be an acceptable figure for attendances.<sup>32</sup> We shall discuss these further features of his report in the context of the historiography on the Census of Religious Worship.

Several tables showing these and related subjects, organised at various spatial levels, were included in the census volume. Summary data were recorded for the whole of England and Wales, for the 11

<sup>31</sup> The Scottish Report and Census was published later, in March 1854.

<sup>32</sup> For Scotland the report was far briefer. Mann stated here that there was insufficient time to prepare as detailed a report as that for England and Wales.

registration divisions,<sup>33</sup> for the 28 dioceses, for the 43 English registration counties and North and South Wales, for 73 large towns (including 9 London boroughs), and for 624 registration districts in a large sub-section marked 'Detailed Tables'.

The opening sections of this book analyse the published data for the 624 registration districts of England and Wales.<sup>34</sup> At this level published information is available for each denomination on the number of sittings, both free and appropriated, the total number of attendances (including Sunday scholars) at services in the morning, afternoon and evening, and the number of places of worship in each district. In Scotland, although the same data are available, they are arranged at a different and less convenient spatial level,<sup>35</sup> that is, for counties and for burghs (or parishes which contain burghs).<sup>36</sup> There was no Scottish administrative unit equivalent to the registration district – burghs being confined to urban areas only.<sup>37</sup> The lack of Scottish registration-district data, or data published for similarly specified areas, is one reason why this book does not cover Scotland. Analysis of the Scottish data is further circumscribed because the original returns, as available

<sup>33</sup> These registration divisions were London, the South Eastern Counties, the South Midland Counties, the Eastern Counties, the South Western Counties, the West Midland Counties, the North Midland Counties, the North Western Counties, Yorkshire, the Northern Counties, and the Welsh Counties.

<sup>34</sup> In the detailed registration-district tables all registration districts are numbered. Anglesey, the final district, is numbered 623 and almost all researchers have assumed, therefore, that there were only 623 registration districts. This is not the case as Pontefract District was numbered 504(a) in the census and Hemsworth District 504(b), making the total number of Registration Districts 624.

<sup>35</sup> *1851 Census Great Britain: Report and Tables on Religious Worship and Education, Scotland*, LIX (1854, Shannon, 1970 edn), p. xii.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–34, but beware of the note on p. xii.

<sup>37</sup> Mann wrote of the Scottish published returns that 'the particulars respecting these returns are not presented in minuter subdivisions of the country than *Counties*. This course was rendered necessary by a pledge, which was deemed essential to the success of the inquiry, that no individual return should be made public. It was found, when preparing the Tables, which at one time it was intended to give, of *Parishes*, that this could not be done without virtually violating the condition upon which, it may be reasonably held, the request for information was complied with.' *Ibid.*, p. xii. Hume, in one of the earliest commentaries on the census wrote: 'In 1851, a "Census of Religious Worship" was compiled for each of the two sections of Great Britain. That for Scotland was published separately, and at a comparatively early period after the receipt of the detailed information. It had been anxiously looked for: and was therefore issued with somewhat less care than was bestowed on the publication for South Britain.' A. Hume, *Remarks on the Census of Religious Worship for England and Wales, with Suggestions for an Improved Census in 1861, and a Map, Illustrating the Religious Condition of the Country* (1860), p. 5.

for England and Wales, have been lost north of the border. The rate of return was also poorer than for England and Wales, the voluntary aspect of the census being for various reasons more problematical in Scotland. In addition, the distinctive and unique nature of the Scottish denominations, which usually lacked direct English or Welsh counterparts of any comparable strength, make it appropriate for an examination along these lines of Scottish religion to be conducted separately by other historians.

### **The collection of Religious Census data**

In assessing the thoroughness of the Religious Census, the process by which returns were collected needs to be described. Some weeks before Census Sunday, local enumerators were appointed and instructed by Mann to collect the names and addresses of ministers in their district to whom census forms should be sent. It was permissible to provide, if the incumbent was unavailable, the name and address of a responsible nominee of the denomination. These details were forwarded to the local registrars – of which there were 2,190 in England and Wales – who sent the forms out for the nominated official's completion.<sup>38</sup> The enumerators involved in the collection of the Religious Census (30 March) were also involved in the collection of the population census data the next day. Each enumerator was either already, or was instructed to become, very familiar with his district. There were 30,610 of these districts or sections, which were generally very small – each enumerator was responsible for an area comprising an average of about 100 houses.<sup>39</sup> Completed schedules were collected by the enumerators on 31 March. The enumerators were instructed to check the returns for completeness and endeavour to complete any missing replies, sometimes sending further forms to incumbents and returning officials. On or before 8 April the schedules were to be delivered to the local registrars, who checked the returns again for completeness and accuracy. If information was missing an Inform-

<sup>38</sup> As well as the normal census forms, and the forms for the Religious Census, there were also forms for all heads or keepers of Day Schools, Sunday Schools, Evening Schools for Adults, and Literary and Scientific Institutions. *1851 Census Great Britain: Report and Tables on Education, England and Wales*, XC (1852–3), p. xciv.

