

Introduction

On 25 July 1968, Pope Paul VI shook the world. His encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* rejected widespread calls to permit use of the contraceptive pill and deemed artificial birth control ‘intrinsically evil’. The decision split, or perhaps exposed an existing split, within a Catholic community which represented almost one in five of the global population – some gave up on the Church, more gave up on the Pope specifically, priests contradicted the encyclical covertly from the privacy of the confessional and, in some cases, brazenly from the public platform of the pulpit, while other Catholics welcomed the reassertion of theological consistency at a moment of profound cultural agitation. For this latter group, the Pope was upholding the integrity of a transcendent, God-given law which he had no authority to meddle with. In the UK, the upheaval and outcry which greeted the encyclical extended well beyond the Catholic community, filling the columns, editorials and letters pages of leading secular publications. Vincent Broome was to ask in the *New Statesman* later that year:

If a man can be shown to be responsible for wrecking thousands of marriages, sexually tormenting countless numbers of simple-minded people and starving millions of young children, would not any moral civilisation indict that man as the arch criminal of the day?¹

Emmanuelle Arsan, the author of a collection of famed erotic novels which inspired a franchise of eponymous softcore pornographic films, felt moved to publish an open letter to Pope Paul VI pleading for a change of heart.² *Humanae Vitae* established the Catholic Church as the antagonist in a story of sixties sexual revolution – a stubborn stone resisting the stream of sexually liberal modernity.

2 *The Pope and the pill*

Forty-five years later, Margaret, an eighty-one-year-old Catholic widow, was sitting at her dining-room table describing the intimate details of her sex life to a young, male researcher. After recalling the limited sexual education she received in her youth, she went on to speak of her marriage to fellow Catholic John in 1954. Her most abiding memory was of a 'life-changing' shift in her contraceptive behaviour. In the first ten years of her marriage, Margaret had dutifully obeyed the Church's prohibition on all forms of artificial contraception, grappling instead, somewhat unsuccessfully, with natural family planning (or the rhythm method) – the only form of birth regulation permitted by the Vatican. The introduction of the pill in 1961, widely heralded as the catalyst for a 'revolution' in sexual practice across English society, had not shaken her resolve. Like many 'liberal' Catholics, Margaret had been hopeful of a change in the Church's teachings during the spring of 1968, but found herself bitterly disappointed when she learned of *Humanae Vitae* over a radio news bulletin. In her mid-thirties, after six children and a decade of sexual frustration, she defied the Pope's dictate and chose to go on the pill. She explained that this decision had come through a process of agonising soul searching, but ultimately allowed her to enjoy sex in an entirely new way and 'achieve her first orgasm'. Margaret asserted that it was only at this point that she discovered her 'true self'.

As the interview drew to a close, the glow of passionate optimism which had coloured her emancipatory narrative seemed to flicker somewhat. After a long pause she looked up from her cup of tea, held the gaze of the researcher and reflected on what she had lost:

All the things we were taught were absolutely logical; if this was so, then this must be so. It was all fitting together like a wonderful jigsaw, and in my teens I thought that was wonderful, you know. We Catholics have the answer for everything. But, when you get into adulthood and real life you find that it isn't as simple as all that, it's impossible really. Vatican II coincided with the sexual revolution; it sort of took the cork out of the bottle and you're never going to be able to put it back ... I really don't know from one day to the next what I do anymore. It really, in many ways it's a bereavement. Because all these beliefs that I've been brought up with, I now find it increasingly difficult to believe in them, towards the end of my life.³

This moment of raw emotional expression encapsulated not only the experiences of many Catholic women, but also, in ways that might not seem immediately apparent, the questions that faced many non-Catholics living in post-war England. The absolute authority of the Catholic Church was shaken in this period as Catholics began questioning its official teachings about sex, gender and the body. If the Pope was wrong about birth control, what else could he be wrong about? In a broader sense, growing affluence in wider society saw an increase in personal freedoms, but this licentiousness was attended with the dissolution of established codes and comforting certainties. It left men and women in a precarious state of moral and existential flux, caught in what certain scholars have described as a 'paradox of choice'.⁴ Increased opportunities brought with them heightened expectations, and heightened expectations brought increased opportunities for both fulfilment and disillusionment.

Sex was at the heart of Margaret's story of religious change. She identified a 'sexual revolution' as the key historical development which let the 'cork out of the bottle' on her Catholic faith. In this sense, Margaret's personal life story chimed with a dominant narrative of collective post-war change. The idea that a process of 'sexual liberation' in the 1960s destroyed Britain's Christian culture has become a powerful trope in both popular commentary and historical analysis. Historians such as Callum Brown have argued that a sudden and abrupt sexual revolution saw women turn away from Christian beliefs and take up a new, sexually liberated version of femininity.⁵ Proponents of this theory argue that 'discursive Christianity', that is, the language, ideals and moral constructs that women draw on to make sense of their worlds, was permanently replaced by a modern, sexualised understanding of female identity in the swinging sixties.⁶ Beyond academic texts, there is today a prevailing belief that religion is somehow unsexy, and that sex, 'good' sex at least, cannot possibly be religious. In the pages that follow, we will both interrogate and historicise this tale of 'sex destroying religion'.

The main subject of this book is, therefore, not sex or Catholicism in isolation, but the relationship between the two.⁷ It is about the way this relationship was experienced by 'ordinary' men and women on an everyday basis – how they negotiated spiritual and sexual demands at a moment when the two seemed to be at odds with each other. An original oral history project, in which Margaret was one of twenty-seven Catholics interviewed, is used to explore these intimate daily

negotiations. This book is also about how the relationship between sex and Catholicism was discussed and constructed by various authorities – the Pope, parish priests, marriage guidance counsellors, physicians, cultural commentators, sociologists and historians. What emerges is a unique insight into the constellation of ideas and assumptions that underpinned personal understandings of sex and religion in an apparently secular age.

