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PART I

INTRODUCTION

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1

FROM IDENTITY TO COMMITMENT

1.1 Beliefs and belonging

This book aims to explore the ways in which Roman Catholics in England in the last quarter of the twentieth century make religious sense of their everyday lives. At one level it is concerned to explore the nature of their religious beliefs over the whole range of concerns, from doctrinal matters to questions of personal and social morality. These include such controversial issues as contraception, abortion and divorce, and concerns such as the celibacy of priests, fasting regulations, Mass attendance requirements, and rules governing religiously 'mixed' marriages, which might better be regarded as matters of Church rules and discipline. On another level it aims to explore underlying questions of religious meaning, belonging and commitment, the nature of the Catholic identity, and its salience. Behind all these concerns there is the matter of religious authority, the ways in which it is interpreted, legitimated, delimited, ignored or transformed by different types of Catholics.

For the purposes of this book the term English Catholics will be used to describe all those self-identifying or baptised Roman Catholics who are living in England, regardless of the origins of their religious affiliation. Thus nearly one in nine are converts to Roman Catholicism, while one quarter are first generation immigrants and an additional one-fifth are second generation immigrants (Hornsby-Smith and Lee, 1979: 43–5, 179–87; Hornsby-Smith, 1986; 1987: 23–6).

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This study has been conceived as complementary to my earlier book *Roman Catholics in England* (1987) which was based largely on quantitative findings from survey research with representative samples of Catholics. It described structural aspects of English Catholicism such as the extent of social and geographical mobility, the assimilation of Irish Catholics, patterns of Catholic marriage and family life, the characteristics of Catholic elites committed to reform in the Church, and the broad framework of Catholic attitudes on major social, moral, political and religious issues. Such a structural analysis provides the social and historical context within which the present study is located. In contrast to the earlier study, the present book will be substantially grounded in more qualitative data derived from taped interviews with Catholics who report a wide range of institutional involvement, from the members of national commissions set up to advise the bishops, to random samples of electors in a number of parishes. Questions of representativeness are not so important for our purposes, which are to present and interpret the variety of religious accounts given by English Catholics in response to focused interviewing. In reporting these variations we shall quote liberally from the interview transcripts. Apart from the exploration of doctrinal beliefs and sexual attitudes, our interviews also investigated responses to parish life, liturgical change, the role of the priest and his relationships with lay people, ecumenism, justice and peace issues, and the authority which our respondents accorded to the teachings of the religious leaders in the Church from the Pope to the local parish priest.

It is appropriate here to make brief reference to the status which will be accorded to the accounts given by lay Catholics, in focused interviews, of their religious beliefs, their sense of belonging and commitment, and the salience which their Catholicism held for them. Some of the methodological issues arising from the accounts given by different types of Catholics will be discussed in the following chapter. Here we are concerned simply to note that the analysis of actors' accounts is problematic and contested within sociology (Gilbert and Abell, 1983).

Peter Abell has distinguished four positions taken by contemporary sociologists from the 'ethnomethodological', that 'no inferences are possible from accounts of actions to actions themselves', to the 'behaviourist', that 'inferences from accounts of actions to actions themselves are impossible as the former are intrinsically unreliable

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and ephemeral' (1983: 173–4). In a similar manner, Wallis and Bruce (1983) distinguish between ethnomethodological approaches which insist that actors' accounts are all we can ever know from structuralist and functionalist, for example marxist, approaches which discount such accounts as merely epiphenomenal. The view taken here corresponds to Abell's second position:

> that inferences are possible from accounts of actions to actions themselves but that *both* the inference *and* the analysis of account giving hold intrinsic interest for the sociologist. (1983: 174; emphasis in original)

In this book our concern will be with the first of these tasks and the regarding of interviewees' accounts as data which can be used, along with other data such as contextual factors to situate the interview material, in the making of inferences about action. Thus we will have particular regard for our respondents' interview accounts because:

> since actors have privileged access to their intentions and beliefs, the presumption must be that their characterizations of their actions and their accounts of why they are performing them are the correct ones. (Wallis and Bruce, 1983: 99)