<sup>39</sup> *1851 Census Great Britain: Report and Tables on Education, England and Wales*, XC (1852–3), p. xciv.

ant's Form was sent to the enumerator requesting information. Finally, 'when made as perfect as was possible',<sup>40</sup> the forms were sent on to Horace Mann in London, to arrive by 22 April. Further checks and communications with local officers then ensued, to obtain as complete coverage as possible. These measures taken for the collection of data appear to have been very thorough indeed.<sup>41</sup>

### Criticisms of the Religious Census

Despite this process, the accuracy of the Religious Census has been much debated, with far more discussion of the source *as a source*, than systematic attempts to analyse it comprehensively. The historiography of the census clearly demonstrates this, and this has hitherto been appropriate.<sup>42</sup> It is important to consider both contemporary concerns about the Religious Census as well as the limitations assessed by historians.

Criticisms fall into several headings. First, it has been argued that the enquiry itself was defective in the way it was envisaged and framed. There had been much debate about the form it should take. Where comparable religious enquiries had been made in other countries, the preference had often been to proceed with an examination of stated or perceived profession. However, this carried an intrinsic advantage for the established church, one felt likely to convey a completely unrealistic picture, and it was thought that an investigation that aimed to assess personal acts of religious adherence was preferable. Mann ably summarised the objections to a census of profession, claiming that such a census 'would produce results utterly untrustworthy; since numbers of people, who have not the slightest connection with any religious communion, would, from the mere shame of openly avowing practical atheism, enrol themselves as members of some church, most probably the Church of England'.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> 1851 *Census Great Britain: Report and Tables on Education, England and Wales*, XC (1852–3), p. xciv.

<sup>41</sup> See also *Census of Great Britain: Instructions to Enumerators*, XLIII (1851, Shannon edn, 1970), pp. 29–31; *Census Great Britain: Tables of the Population and Housing*, XLIII (1851, Shannon edn, 1970), pp. xi–xvi.

<sup>42</sup> For example Ambler, 'The 1851 Census of Religious Worship'; Thompson, 'The 1851 Religious Census: problems and possibilities'. Both are appraisals of the source.

<sup>43</sup> H. Mann, 'On the statistical position of religious bodies in England and Wales', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, 18 (1856), 142.

As the census returns were not compulsory, it has been argued that the census was inaccurate through insufficient returns being made. In Scotland, as Mann admitted, non-completion of returns was a problem: 'the statistics are not complete; and . . . no means are in your [the Registrar General's] possession of computing the extent of the deficiency. The effect of the instruction given to enumerators – that the inquiry was a *voluntary* measure – was much more awkward in Scotland than in England; the enumerators were less careful, after this announcement, to deliver forms, and parties were less willing to supply the information. The absence, likewise, of a staff of local officers within the sphere of your own influence (as are the Registrars in England) prevented any attempt, like that made here, to supply, by subsequent inquiries, such deficiencies as really became apparent.'<sup>44</sup> Of the 3,395 places of worship recorded in Scotland, 481 (14 per cent) failed to provide both sittings and attendance data.<sup>45</sup> This was a far higher proportion than for England and Wales. Some places of worship in Scotland were apparently not even issued with a return. The Scottish data have resulting limitations, although much useful work may be still done with them.<sup>46</sup>

For England and Wales however, the returns were of a far higher quality. We have seen that their method of collection was exacting. The published data show that, after all lines of enquiry were exhausted, 2,524 of the returns contained no sittings data and 1,394 lacked data concerning attendances. In many such cases, there were good reasons for such omissions – for example, no service having been held on that day. Of the 34,467 returns in England and Wales only 390 (or 1.1 per cent) lacked information on both sittings and attendances. Some such places of worship were clearly dilapidated or derelict.