Above all else, Margaret's testimony offers an insight into what is at stake in this book. It became clear that through the interview, Margaret was confronting her own mortality. It was the spectre of her approaching death that brought into focus the full implications of her altered belief system. She was not simply reflecting on changing values and beliefs, but an entirely new way of making sense of her existence. And ultimately, her eventual non-existence. This book is about the stories that people tell themselves about meaning, morality and being, and the way these stories changed in the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, it's about the everyday experiences that informed and were informed by these stories. Too often historians of religion have focused on the discourses, ideas and language of religious faith, while neglecting its material, embodied experience. As we shall see, this tendency amongst historians is itself a product of much larger trends at work in the twentieth century.

The book works *with* rather than *on* Catholic women and their life stories.⁸ Since the emergence of socio-scientific and psychoanalytical disciplines at the start of the twentieth century, studies of religious belief, sexuality and, in many cases, women have shared a tendency to 'unpack' or 'deconstruct' their subjects. Meanings have been arrived at by critiquing or suggesting alternative explanations to those narrated by religious women, especially Catholic women. An effort has been taken here to treat Catholic women as reflexive authors of their own stories. This commitment to really listening to the interviewees' accounts of their lives is reflected not only in the book's methodology, but also in its structure. The organisation of the chapters has been calculated to challenge any temptation to simply ascribe Catholic women's life stories to their upbringing. When describing the project to others, I was invariably told that Catholic women's sex lives were all about childhood indoctrination – the daily decisions and experiences of a forty-year-old married woman in relation to contraception, foreplay, sexual pleasure, masturbation and monogamy were all determined by her upbringing,

so the story went. The aim here is to eschew this Freudian way of thinking – to recognise the agency of the interviewees in their everyday lives, but also as analytical interpreters of these lives. Working with rather than on Catholic women animates a new set of questions about religion, sex and power.

Scholars have already moved beyond asking questions which assume that sex and religion were diametrically opposed in the post-war decades. Historians of religion have been roundly warned against falling back on the lingering assumptions of a once totemic ‘secularisation’ theory. Conversely, historians of sexuality have been encouraged to critique the notion of ‘sexual liberation’. These two developments, although largely existing in isolation from one another, have encouraged an optimistic, complementary reading of the relationship between sex and religion. We can now point to examples of a dialogue between sex and religion – points of reciprocation between modern sexualities and traditional Christian ideals. Harry Cocks has shown that religious impetuses informed the early development of sexological theories at the turn of the twentieth century; Laura Ramsay has demonstrated that actors within the Church of England played a formative role in bringing about the ‘permissive’ legislation of the sixties; and Sam Brewitt-Taylor has emphasised the centrality of clergymen to the ‘myth of the sexual revolution’ in the same decade.⁹ Catholicism however, remains defined by a sex-negative status in the historical imagination, cut adrift from the processes which produced the ‘modern’ sexual subject.

Grand narratives of religious decline and sexual liberation have fallen out of vogue: their propensity to flatten out the messy and textured nature of everyday life has left them open to condemnation. ‘Post-secular’ is the latest expression to trend in the vocabularies of contemporary historians: it neatly crystallises the death of the ‘secularisation thesis’ as an explanatory narrative, but the term also seems to imply a supplanted ‘secular age’. While there is a greater complexity to post-secular thinking than this characterisation suggests, it serves to highlight the problematic nature of all-encompassing labels.¹⁰ The material collected here on sex, women and Catholicism reaffirms the need to be cautious when drawing up any straightforward, linear narratives: the terms ‘sexual liberation’ and ‘secularisation’ tell only part of the story, or at least part of society’s story.

The memories of Catholic women, as well as the documents of the central Catholic Church, do suggest that there was something of a

recategorisation in the relationship between sex and religion in the middle of the twentieth century. Rather than being about an emancipation from the confines of religious subjugation, a deeper, conceptual separation between the religious and the sexual opened up in the decades after the war. Sex became understood to be a material, embodied instinct while religious belief was increasingly identified as its counterpoint – a matter of transcendent, abstract theory. This recategorisation of the religious and the sexual was about shifting regimes of *materiality* as opposed to morality; the categories of existence that objects and ideas are placed within. As we will discover, this system of classification was at the heart of ‘liberal’ Catholic women’s often painstaking decisions to reject the Church’s teaching on contraception, written into the Vatican’s ‘orthodox’ writings on sex and the body, and continues to underscore the explanatory frameworks employed by historians of religious decline.¹¹ It was a trend which was both personal and institutional in its scope, discursive and experiential in its nature, historical and historiographical in its implications. We find it in Brown’s narrative, Pope Paul VI’s Encyclical and Margaret’s rejection of this Encyclical. The causes and consequences of this recategorisation are elucidated through the course of the book, but let us first look at the position of Catholicism in post-war England.

Catholicism in post-war England

The Catholic community was steadily expanding in the middle of the century thanks to Irish and continental immigration, but remained a relatively small percentage of the English population throughout the period – 2.23 million Catholics were recorded as regular churchgoers in 1940 (4.6 per cent of the national population), 2.43 million in 1950 and 2.85 million by 1960 (5.4 per cent of the population).¹² Despite its diminutive demographic, Catholicism represents a particularly valuable case study when considering the way religion and sexuality were experienced in post-war England.¹³ The significance of the Catholic example lies in its distinctive ecclesiastical identity within British society. The Church of England may have constituted the leading denomination in term of institutional affiliation and population size, but Catholicism had always occupied a very particular cultural space in relation to the politics of the body.¹⁴ Moreover, the Catholic Church’s response to questions of ‘sexual permissiveness’ in the 1960s received

far more public attention than that of the Church of England. Gerard Parsons is of the opinion that ‘the pivotal significance of the 1960s in Christian decline is stressed by placing more emphasis on the Catholic Church than Brown did.’¹⁵ Parsons’ view seems to be substantiated by Church attendance statistics, which indicate that, unlike the Protestant denominations, Catholic disaffiliation increased at the end of the decade rather than the beginning.¹⁶

The belief that Catholicism was damaged by a ‘sexual revolution’ to a greater extent than any other Christian faith tends to be based on the issue of birth control. The introduction of the pill in 1961 is often identified as a central component of a sexual revolution, if not its very catalyst. Hera Cook characterises this view, making a case for the revolutionary impact of the pill:

It increased the control of fear and allowed a greater experience of pleasure and increased emotional aspirations ... [the pill brought about] substantial improvement, amounting to a transformation, in the lives of English women over the past two centuries.¹⁷

Although the Catholic Church had traditionally prohibited the use of artificial means of birth control, the creation of the pill prompted many in the Catholic community to call for this teaching to be revised, not least because to many observers it appeared less ‘artificial’ than existing forms of contraception. In the autumn of 1962, a secretive commission was set up by Pope John XXIII to investigate the matter, the final report of which, leaked to the press in 1966, recommended a change in the Church’s teaching. The hitherto unpublished papers of this Papal Commission for Birth Control reveal the contested and mutating understandings of female sexuality that circulated within the boundaries of the ‘Church’. Indeed, the boundaries of the ‘Church’ were themselves appearing to blur in the middle of the 1960s, as initiatives such as the papal commission brought in lay experts from secular disciplines such as biology, sociology, medicine, anthropology, economics and psychology. Change seemed to be in the air; Catholics were preparing themselves for a fundamental shift in not only the content of Catholic doctrine, but also the way this doctrine was constructed. As the revolutionary ‘spirit of ’68’ trickled across Europe, Catholicism was being shaken to its core by questions of sex.

In its unexpected rejection of this clamour for change, *Humanae Vitae* became the object of heated public debate which played out as

much in parish church halls as the pages of theological scholarship. The responses of the Catholic community to the Pope's pronouncement were certainly mixed but almost always impassioned. As a consequence, the years immediately preceding the encyclical's publication have been largely neglected by historians of both Catholicism and modern sexuality. Furthermore, intellectual assessments of Catholic sexuality in the post-war tend to focus solely on the circumscribed topic of birth control rather than considering the broader dimensions of marital sexuality. Catholic women who married in the decades after the war confronted a set of questions that had not existed for any previous generation. In a climate that increasingly encouraged personal expression and sexual independence, their beliefs on the morality of the body became the object of fierce personal and public scrutiny. These questions were not just theological abstractions to be pondered over, but immediate dilemmas that shaped marital relations, religious practice and daily family life. They were dilemmas which were peculiar to the Catholic experience – the belief systems, social communities and traditions that defined life as a 'Catholic' – but also part and product of wider societal developments in the post-war decades. Recognising the 'same but different' nature of post-war Catholicism is an important imperative for historians of Catholicism, sexuality and British society in general.

The interplay between change and continuity has been a central motif in the history of post-war Catholicism. Until recently, Michael Hornsby-Smith's extensive sociological research had been the main contribution to the field. Hornsby-Smith used large-sample surveys and opinion polls to argue that the years surrounding the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) witnessed a number of vital changes in the character and composition of English Catholicism.¹⁸ Announced by Pope John XXIII on 25 January 1959 and convened on 11 October 1962, Vatican II, as it is generally referred to, drew together over 2,500 bishops from around the world to carry out John XXIII's call for *aggiornamento* (translated as 'updating'). The Council eventually ratified sixteen documents that paved the way for reforms in many areas of Catholic life, including the introduction of vernacular language in the Mass, new and more sympathetic relations with other faiths and changes to the Catholic liturgy. While the decrees and declarations of the Council are easily described, and have been elsewhere, their impact and legacy continue to represent a point of contest for scholars of twentieth-century Catholicism.¹⁹

Hornsby-Smith emphasised the fundamental changes that the Council invoked and expressed. He optimistically described a movement from ‘collective-expressive to individual-expressive religiosity’, whereby Catholic lay people began ‘creating their own’ personal beliefs and devotional practices as opposed to ‘passively receiving an official spirituality’.²⁰ Conversely, a recent book on Catholic disaffiliation in Britain and America, opening with the statistic that nearly half of all born-and-raised Catholics no longer consider themselves to be ‘Catholic’, is framed with the question of whether Vatican II caused this ‘mass exodus’ from the Church – ‘Did the Council Fail?’ its epilogue asks.²¹ Catholic commentators of both a liberal and orthodox persuasion have interpreted the middle of the 1960s as something of a historical watershed for English Catholics, be that as a point of modernising progression or regression away from an apparent ‘golden age’. Margaret’s reflections epitomised this seismic and yet ambivalent rendering of Vatican II, she placed it alongside the ‘sexual revolution’ as the event which let the cork out of Pandora’s Catholic bottle.

But not everyone has agreed with this story of Catholic revolution in the sixties. Alana Harris built on Hornsby-Smith’s analysis in her timely addition to the field, *Faith in the Family* (2013), but also diverged from some of his central conclusions. Where Hornsby-Smith emphasised the changes that occurred in the lives of ‘ordinary’ Catholics, Harris stressed the ‘little-appreciated elements of continuity’ that existed throughout the post-war decades. Her main contention was that Hornsby-Smith drew too sharp a distinction between pre- and post-conciliar Catholicism:

Rather than interpreting this period as a period of caesura or rupture, especially through an over-emphasis on the social dislocation of the 1960s, this book reinterprets these movements as modulations or gradual, non-linear modifications of Catholics’ understandings of their identities, beliefs and practices.²²

Harris situated her research in the emerging histories of gender and emotion which ‘increasingly assert that change in twentieth-century Britain should be viewed as part of a longer-term continuum’. Her work demonstrated that there was no sudden movement away from a ‘ghettoised’, coercive form of Catholicism in the sixties as Hornsby-Smith suggested. Harris’ emphasis on what she termed the ‘longue

durée of the second half of the twentieth century' chimes with the approach taken here.²³ *Humanae Vitae* was itself a reassertion of an earlier encyclical, *Casti Connubii* (1930), which had initially prohibited the use of artificial means of contraception for Catholics. *Casti Connubii* was a response to the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church in the same year which had approved the use of artificial birth control, including condoms, in certain circumstances. It seems that in the area of marital sexuality, a number of central continuities defined the Catholic Church's ecclesiastical identity throughout the twentieth century.