However, 'actors' accounts, like sociologists' accounts, are efforts to conceptualize and explain behaviour and beliefs, and both are equally hypothetical' and fallible. In spite of this, sociological explanations, which may be considered to be 'a more systematic form of commonsense', differ from those of actors not only in being more systematic but also more concerned with conceptualising and generalising (1983: 103–5). Wallis and Bruce conclude by observing that:

> No-one will adequately explain social action who does not understand how individuals interpret their world. But no-one will understand how individuals interpret their world who is not aware of the social and historical context within which they do it. (1983: 109)

1.2 Social and religious context

Thus in order to understand the accounts which English Catholics give of their religious beliefs, it is first necessary to locate them historically in their social and religious context. Our data were collected over the decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. We commenced our research nearly three decades after the end of the

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traumatic events of the Second World War. During this post-war period the world had learned to live with the threat of nuclear annihilation, the 'cold war', and 'peaceful coexistence' between the two great ideologically opposed blocks of western capitalism and soviet communism. These three decades also saw the end of the long period of European colonialism and the emergence of dozens of new, politically independent nations. For Britain this meant coming to terms with a major loss of international status and power, as but one among many medium-sized industrial nations competing fiercely for world markets. It was perhaps peculiarly handicapped by institutional obsolescence, the legacy of its earlier historical emergence as the first industrial nation. All the same, at home the period saw the construction of the Welfare State and a long period of continuous economic growth and rising affluence sufficient to prompt the proclamation from Harold Macmillan that 'you've never had it so good'. It was a period which saw the revolution of rising expectations, the emergence of mass leisure industries, the growth of car ownership and the mobility it gave, and, in particular, the near universality of television ownership. For the first time authority figures, whether cabinet ministers or the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, were subject to detailed cross-examination in one's own front room, and in the process became vulnerable to critical evaluation in a way that had never been possible before. Post-war reconstruction and urban development projects resulted in more comfortable homes, and a more privatised home-centredness focused around the nuclear, rather than the extended, family was said to have emerged.

Our research was also undertaken at a time of great religious upheaval in the Roman Catholic Church. We commenced our interviewing programme nearly a decade after the ending of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. This general council of the Church was only the second to be called since the Counter-Reformation Council of Trent (1545–63) and the First Vatican Council (1869–70), which was aborted by the taking of Rome by nationalist forces and the ending of the temporal power of the papacy. The latter council had defined the doctrine of papal infallibility, but in a way which had resulted in its wide misinterpretation and exaggeration. The Second Vatican Council was regarded as having completed the unfinished business of the earlier council and, especially in its major Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (Abbott, 1966: 14–101),

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placed the doctrine of papal infallibility in the context of an extended theology of the 'People of God'. Apart from that, the Council had been called by Pope John XXIII to 'let some fresh air into the Church' and promote within her an *aggiornamento* or 'bringing up to date' (Butler, 1981: 6). The participation of lay people in the Church and in its mission to transform the world in favour of the Kingdom values of justice, peace and love, was afforded much greater emphasis, and strong encouragement was given to the ecumenical movement. Given the major transformations taking place world-wide after the Second World War there was certainly a need for institutional renewal in the light of the changing social and historical context and the emergence of new needs requiring new responses to mission.

The combined effect of these social and religious transformations in the post-war world was 'the dissolution of the English Catholic subculture' (Hornsby-Smith, 1987: 208–14). Up to the 1950s English Catholicism had been characterised by a distinctive subculture with an all-embracing Catholic institutional life centered around the parish and school and with its own norms, values and beliefs (Coman, 1977: 4–5). This subculture had been forged in a fortress model of the Church, defended by policies favouring marital endogamy and segregated religious worship and schooling, which were buttressed not only by institutional rules and sanctions but also by community pressures to safeguard the preciously distinctive Catholic identity. The strong Irish background of most English Catholics reinforced this sense of belonging to a religio-ethnic minority with its own separate and proud identity.