<sup>44</sup> *1851 Census Great Britain: Report and Tables on Religious Worship and Education, Scotland*, LIX (1854, Shannon, 1970 edn), p. ix, and see G. Graham's letter to Viscount Palmerston, 20 March 1854, *ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>45</sup> There were no Scottish attendance returns from 32 per cent of Established churches, 12 per cent of Free churches, and 10 per cent of United Presbyterian churches. See C. G. Brown, *The Social History of Religion in Scotland since 1730* (1987), p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, as the Scottish returns have not survived, places of worship not furnishing a return cannot be identified. For detailed analysis this renders under-completion much more serious than it was for England and Wales. The Scottish religious census is ably discussed in Brown, *Social History of Religion in Scotland*, pp. 59–63, 72–5, 77–83; A. A. MacLaren, *Religion and Social Class: the Disruption Years in Aberdeen* (1974), pp. 31–49, 46; see also C. A. Piggott, 'A geography of religion in Scotland', *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 96 (1980), 130–40.

Where enumerators were unable to furnish returns they advised the local registrar rather than invent figures themselves. It would, indeed, be a cause for concern if all returns had been completed.

Finally, the form of enquiry was criticised for providing details of attendances rather than attendants. Mann made clear that the Census was not concerned with actual attendants: 'The inquiry undertaken in 1851 related to the provision for religious worship and the extent to which the means provided were made use of. It was not an enumeration of professed adherents to the different sects.'<sup>47</sup> He did attempt to estimate the true size of worshipping communities, by formulating an equation for calculating attendants, one that he had little faith in, and which has been sceptically received by almost all historians. We will consider this later when discussing the measures that can be created from the data. There has been much interest in calculating the number of worshippers in 1851, but there is no reliable way of obtaining such a figure. David Thompson was entirely correct when he argued that 'It is impossible to discover how many people went to church on 30 March 1851',<sup>48</sup> although this need not be a serious limitation if the census is used with care, for example to consider the relative strengths of denominations.

A second criticism of the census suggests that faulty initial enquiries may render some of its statistics defective. Denominations claimed that some of their places of worship were omitted from the census.<sup>49</sup> Certainly there was a weakness in the method of enquiry adopted by Mann. As already mentioned, a few days before the census, enumerators were instructed to record every place of worship in their district together with the name and address of 'a responsible official'. If, at this stage, a Nonconformist place of worship was omitted from the list there was little chance of the error being detected later and of that place of worship receiving an enumeration form. However, this problem is not as prominent as it may seem. In the case of the established church, returns for each church and chapel of ease were checked against the Clergy List and, where there was a discrepancy, further enquiries were made. It is also very unlikely that any Nonconformist minister was

<sup>47</sup> *The Times*, 22 July 1870, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Thompson, 'The 1851 Religious Census: problems and possibilities', 91.

<sup>49</sup> See for example J. Kennedy, 'On the census returns respecting Congregational worship', *The Congregational Yearbook* (1855), p. 35. Here it was suggested that omissions occurred particularly when places of worship were not separate buildings.

unaware of the Religious Census and, if he did not receive an enumeration form, it seems probable that he would have made this known to the enumerator. Local studies appear to confirm these views.<sup>50</sup> Even if it was accepted that substantial numbers of churches and chapels were omitted in 1851, there is no evidence to suggest that this occurred more in some English and Welsh divisions than others. When one is comparing denominational support across registration districts, rather than dealing with absolute numbers, errors in the census that are regionally specific are the main concern. One historian has covered this point well: 'Even if the degree of error is not inconsiderable, it can be assumed that the errors were equally distributed over the country – a reasonable assumption in the light of no contrary evidence – and therefore the results are of value in determining relative levels of church attendance in various regions, for example, between county and county, and between town and countryside.'<sup>51</sup>

In some cases confusion seems to have arisen over what constituted a 'place of worship', for a plethora of places could serve as such. This was not only a matter of poorer congregations making do with barns, shop floors and the like, as it extended to workhouses and schools in which Anglican services were held. Such returns usually bolstered the following of the established church, causing raised eyebrows in some Nonconformist circles. However, the main denominational charge ran the other way, for many dissenting places of worship did not match Anglican expectations, and were criticised accordingly. One sees this for example in occasional, and rather triumphal, complaints from Anglican authorities and parliamentarians that some dissenting attendances exceeded their stated numbers of sittings. However, the conclusion they wanted to draw – that these dissenting attendance figures were therefore fabrications – is not persuasive. In poorer places of worship, many used to stand. This was commented on for Roman Catholic churches by Edward Baines (MP for Leeds).<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> For example, A. Rogers, 'The 1851 Religious Census returns for the City of Nottingham', *Transactions of the Thoroton Society of Nottingham*, 76 (1972), 75. He found that all places of worship in contemporary local trade directories were also included in the Religious Census. Other evidence on places of worship also tends to confirm the comprehensive nature of the census.