However, the build-up, backdrop and response to *Casti Connubii* and *Humanae Vitae*, in the 1930s and 1960s respectively, were very different. In fact, when we focus on the *relationship* between Catholic belief systems and the processes of the body, something which can be described as a rupture can be evinced in the post-war decades: a fundamental change that superseded many of the continuities that Harris dwelt on. The interviewees I spoke to were eager to stress a significant, historically unprecedented shift in the way they understood religion and its relationship to sex. Like many changes in social history, it was a shift that occurred at different speeds and at different times for different people. Nailing down a tight periodisation like the 'sixties', or even 1963 specifically, as Brown does, is therefore unhelpful and ultimately misleading.²⁴

As the title of a recent edited collection indicates, the heady summer of 1968 saw something of a schism emerge within European Catholicism (although contributors to the collection disagree as to whether the schism was caused by *Humanae Vitae*, or whether the encyclical simply revealed an existing divide).²⁵ Those who continued to identify as Catholic after *Humanae Vitae* tended to fall into one of two camps – liberal or orthodox. Put simply, liberals wanted the Church to change its stance on a number of issues, notably surrounding sex and body, orthodox Catholics did not. Within these tribes there were divergent views on certain aspects of liturgical and doctrinal reform, but contraception was almost always a litmus test – liberals campaigned vociferously for a relaxation of the Church's prohibition, orthodox Catholics were steadfast in their support of continuity. As the theologian Stephen Bullivant wrote in an article marking the fiftieth anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, it was only after 1968 that

tribal divisions between ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’, or ‘progressive’ and ‘traditional’ Catholics began to carry serious meaning. In the past, Catholics were typically divided into ‘good’ and ‘bad’, or ‘practising’ and ‘lapsed’. But these were, in a sense, degrees on a single scale of being Catholic. They were not two different modes, different camps, of being Catholic ... On the face of it, a person’s views on *Humanae Vitae* need not correlate in any predetermined way with their positions on various doctrinal points (women priests, say) or on their liturgical preferences. In practice, however, they very often do.²⁶

The interviewees all identified as either orthodox or liberal – the next chapter provides a fuller account of the weighting of the sample and how this related to the size of two factions in the English Catholic population. The entrenched polarity running through the Catholic community today is a major legacy of the battle lines over sexual morality which formed in the post-war decades.

But the frays and disruptions of this period were not only about politicised theological positions, played out in public arenas and invariably articulated by men, but also the fabric of everyday married life. For the generation of women getting married in the years immediately following the war, new technologies and opportunities refashioned the emotional and physical experience of intimacy. At an address to Italian midwives in 1951, Pope Pius XII officially endorsed the practice of natural family planning (NFP, also known as ‘rhythm’ or the ‘safe method’).²⁷ This method of birth regulation involved calculating the fertility of the wife, generally by charting their temperature, and then abstaining from sex in the periods of ovulation. The simplicity of this description belies the great complexity of feeling and outcome which accompanied the method. Many Catholics found that NFP did not facilitate effective ‘family planning’: unexpected pregnancies, or at least the perennial fear of them, caused anxiety and marital tensions. Frustration in the periods of abstinence, and then a heightened pressure in the ‘safe period’, created difficulties in the bedroom that seeped out into other parts of marital relations. As the author David Lodge said of his own experience of the method in his early marriage, “‘Rhythm’ or the ‘Safe Method’ was in practice neither rhythmical nor safe, and therefore a cause of considerable stress.”²⁸ For a significant minority of couples, the method worked and became an integral part of a ‘holistic’ Catholic union, just as it was advertised to do.

The inconsistency of experience led to the method being dubbed Vatican Roulette by certain commentators and indeed doctors – this formulation was adopted as the title for the American version of Lodge’s comedic novel of 1965, *The British Museum Is Falling Down*. Written twenty years earlier than his most famous fictionalisation of Catholic marriage *How Far Can You Go?*, and three years before the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, the book depicted the trials and tribulations of a young Catholic couple’s unsuccessful attempts to practise NFP. The book’s protagonist Adam Appleby whimsically reflects on the centrality of sex and NFP to Catholic life in the 1960s, mentally composing an entry, ‘Catholicism, Roman’, for a Martian encyclopaedia compiled after life on earth had been destroyed by atomic warfare:

Roman Catholicism was, according to archaeological evidence, distributed fairly widely over the planet Earth in the twentieth century. As far as the Western Hemisphere is concerned, it appears to have been characterized by a complex system of sexual taboos and rituals. Intercourse between married partners was restricted to certain limited periods determined by the calendar and the body-temperature of the female. Martian archaeologists have learned to identify the domiciles of Roman Catholics by the presence of large numbers of complicated graphs, calendars, small booklets full of figures, and quantities of broken thermometers, evidence of the great importance attached to this code. Some scholars have argued that it was merely a method of limiting the number of offspring; but as it has been conclusively proved that the Roman Catholics produced more children on average than any other section of the community, this seems untenable. Other doctrines of the Roman Catholics included a belief in a Divine Redeemer and in a life after death.²⁹

Appleby’s sardonic summary of Catholicism captured a number of aspects of his historical setting – a rising consciousness of a decline in the Christian faith (sociologists such as Peter Berger were predicting the ‘death of religion’ by the end of the century), a wider cold-war concern over the destruction of Western civilisation and the almost farcical idiosyncrasy of Catholic contraceptive behaviour.³⁰ Sex, above and beyond any other belief or practice, defined Catholicism in the 1960s.