The processes of change in the post-war years were gradual and took place over several decades. There was no dramatic collapsing of the fortress walls as a result of an explosive attack from without. Rather there was a steady dissolving of the walls in the solvent of rapid external social change after the Second World War and the internal processes of renewal encouraged by the Vatican Council's programme of reform. Peter Coman characterised the process in the following terms:

> The gradual assimilation through education and mixed marriage, the dissent over traditional teaching in birth regulation, the questioning of the limits of papal authority, the gradual substitution of English for Latin in the liturgy, the tentative movements towards ecumenism, the softening of traditional disapproval of mixed marriages and the abolition of Friday abstinence. (1977: 105)

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The 1978 survey of English Catholics had shown, for example, that whereas over two-thirds of married Catholics before 1960 had a Catholic partner, among those married in the 1970s, the proportion had fallen to only one-third (Hornsby-Smith, 1987: 94). These, and other changes, led to 'the weakening of the traditional Roman Catholic sense of boundary and demarcation in relation to the wider community ... [and] the weakening of a general Roman Catholic identity' (Coman, 1977: 106). Mary Douglas articulated the concern of many:

> Friday no longer rings the great cosmic symbols of expiation and atonement: it is not symbolic at all, but a practical day for the organisation of charity. *Now the English Catholics are like everyone else.* (Douglas, 1973: 67; italics added)

Most Catholics experienced the effects of the changes primarily at the parish level (Hornsby-Smith, 1989). The Mass was said in English and the priest faced the congregation in order to symbolise the communal nature of the eucharistic celebration and the full participation of lay people in it. During the Mass lay people read selections from scripture in English, articulated in bidding prayers the petitions and everyday concerns of the members of the parish, and, more recently, served as special ministers at Communion which was increasingly given under both kinds, that is the consecrated wine as well as the host. The full participation of lay people at all levels in the life of the Church was reflected in their membership of bishops' advisory bodies at both diocesan and national levels and in the slowly increasing number of parish councils. In their response to the National Pastoral Congress in 1980, the bishops of England and Wales eulogised the concept of *The Sharing Church* (Anon, 1981: 307–28). While the practice very often fell far short of the new theological thinking in the Church, there is no doubting the magnitude of the shifts in self-understanding to which members of the Roman Catholic Church were asked to respond after the Second Vatican Council.

While most English Catholics adapted well to the changes as they were gradually, and sometimes reluctantly, introduced, there were some unanticipated consequences. Thus Anthony Archer has suggested that, whereas the Church up to the 1950s had been an important source of identity for working-class Catholics, the post-Vatican Church has increasingly become a vehicle for the achievement of the aspirations of articulate middle-class enthusiasts who are in open competition with older forms of clerical domination. But the

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liturgical changes so enthusiastically welcomed by middle-class reformers, in fact articulated new forms of elitism, 'cut off many of the ritual streams that had previously nourished Catholics and covered over many of the accumulated pools in which popular Catholicism had found its strength'. While 'the new Mass proved only too vulnerable to congregational as well as clerical sabotage', it was basically classist in origin: 'its very language was that of a particular class', familiar in the courtroom and the classroom. In this sense Archer interprets the changes as new forms of class oppression, and it is hardly surprising that, with the dissolution of a distinctive Catholic identity, 'working-class indifference coincided ... with the relinquishment of an Irish identity, and their subsequent failure to find anything of particular interest to them in the Catholic Church' (Archer, 1986: 141–5, 234–6).

Archer's claim has some validity, though it overlooks the extent to which lay people generally were excluded from full participation in the life of the Church in the pre-Vatican years. What seems to be beyond dispute is that, with the dissolution of the distinctive Catholic subculture, there was an associated shift in the nature of Catholic belonging to the Church. No longer was being a Catholic a part of one's intrinsic identity, an indication of ancestry and membership of an identifiably distinct religio-ethnic community, something normally ascribed. Now Catholics were increasingly required to make a positive choice and affirm the calling to participate fully in the work of the whole 'People of God'. From being a given aspect of their cultural identity which they accepted passively, Catholics were invited to see their Catholic faith as having meaning, and requiring from them a positive commitment to the task of mission in the world. Whereas previously 'cradle' Catholics regarded themselves as Catholics unless they positively 'opted out', there is a sense in which in the post-Vatican Church, Catholics were being asked to 'opt in', rather as converts had always had to. It seems, therefore, that the basis of meaningful belonging for the English Catholic has been transformed from one of religio-ethnic identity to one of voluntary religious commitment.