<sup>51</sup> Pickering, 'The 1851 Religious Census – a useless experiment?', 387.

<sup>52</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CLIX (11 July 1860), 1700. He also pointed out that Catholic services were held several times during the morning. On the handling of this, see *Census of Great Britain: Instructions to Enumerators*, XLIII (1851), p. 12.

Indeed, in countering such a criticism of the census, the MP Frank Crossley made the telling point that attendances could easily exceed sittings, just as in the House of Commons, where there were 'sittings for about 200', but where there were '650 members', who crowded in during important debates.<sup>53</sup> In some places, congregations even over-spilled to ground outside the chapel, especially when people had come to hear a popular preacher. Whatever the steam stoked up over these issues at the time, in an atmosphere of denominational charge and counter-charge, to the historian these details seem minor when aggregated at registration-district level. At that level, fine questions of data accuracy, occasionally expressed as inter-denominational accusation, can have only the most negligible effect upon quantitative analysis. They matter more at the parochial level, but there they are more visible and open to judgement when one inspects the enumerators' forms.

At the time criticism was focused in particular upon the attendance figures which – unlike sittings – were less readily checked by independent viewers. A number of objections were made in Parliament about the census, with fears voiced over the accuracy of this information.<sup>54</sup> For obvious reasons in Parliament, but outside it as well, such fears came overwhelmingly from the established church rather than from the dissenting bodies. Before the census, Bishop Wilberforce of Oxford presented a petition to the House of Lords from the Deanery of Newbury, complaining that some replies would not be made; that some replies 'must necessarily be vague and incorrect'; and that the general result would propagate error rather than truth. He felt that 'the incorrect information thus obtained would be made available to the prejudice of the great interests over which the ministers of the Church were bound to watch'. The bishop pointed out that answering the queries was not compulsory. He felt that 'authentic information was only attainable when demanded under a penalty'. Prior to the next census, he thought that it should be made imperative that clergy and others answer the questions. His instinct was to advise his own clergy not to respond, although he did not wish to place himself in an antagonistic position towards the government.

<sup>53</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CLIX (11 July 1860), 1727. See also Ambler, *Lincolnshire Returns of the Census of Religious Worship, 1851*, p. xvi.

<sup>54</sup> The following account is from *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CXV (27 March 1851), 629–34.

Earl Granville, the Bishop of Salisbury, Earl Fitzwilliam and the Marquess of Breadalbane all made further, and less critical, points in the House of Lords. It was conceded by Earl Granville that the question about the endowments of the benefices of the Church of England might have to be withdrawn. But it would be a great disappointment to the public if no efforts were made by the government to ascertain statistics on the spiritual and secular education of the people. He believed that the returns would be 'of a generally accurate and ample character', and that it was 'important to ascertain whether the spiritual instruction afforded had kept pace with the increased wants of the population of 1851'. He felt that, while other religious bodies were willing to co-operate with the government, 'it could not but redound greatly to the disadvantage of the ministers of the Established Church if they were, on this occasion, to persist in their disinclination to make these important returns in reference to the position and circumstances of their own Church throughout the country'. This was a point reinforced by the Bishop of Salisbury, who indicated that 'if the ministers of the Established Church declined making these returns, they would stand in a position disadvantageous as contrasted with the conduct of ministers of other Churches'. The Church of England, he claimed, had 'no reason to shrink from the closest examination'; but he felt that these particular returns would necessarily be incomplete and imperfect, and that 'unjust, mischievous, and dangerous' inferences would be drawn from the results.

The Marquess of Breadalbane had little time for these prelates' views, although unlike some contemporaries he did not accuse them of a rearguard defence of Anglican political advantage. 'That the returns, in many cases, would be incomplete, might be true; but that was no reason why they should ask for no information at all.' And he added, in a forthright manner, that 'The ministers of Dissenting denominations had not intimated any unwillingness to make the required returns; and he could not attribute it to anything but laziness to find this opposition on the part of clergymen of the Established Church.' Needless to say, this was a position that the Bishop of Oxford objected to, one that he found to be 'not very fair'.