The shortcomings of NFP appeared all the more acute with the arrival of the contraceptive pill. Catholic men and women looked around

them to see, or more likely overhear, English couples enamoured with the efficacy, ease of use and inconspicuousness of the pill. At different times, for different reasons, and with different consequences, Catholic couples started contravening the Church's teachings and taking up artificial means of contraception. Some made the decision before *Humanae Vitae* was published, others after, some agonised over the decision for years, others did not. As we shall see in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, common to virtually every transition was the experience of NFP as a driving motivational force. It was these changes, these breaks in everyday religious and sexual behaviour, that characterised Catholic life in the years between the mid-1950s and the 1980s. The oral history interviews presented here offer the closest depiction to date of the pain, frustration and sorrow experienced with Vatican Roulette, the profoundly transformative decisions on contraceptive morality which took place in Catholic bedrooms and the new forms of sexual and spiritual sensation which these decisions introduced. It is my belief that these memories, personal spotlights on the very intersection of sex and religion, tell us something vital about the history of modern England. They help us understand why religious belief does not structure the lives of most English men and women today in the way it did seventy years ago, why sex holds a place of such significance in our modern culture and, crucially, how these two developments relate to one another.

Catholic women and a history of power

The historical relationship between sex and religion has invariably been understood as a question of shifting power relations. Historians who advocate both a 'sexual revolution' and a 'religious crisis' in the 1960s invoke tropes of 'liberation', 'authority' and 'autonomy'. Brown's model of Christian decline works at a level of straightforward, top-down power dynamics. It was about women freeing themselves from the oppression of the Church – individuals taking the power into their own hands. In a number of ways, this was an important aspect of the Catholic experience in the post-war years. The moral authority of the central Church in matters of sex was fundamentally undermined by the events of the 1960s. The Catholic commentator Quentin de la Bedoyere describes *Humanae Vitae* as a 'historical watershed' for the consciences of Catholic men and women:

[F]or the first time the general Catholic community was faced by the solemn reiteration of a formal moral teaching which many had come to doubt – and acting on that doubt did not exclude them from the Church.³¹

It is important to remember that *Humanae Vitae* was not an infallible teaching (when the Pope is deemed to be incapable of error in pronouncing dogma), but for many Catholics, it called into question the absolute authority of the Church as a source of moral guidance. After the 1960s, the classical, coercive form of power that the clerical hierarchy had exercised over the laity for centuries ceased to function in the same way for large swathes of England's Catholic community.

The reason Brown's theories are given a position of such prominence here is not simply because of the academic acclaim his model has achieved, but because many of his ideas resonated with the interviewees' testimony. 'Liberation', 'revolution', 'repression' and above all the character of the 'self' were all formative terms of understanding in the way the interviewees constructed their life stories, terms which form the backbone of Brown's narrative. However, this shared vocabulary alone does not vindicate Brown's conclusions or indeed the intellectual framework he constructed around the subject. My intention is to scratch below the surface of terms like 'liberation' and 'autonomy' to get at the subjective, highly personalised meanings that individuals attach to them.

Historians of religion are increasingly turning their attentions to the material cultures which forge and are forged by religious belief. As the philosopher of religion Grace Janzen points out, this is a necessary response to the tendency amongst Western modernity's key thinkers, including Durkheim, Marx and Weber, to push God into a metaphysical heaven, away from the material realities of earth.³² We can see this tradition at play in Brown's construction of 'discursive Christianity', with its attendant emphasis on language, ideas and words.³³ For Brown, 'discursive Christianity' constitutes a corrective to the statistical methodologies employed by 'traditional' sociologists.³⁴ He claims his 'modern cultural theory' approach to oral history allows him to get beyond dry church attendance figures and access the 'personal':

This failure [of 'traditional' social scientists] is caused by a focus on 'structures' (such as churches and social classes) to the neglect of 'the

personal' in piety. The 'personal' is intrinsically wrapped up with language, discourses on personal moral worth, the narrative structures within which these are located, and the timing of change to these.¹⁵

Like Brown, I also use oral testimony to get at the complex and highly subjective meanings that are attached to personal religiosities. Unlike Brown, my rendering of the personal pays particular attention to the experiential – spatial and temporal – moments of material existence. The formulation 'discursive Christianity' needs to be thought about historically (as does my own approach to religion – the following chapter offers some thoughts on this). Intellectual investigators of religion in the twentieth century have continually attributed changes in religious belief systems to the operation of liberating ideas and languages opening up an individual's consciousness.³⁵ This approach, like that of the quantitative sociologists Brown chastises, is liable to obscure the ways in which discourse and experience are intertwined. It is therefore, equally at risk of overlooking aspects of 'personal' Catholic religiosity.

'Discursive Christianity' also has a distinctly post-war flavour to it. Brown points out that his focus on discourse has been produced by his engagement with the 'linguistic turn', an intellectual movement which is generally seen to be located in the deconstructionism of the 1960s.³⁶ The 'postmodern-inspired discourse analysis' that Brown employs to evaluate personal religiosity is not idiosyncratic, but indicative of a much larger recategorisation of the religious that has taken hold in the post-war era. Religion has been rendered ethereal, immaterial, abstract; removed from the earthly domain of daily living. This approach to religion is itself historically specific, based on a particular, ideological understanding of religion and power relations. As Lucie Matthews-Jones and Timothy Willem Jones point out in the introduction to their timely collection *Material Religion in Modern Britain* (2015):

The intellectual tradition that has privileged religion-as-thought over religion-as-material is part of that highly problematic modernist condition in which all sorts of binaries – mind/body, male/female, modern/pre-modern, civilized/uncivilized, and so on – have taken on the appearance of universal truth rather than ideological construct.³⁷

Traditional narratives of religious decline may no longer hold the sway they once did, but their intellectual infrastructure, and the resulting

definitions of religion and power, continue to be reproduced in a transposed form.

Despite widespread efforts to resist the hegemonic authority of the secularisation paradigm, elements of it continue to shape the intellectual apparatus which historians construct around religious subjects. The idea that 'modernity' went hand in hand with a process of linear religious decline has been rightly dismantled in the last twenty years. The sociologist Peter Berger, a particularly combative proponent of the secularisation theory during the 1960s, predicted the death of religion in Britain within the space of twenty years. By the 1980s, Berger was to speak candidly about how his prediction and approach to religion had been misguided: 'I think what I and most of the other sociologists wrote about secularisation in the 1960s was wrong.'³⁸ Notwithstanding these concessions, religious change continues to be assessed within a win/lose framework that is premised on static, absolute ideas of liberation, authority and autonomy. These ideals map out a secularist portrait of power relations, one in which the 'transcendent', the 'mysterious', the 'spiritual' have no place. The symbols, values and meanings of everyday life are analysed in what Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor would call an 'immanent frame', denying integral aspects of religious sensibility.³⁹ The memories of Catholic women encourage us to problematise these concepts and place them in an alternative, metaphysical framework: regimes of materiality undercut the changes they lived through as much as regimes of power. With this, a different story of not only religious but also sexual change emerges.

