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978-0-521-09327-9 - Roman Catholic Beliefs in England: Customary Catholicism and Transformations of Religious Authority

Michael P. Hornsby-Smith

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This book makes available for the first time an empirical study of the transformations in religious beliefs that have occurred amongst English Catholics since the Second Vatican Council of 1962–5. It complements Dr Hornsby-Smith's well received *Roman Catholics in England* (1987) which provides the social and historical context for this present study.

In *Roman Catholic beliefs in England*, Michael Hornsby-Smith explores Catholic beliefs over a range of concerns from doctrinal matters to questions of personal and social morality and assesses how religious beliefs are differentiated between different types of Catholics. He also examines the legitimacy accorded by English Catholics to both papal authority and religious authority in general.

This study is based on extensive interviews with lay members of the bishops' advisory commissions, Catholic electors, people who attended the public events during the Pope's visit in 1982 and grassroots parishioners. From this evidence, Michael Hornsby-Smith convincingly demonstrates the prevalence of 'customary religion', that is the continuation of beliefs and practices derived from official religion but no longer subject to the control of the Church. He argues that English Catholics have gradually withdrawn legitimacy from the clerical leadership and increasingly 'make up their own minds', particularly in the area of personal morality. The author concludes by reflecting on the implications of his findings for the secularisation thesis.

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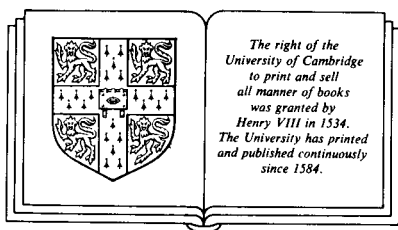
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# Roman Catholic beliefs in England

## Customary Catholicism and transformations of religious authority

**Michael P. Hornsby-Smith**

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To

LENNIE

with all my love and thanks for our thirty years together

and to

PENNY, PETER AND RAY

generous collaborators and good friends

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## PREFACE

'Are you really a Roman Catholic?' I asked my aunt with interest. She replied promptly and seriously, 'Yes, my dear, only I just don't believe in all the things they believe in.' (Graham Greene, *Travels with my Aunt*, 1972: 151)

This book has been conceived as a complement to *Roman Catholics in England* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), which reported a number of studies of the social structural aspects of English Catholicism and how these had changed as a result of post-war social and post-Vatican religious change. Thus evidence of the heterogeneity of English Catholics, their social mobility experiences, changing marriage patterns and competing elite groups, and the assimilation of Irish Catholics, were the primary concern in arguing that the defensive walls, which up to the 1950s, had separated the 'fortress' Church from contamination with the outside world, had steadily been dissolved.

In this second book, the focus is on the consequences of these structural changes, in terms of patterns of belief and morality and views of religious authority, for the whole range of Catholics, from those institutionally involved with the Church at the national level to ordinary self-identifying Catholics at the parish level, such as Henry Pulling's 'aunt' in Graham Greene's novel, whether they attend Mass regularly or not. It has been a long time in the writing. The data which have been reported in it were collected in four separate research projects in the decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s.

It is unlikely that the researches which are reviewed would have been commenced without two grants from the British Social Science Research Council (as it was then called in happier times) for the interviewing programmes with members of the bishops' commissions, and random samples of Catholics in two London and two Preston parishes. The Nuffield Foundation made available the small grant, at very short notice, which

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facilitated the interviews with people attending the six public events at Wembley, Coventry, Liverpool, Manchester, York and Cardiff, during the historic visit of Pope John-Paul II in 1982.

A cursory examination of the bibliography will demonstrate that much of the work which is reported here was undertaken collaboratively. I am indebted to a generation of generous colleagues who have worked with me over the past fifteen years or so. In particular, I wish to dedicate this book with gratitude to Penny Mansfield, Peter Reilly and Ray Lee who were successively the research officers on the two S.S.R.C.-funded projects. I count myself fortunate to have had such conscientious, sociologically alert and insightful colleagues, and hope that this book, in spite of its somewhat slow gestation, will be an acceptable testimony to the many hard and often uncomfortable interviews we carried out, as well as to their numerous reflections and draft reports. It is gratifying to record that our friendship has outlasted our research collaboration.

During the pope's visit, Ray Lee and several other colleagues, especially Jennifer Brown, Betsy Cordingley, Constance Elliott, Joan O'Bryne and Ann Scurfield, kindly collaborated by interviewing people at various locations. Without their help this project would have been stillborn and I gratefully acknowledge the generous way they gave up a very hot Bank Holiday weekend.

Over the course of nearly fifteen years research on English Catholics I have incurred too many debts to record in detail. In this book the results of several hundred interviews have been reported. Perhaps only other researchers, whose analyses depend on the collection of focused and tape-recorded interview data, will appreciate fully the significant work of the interviewees, who conscientiously probed and prompted various samples of respondents, almost all of them strangers, to tell us something about their understanding of their Catholicism and the meaning it had for them. But their efforts would have been of no avail had it not been for the courtesy and generosity of those people who agreed to tell us their stories and give us their accounts of what it meant to be a Catholic. To all those who have contributed in any way to this research I wish to express a very sincere thanks.

This preface was drafted at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris as I waited for the flight home after a Council meeting of the Société Internationale de Sociologie des Religions. It was a happy reminder of the friendship, stimulation and sociological insights which have been generously given by the wider community of sociologists of religion. They have kindly provided thoughtful and constructive comments on various drafts over the years. The intellectual climate in Britain has become crudely instrumental in recent years and their collaboration and encouragement is a happy reminder of more lasting values. I am pleased to express my gratitude to those who commented critically but constructively on early drafts, especially Eileen Barker, Joan Brothers, Jennifer Brown, Grace Davie, Christie Davies,

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Graham Howes, Ray Lee and Joan O'Bryne. Any failure to respond to their suggestions is, of course, entirely mine. My thanks are also due to Melanie Cottrell who generously gave me a copy of her perceptive and important thesis.

I am pleased to acknowledge permissions to use materials which first appeared elsewhere. Much of chapter 2 was first published in *Accounts and Action* edited by Nigel Gilbert and Peter Abell. An earlier version of chapter 3 first appeared as a University of Surrey Occasional Paper. Chapter 5 is a substantially expanded version of a paper written with Ray Lee and Peter Reilly which first appeared in the *Review of Religious Research*. Some sections of chapter 6 first appeared in *The Month* and the main argument of chapter 7 was presented with Penny Mansfield in an article in *New Blackfriars*. Chapter 9 is a substantially revised version of a paper first given at an Implicit Religion conference organised by Edward Bailey at Ilkley. I am also grateful to Michael Holdsworth for encouraging me to write two books on English Catholics, and to his colleagues at Cambridge University Press for their painstaking work in seeing them through to publication.

Finally, to my wife Lennie. Thank you for your love and our first thirty years together. I wish I had the words to express adequately my gratitude for your tolerance, support and encouragement when the writing has not been going well, to have faith and keep going in the sociologist's vocation of demystification, for 'the truth will set you free' (Jn. 8: 32).