The levels of completed returns cited earlier suggest that little heed was taken of anyone who advocated non-compliance. Nor is there evidence to indicate that Anglican attendance figures were deliberately falsified. The Anglican clergy were widely used by the state to gather

quantitative and qualitative information throughout the nineteenth century and earlier. For example, in 1800 the government had requested bishops to ask their clergy to answer four questions relating to the state of agriculture and food supply in their area.<sup>55</sup> In 1801 the clergy acted as enumerators for the first population census. Place names on the first Ordnance Survey maps were moderated by them together with local landowners.<sup>56</sup> There was a long tradition of clergy responding to episcopal enquiries. In the light of so many similar precedents, it would be almost incomprehensible if clergymen of the established church, linked as they were to the state and its enquiries, systematically failed to provide fairly accurate attendance and seating information. Most clergy would probably have felt themselves to be seriously in breach of their duties if they had not provided the required information.<sup>57</sup>

Some churches and chapels may have included Sunday school scholars in their attendance figures. The census forms very clearly requested details of Sunday scholars to be given separately from the 'general congregation' attending services – they were to be entered in a row below the latter, with another row provided for the total figure. It was thus hard to avoid doing this, but it was probably not universally followed, for in some returns only a total figure was given. This may have been partly because the presence or absence of Sunday school classes, or the numbers of scholars in them, reflected upon the incumbent, minister or congregation. Where the matter was thus avoided, one suspects that no Sunday schools had been held, or that the numbers attending them had been embarrassingly small. When Mann compiled the statistical tables which he published in the census, he added the Sunday scholars to the general congregation attendances for the same period of the day. Perhaps one should not criticise him for taking this approach. Mann was very far removed

<sup>55</sup> W. E. Minchinton, 'Agricultural returns and the government during the Napoleonic Wars', *Agricultural History Review*, 1 (1953), 38–9; *A Century of Agricultural Statistics: Great Britain, 1866–1966* (HMSO, 1968), p. iii.

<sup>56</sup> J. B. Harley, 'Place-names on the early Ordnance Survey maps of England and Wales', *Journal of the British Cartographic Society* (1971), 93.

<sup>57</sup> They were also subject to extremely flattering approaches from the Registrar General. On 13 March 1851 they were written to as clergy 'so eminently qualified by position, character, and office, to exercise . . . a beneficial influence on the minds of [your] less educated neighbours'. This letter asking for their help was signed: 'Your faithful Servant, George Graham'. *Census of Great Britain: Instructions to Enumerators*, XLIII (1851, Shannon edn, 1970), p. 41.

from modern data handling capabilities and, given the resources open to him, what he achieved was phenomenal enough without historians asking for more. He had limited space and wished to communicate information in an accessible manner. He was aware that the Sunday scholars generally represented current and many future supporters of each denomination. The age structure of the overall population was relatively low, and Sunday scholars were normally aged between 5 and 16. For Mann, it would have seemed mistaken to omit such pupils where they were entered on the forms as requested, but run a risk of some such scholars being included within figures for general attendances where only totals had been returned. His solution therefore seems legitimate. The inclusion of these scholars within the published attendance figures does not raise serious problems, and historians have little option but to analyse the published registration-district totals of attendances as given. Nevertheless, for the parish-level work in part 2 of this book, using the original returns, the approach adopted has been to keep Sunday scholars separate, which facilitates greater analytical precision, allows them to be added to total attendances if necessary, and permits them to be studied in their own right.<sup>58</sup>

After the census, the Registrar General's Office was widely praised, even by the Bishop of Oxford.<sup>59</sup> However, there were claims, again particularly by this bishop, that Nonconformists had deliberately exaggerated their attendance figures. In a statement that may not have endeared him to Nonconformists, the bishop pointed out that 'Many of their ministers were not often in the same rank of life as the clergy of the Established Church.'<sup>60</sup> He allowed that 'in large Dissenting chapels in large towns the ministers were men of education', and no doubt their returns were honestly made. But in 'very little places . . . small licensed rooms in remote villages', served by 'men who had not the advantages of education – and who were not the objects of general view and observation', he had 'no hesitation in saying there was continually a misrepresentation in point of fact as to the relative numbers of the Established Church and of the

<sup>58</sup> For further discussion, see appendix C, pp. 431–2.

<sup>59</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, CXXXV (11 July 1854), 24. Earl Granville praised the Registrar General's conduct of the Religious Census for showing 'great powers of administration and great care for the public interest in every possible way'. *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>60</sup> For the bishop's 1854 speech, see *ibid.*, 23–8.