Much like the historiography of the 'religious crisis', historians of sexuality have tended to see their primary task as explicating the changing nature of authority. Hera Cook's account of a 'long sexual revolution' was a story of contraceptive technology enabling women to throw off the shackles of societal, religious and patriarchal repression.⁴⁰ In short, women became free to enjoy a more autonomous form of sexuality because of the pill. Matt Houlbrook attributes the history of sexuality's focus on 'questions of regulation, power and subjectivity' to the 'over-determining influence of Foucault.'⁴¹ With his story of pathological discourses usurping Catholic regimes of regulation, Michel Foucault claimed to reconceptualise the way power worked in relation to the sexual subject. Whether through confessional or therapeutic techniques, discipline and governance have been exercised

as much from within the individual as from without according to Foucault.⁴² His model of historical change was therefore primarily concerned with how power worked, even if the nature of this power differed from previous definitions. As a result, Houlbrook argues, ‘ironically, we seem to have a history of sexuality with the sex written out.’⁴³ Regardless of the culpability of Foucault’s legacy, intellectual assessments of sex have been more preoccupied with theorising over the meanings that have been attached to certain actions rather than the actions themselves.

This book marks an explicit attempt to challenge this tendency and ‘write the sex back into the history of sex.’⁴⁴ It follows the line of a more recent offering from Hera Cook, an analysis of Edwardian sex education, which argues that ‘a focus on corporeal experience and emotion enables a deeper understanding of cultural mores and of transmission to the next generation, which is fundamental to the process of change.’⁴⁵ Embedding Catholic women’s sexual experiences in a material frame of reference enables us to recognise the body as a ‘thing’, as Susan Bordo would have it, as opposed to a symbolic on which meaning and power are inscribed.⁴⁶ Just as the lens of Catholicism can prompt historians of sexuality to rethink the nature and purpose of their discipline, so it can equally prompt historians in general to reappraise the position of power in their stories of the past.

This is not to deny the operation of a traditional form of coercive power in the Catholic experience. We will see how questions of autonomy and authority were very real dimensions of the changes in Catholic women’s sexual behaviour, contraceptive choices and religious identities. What I am attempting to do with this traditional story of power dynamics will hopefully be a little more subtle – digging beneath its apparently self-evident values to show how categories of materiality intersected with a narrative of liberation, while simultaneously suggesting that history, particularly the history of sexuality, should not always be treated as a thought experiment in ‘how power works’. Even when subverted by a Foucauldian twist, historical attentions continue to be preoccupied with unpicking the way individual experience has been governed and disciplined by external structures. The sexual and religious experiences of Catholic women in the post-war period have hitherto been understood in this context, an exemplar of shifting modes of authority between the institution and the individual, structure and agency, science and religion. The interviewees’ memories prompt us to

engage with an alternative, 'vertical' dimension, looking beyond but also resituating the question of power in a deeper framework.⁴⁷ Their testimony ultimately encourages us to broaden the horizons of historical practice.

Book structure: Catholic women's life cycles

This book is ordered in a way that illustrates the implications of its findings for public debates within both Catholicism and secular society. The first chapter introduces the sources and methods of the project, discussing the specific methodological issues which surround the sex lives of Catholic women. It begins by outlining the processes involved in carrying out the oral history research, before discussing the nature and function of individual memory in the Catholic birth-control debates of both the immediate post-war decades and the present day. The chapter then moves on to consider the relationship between the historical and the personal, both for the interviewees and the interviewer. I reflect on the constitutive role of my own identity, my religious beliefs, sexuality, academic status, family background (notably the place of my grandfather, a self-proclaimed 'Catholic sexpert'), in generating and analysing the memories of Catholic women. The chapter demonstrates that intellectual approaches to both sexuality and religion in the twentieth century have tended to be based on abstract theory as opposed to experience. It then puts forward the dual aims of the book – first, to historicise this privileging of the theoretical at the expense of the experiential when making sense of sex and religion, and second, to provide an antidote through oral history material.

Chapter 2 explores the Church's relationship with 'sexual liberation' in the post-war decades. It analyses public pronouncements and papal encyclicals such as *Humanae Vitae*, as well as private, secretive discussions within the Vatican, to provide a fresh insight into how the Catholic Church understood human sexuality. The chapter argues that the Catholic Church's attempts to investigate sexual experience in the 1960s was contingent on the conception of the 'personal' its representatives employed. Within the discussions of the Papal Commission for Birth Control, the individual testimony of Catholic lay people, notably Catholic women, was overlooked. While the Church engaged with secular expertise drawn from psychology, sociology

and biology in its deliberations over the morality of birth control, at no point were the individuals at the centre of these debates offered a space in which to interpret their own experiences. In the central three chapters that follow, human memory is used to redress this omission and reconstruct the sexual experiences of Catholic women.

The clearest theme that emerged from the interviews was the centrality of life-cycle stage to Catholic women's sexual and religious development. Accordingly, the book is structured in a way that reflects this trend. Oral historians addressing love, sex and the body have tended to split women's life cycles into three compartments – youth, courtship and adult life.⁴⁸ As such, marriage is broadly treated as a single, unified life-cycle stage. This is a prevalent and, in many ways, intuitive way of conceptualising women's personal development, but the testimony of Catholic women does not fit neatly within this model. Almost all the interviewees spoke of a clear break in their personal sexual development *during* marriage. This break was often but not always aligned with a change in contraceptive practice – most interviewees tied it in with the uptake of artificial means of contraception and the resulting removal of a fear of pregnancy. A handful remembered this break as being less linked to contraceptive behaviour and more a 'natural progression' that came through the passing of time. In both cases, what was emphasised was a 'liberation' from the confines of doctrinal obedience and a resulting resolution of the conflicts that had dogged their early married lives. In keeping with this marital partition, the book's oral history material is organised into three life-cycle stages with chapters devoted to 'later marriage', 'early marriage' and 'early life'.