1.3 Research aims

This book is concerned to explore the religious transformations which have taken place in English Catholicism in the second half of

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the twentieth century. Here the study of religious change in a Liverpool suburban parish by Theodore Koopmanschap in the 1970s is of great value. In particular he explored transformations in the quest for community, liturgical worship, the belief system and morality, and these issues are similar to those we have addressed in our own studies. In his interpretation of his in-depth interviews with ninety-five adult Roman Catholics in his research parish in 1972, he utilises John Bowker's concept of 'route-finding activity' as the principal characteristic of religion (1973: 82) and finds value in Lévi-Strauss's notion of 'bricolage' (1966: 16–36; Koopmanschap, 1978: 39). He concludes that:

> old symbols must make sense in *this* industrial society and encompass, differentiate and synthesise modern multi-faceted and fragmented social experience.
> It is precisely at the crossroads between tradition and modernity, between old symbols of old authoritarian social structures and new social experience that the contemporary Roman Catholic is called to perform his bricolage. (1978: 49)

We shall be concerned, like Koopmanschap, to explore how English Catholics 'reshuffle the myths and values of their religious tradition in order to make them fit new experiences' (1978: 223) in a more affluent, highly mobile and more tolerant or religiously indifferent society.

We shall also take note of the challenging and insightful study of middle-class religion in England in the 1980s by Melanie Cottrell (1985). Her research was designed to test a number of hypotheses derived from Luckmann's 'invisible' religion thesis (1970). Her data came from the life stories of 34 middle-class people in the south of England in the early 1980s, in interviews which typically lasted three to five hours. For the 'religiously devoted', church religion did provide a transcendent meaning system. But, contrary to Luckmann's hypothesis, for the majority of her respondents, including many regular church-goers, religion was not a matter of intrinsic importance. Most people had meaning systems which contained no transcendent theme. The outlook of the majority was this-worldly and pragmatic. Church religion had been pushed to the margins of life and consciousness and there were no secular substitutes. Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas (1973; 1975; 1978), Cottrell found that the prevailing cosmology corresponded to a competitive individualism and was strongly influenced by rationality, empiricism, plural-

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ism and relativism. It will be one aim of this present study to judge the extent to which Cottrell's analysis has relevance for English Catholics who differ widely in the degree to which they are institutionally involved.

In broad terms this book will endeavour to address four different but related sets of issues. Firstly, it will attempt to describe what meanings English Catholics attached to being a Roman Catholic at this time, how they saw the nature of their religious identity, and to what sort of institution they regarded themselves as belonging. Here the recent Presidential Address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion is helpful. Phillip Hammond, following Hans Mol (1978), distinguished two kinds of identity: one which is involuntarily held, such as is the case of an oppressed religio-ethnic immigrant minority, which is nourished in primary, face-to-face, groups and community interaction, and the second which is transient and dependent on the nature of social encounters and where a great deal of social interaction takes place outside primary groups. Thus Hammond distinguishes two views of the Church in contemporary society:

> On the one hand, there is ... the 'collective-expressive' view, in which involvement is largely involuntary because it emerges out of overlapping primary group ties not easily avoided. On the other hand, there is the 'individual-expressive' view, in which involvement is largely voluntary and independent of other social ties ... the social conditions eroding the first view are the same conditions that permit, perhaps even encourage, the second view. (1988: 5)

Following Luckmann's contrast between church-related and invisible religion (1970), Hammond suggests that people can be located on a grid in terms of their involvement in overlapping primary groups and in secondary groups. This leads him to distinguish two main types of religious identity. Firstly, church-affiliated people who place a high stress on primary group involvement and on 'localism' (Roof, 1978) and a low stress on secondary group involvement are said to have a 'collective-expressive' involvement in the Church and the first type of 'involuntary, immutable' religious identity. Secondly, those with a low local involvement but high secondary group ties are said to have an 'individual-expressive' involvement in the Church and a 'transient, changeable' religious identity (1988: 6).

Hammond's theory seems likely to be of value in the case of English Catholics for whom the defensive walls of a fortress Church have largely been dissolved in the solvent of post-war social change

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