Of course, these life-cycle stages fell at different times for different people at different historical moments. For example, 'early marriage' tended to start and finish at an earlier age for those married at the start of the sixties than those married at the end of the decade. For the vast majority of the interviewees, the transition from early to later marriage occurred in the 1970s, but there were notable exceptions.⁴⁹ A more detailed picture of how these stages related to age, time and place is given at the start of each chapter, but it should be remembered that these were fluid formulations that were contingent on a range of factors.

These life-cycle stages were both identifiable periods in a person's life that were lived through in a concrete, quotidian sense, and also discursive formulations – topics of discussion that were underpinned by shifting cultural norms and mores. They are treated as such in this

book. For example, the last chapter on 'pre-marital sexuality' does not work chronologically through childhood, youth and then courtship, but is organised around the key themes and questions that emerged from the interviewees' memories of the period. One section of this chapter deals with 'infantilism' as a social construction, exploring the way popular psychoanalytical understandings of religiosity and its relationship with childhood have affected Catholic women's experiences in the post-war. In this sense, the book merges a thematic approach with a life-cycle-stage approach.

The interviewees' emphasis on 'later marriage' as the pivotal moment of change could be explained by their proximity to this period at the point of interview. However, rather than seeing this emphasis as a product of a failing or 'inaccurate' memory, I will be following my conviction to take the decisions made by the interviewees seriously – paying close attention to the choices inherent in remembering and unremembering.

When human memory is interpreted as nothing more than a random filter, individual women's capacity to serve as the authors of their own life stories is irrevocably undermined. This constraint will be particularly familiar to religious individuals in a post-war setting. A pathological diagnosis of religion, reinforced by the growing authority of psychoanalytical modes of understanding, took hold in the second half of the twentieth century. In academic texts and the wider imagination, childhood has been placed at the centre of 'rationalist' explanations of religious belief.⁵⁰ Religiosity, to a greater degree than any other belief system, ideology or source of identity, has become understood to be the product of psychological programming in a person's early life. This link between religion and infantilism was a conspicuous presence in the interviews; the interviewees adopted elements of it while also actively resisting the association. The final chapter examines the historical development of this 'infantile hypothesis' in more depth.

The problem with an overemphasis on the role of childhood in the formation of religious belief systems is that it denies the agency of religious women acting at a later stage of their lives. Their life stories, and through this their identities, are thought to be entirely determined by the intricate details of a period that is distant or unrecognisable to them. As stated earlier, this form of determinism is both methodologically and ethically problematic for my research – not least because we are dealing with interview subjects for whom the concept of free will is

so important. To counter this tendency, Chapters 3 to 5 move through life-cycle stages, but do so in reverse. We start with later marriage, move back through early marriage and finish with youth. As such, the order mirrors the life of F. Scott Fitzgerald's eponymous character Benjamin Button.⁵¹ Henry Alexander argues that Fitzgerald's story, about a man born with the mental and bodily features of an old man who gradually becomes younger as his chronological age advances, should be interpreted as a lesson in how the 'levels of importance' we attribute to memory can overlap into moral concerns:

Benjamin Button's life evokes awareness of the breakdown of such levels of importance and of their various claims to a place in memory. His life stresses the disruption and havoc that can emerge when the threads of memory are severed from salient features of a life. It brings out how such severance is an obstacle to change. And by contrast it brings out equally and vividly – what we may have failed to notice because so evident – namely, the importance of the threads of memory to the significance that a person can find in life. By highlighting how forgetfulness damages and dissipates Benjamin Button's topsy-turvy existence, we can grasp how forgetfulness may overlap into moral concerns.⁵²

The levels of importance that the interviewees attached to their different life-cycle stages were shaped by moral concerns, but also borne out of lived experience. Reversing the chronology of their lives allows us to recognise the choices that are being made in the retelling of a life, while also respecting the way this life was made up of lived, transient moments.

This ordering replicates human memory rather than historical narrative. Starting from the point of interview, it works back through the interviewees' lives in a manner not unlike Foucault's genealogies.⁵³ In this way, we are encouraged not to attribute the behaviour and decisions of married Catholic women to an infantile event or environment, but to treat them as lived moments shaped by individual agency and external structures. Kierkegaard wrote that 'life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards'.⁵⁴ This musing on the temporality of existence illuminates the problems of oral history research but also its inherent virtues. The act of remembering allows us to think on the paradoxes and constraints of linear time. Working

backwards through a life demonstrates how understanding and experience are not distinct from one another for a religious believer, but intimately intertwined. Perversely, working backwards enables a clearer picture of how Catholic women lived forwards.

Notes

- 1 Referenced in L. Pyle (ed.), *Pope and Pill* (London, 1968), p. 116.
- 2 Referenced in T. P. Marquez, 'The Politics of Catholic Medicine: "The Pill" and *Humanae Vitae* in Portugal', in A. Harris (ed.), *The Schism of '68: Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945–1975* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 161–186.
- 3 Margaret, interviewed 29/09/2013. Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees to protect anonymity (in line with the University of Sussex research ethics procedure).
- 4 A. Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence: Self-Control and Wellbeing in the United States and Britain since 1950* (Oxford, 2006), p. 1.
- 5 C. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 9–17.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- 7 This book focuses on *marital* sexuality as opposed to single, pre-marital or lesbian experiences (all of which would make for valuable areas of future research). Amongst the extensive debates that existed within the Christian community over sex in the 1960s, the prohibition of pre-marital sex was never really questioned within any of the major Christian denominations. This doctrinal principle remains an integral aspect of the Catholic creed. Marital sexuality therefore provides an apposite and strangely underexplored terrain for assessing the Church's relationship with sexual change.
- 8 I am indebted to Lucy Robinson for this formulation. L. Robinson, 'Collaboration In, Collaboration Out: The Eighties in the Age of Digital Representation', *Social and Cultural History*, 13 (2016), pp. 403–423.
- 9 L. Ramsay, 'The Ambiguities of Christian Sexual Discourse in Post-War Britain: The British Council of Churches and Its Early Moral Welfare Work', *Journal of Religious History*, 40:1, pp. 82–103; H. Cocks, 'Religion and Spirituality', in M. Houlbrook and H. G. Cocks (eds), *Palgrave Advances in the Modern History of Sexuality* (London, 2006), p. 157; S. Brewitt-Taylor, 'Christianity and the Invention of the Sexual Revolution in Britain, 1963–1967', *Historical Journal*, 60 (2017), pp. 519–546.
- 10 For a discussion, and nuanced example, of post-secular histories of modern Britain, see S. Brewitt-Taylor, *Christian Radicalism in the*

- Church of England and the Invention of the British Sixties, 1957–1970* (Oxford, 2018).
- 11 P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford, 2005).
 - 12 C. Brown, *Religion and the Demographic Revolution: Women and Secularisation in Canada, Ireland, UK and USA since, the 1960s* (Woodbridge, 2012), p. 79.
 - 13 The main focus of this book is on England, as this is where the vast majority of the interview respondents lived during their marriages. There are a few notable exceptions – included in the sample is one interviewee from Scotland, one from Northern Ireland, one who spent most of her married life in Wales and another who grew up in France. There is then some potential for extending the analysis to include a consideration of national variations within Britain, but only in a cautious manner. Particularly in the cases of Ireland and Scotland, the Catholic experience had a very distinctive character shaped by social, political and sectarian contexts which make comparisons over a national plane problematic.
 - 14 Cocks, 'Religion and Spirituality'.
 - 15 G. Parsons, 'How the Times They Are A-Changing: Exploring the Context of Religious Transformation in Britain in the 1960s', in J. Wolfe (ed.), *Religion in History: Conflict, Conversion and Coexistence* (Manchester, 2004), p. 164.
 - 16 McLeod shows that 52.4 per cent of Catholics attended church regularly in 1960 and 47 per cent still did so in 1970, but by 1980 this figure had fallen to 38.6 per cent. Mary Eaton's study of Catholic women's organisations in the 1960s indicates that the biggest drop in membership occurred in the last two years of the decade. These statistics suggest that the events of the 1960s had a more direct impact on disaffiliation within the Catholic Church than in the Protestant denominations. H. McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2007), p. 65; M. Eaton, 'What Became of the Children of Mary?', in M. Hornsby-Smith (ed.), *Catholics in England 1950–2000: Historical and Sociological Perspectives* (London, 1999), p. 220.
 - 17 H. Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex and Contraception 1800–1975* (Oxford, 2004), p. 8.
 - 18 Ibid.
 - 19 A. Harris, *Faith in the Family: A Lived Religious History of English Catholicism, 1945–1982* (Manchester, 2013), p. 5.
 - 20 M. Hornsby-Smith, *Roman Catholic Beliefs in England: Customary Catholicism and Transformations of Religious Authority* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 60.

- 21 S. Bullivant, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II* (Oxford, 2019), p. 2.
- 22 Harris, *Faith in the Family*, p. 3
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 C. Brown, 'Sex, Religion, and the Single Woman c. 1950–75: The Importance of a "Short" Sexual Revolution to the English Religious Crisis of the Sixties', *Journal of Social History*, 22 (2011), pp. 189–215.
- 25 Harris, *The Schism of '68*.
- 26 S. Bullivant, 'How *Humanae Vitae* Changed the Church', *Catholic Herald*, 20 July 2018.
- 27 The Pope's endorsement of NFP was given at addresses of 29 October 1951 to the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives and 26 November to the National Congress of the Family Front and the Association of Large Families, National Catholic Welfare Conference, Washington, DC.
- 28 'Afterword', in D. Lodge, *The British Museum Is Falling Down* (London, 2011, first pub. 1965), p. 168.
- 29 Ibid., pp. 8–9.
- 30 P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, 1967).
- 31 Q. de la Bedoyere, *Autonomy and Obedience in the Catholic Church* (London, 2002), p. 2.
- 32 G. Janzen, referenced in T. W. Jones and L. Matthews-Jones, 'Introduction: Materiality and Religious History', in T. W. Jones and L. Matthews-Jones (eds), *Material Religion in Modern Britain: The Spirit of Things* (London, 2015), pp. 1–16.
- 33 Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, pp. 9–17.
- 34 Ibid., pp. 195, 203.
- 35 É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford, 2001); Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*.
- 36 Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, p. 202.
- 37 Jones and Matthews-Jones, 'Introduction'.
- 38 'Epistemological Modesty: An Interview with Peter Berger', *Christian Century*, 114 (1997), p. 974.
- 39 C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), p. 548.
- 40 Cook, *Long Sexual Revolution*.
- 41 M. Houlbrook, 'Sexing the History of Sexuality', *History Workshop Journal*, 60 (2005), p. 217.
- 42 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (London, 1976).
- 43 Houlbrook, 'Sexing the History of Sexuality', p. 221.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid.; H. Cook, 'Emotions, Bodies, Sexuality and Sex Education in Edwardian England', *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), p. 475.

- 46 S. Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley, CA, 2003), p. 3.
- 47 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 706–708.
- 48 C. Langhamer, *Women's Leisure in England* (Manchester, 2000).
- 49 Anne represented a notable exception, an interviewee who will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3.
- 50 The start of Chapter 5 has more details on this indictment, see for example E. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York, 1950); C. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (New York, 2007), pp. 217–228.
- 51 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button and Other Stories of the Jazz Age* (Claremont, CA, 2008).
- 52 H. Alexander, 'Reflections on Benjamin Button', *Philosophy and Literature*, 33 (2009), pp. 1–17.
- 53 C. Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity* (Bloomington, IN, 2013).
- 54 M. Strawser, *Both/And: Reading Kierkegaard: From Irony to Edification* (New York, 1997), p. 17.