

<b>Institution:</b> St Mary's University		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 31, Theology and Religious Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Deciding upon the 'religion' question for the Irish Census 2021 and informing the international public understanding and discussion of contemporary religious trends occurring in the UK and Europe		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 1 September 2013 to 31 July 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Stephen Bullivant	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Professor of Theology and the Sociology of Religion  Director of the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 1 September 2009 to present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 23 May 2016 to 31 July 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)  <p>This case study focuses on the impact of the research of Professor Bullivant on various (primarily quantitative) aspects of religious life (including affiliation, practice, and demographic trends) in the UK and Europe. This impact can be seen in two areas:</p> <p><b>Decisions taken by the Irish Central Statistics Office on the approved wording of the Irish Census 2021.</b> Bullivant's research within the quantitative sociology of religion provided the basis of a formal submission to the Irish government's Consultation regarding possible changes to the 2021 Irish Census. Bullivant's subsequent involvement in the 'Census Consultation Subgroup on Religion' ultimately had direct impact on the approved wording of the 2021 Irish Census and positively enhanced the Census' effectiveness in gathering information regarding religious affiliation.</p> <p><b>Informing the wider public discussion around changes in religious behaviour in contemporary society.</b> Bullivant's research underpinned the production of a series of reports on the religious disaffiliation in the UK and internationally, which have received significant UK and international media attention, sparking considerable media and public debate. These reports have had impact by framing 'religion stories' in the media and in wider public discussion, being used in popular A-level textbooks, and through regular citation as 'background information' in religious affairs reporting.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)  <p>Bullivant has been engaged in teaching and research at St Mary's since 2009. Alongside this work, Bullivant has been publishing in the field of sociology since 2008, with a focus on the study of atheism, nonreligion, and related areas. Major publications in this area include <i>The Oxford Handbook of Atheism</i> (submitted as a research output in REF 2014), <i>The Oxford Dictionary of Atheism</i> (2016), and a forthcoming two-volume <i>Cambridge History of Atheism</i> (2020). Supported by St Mary's, in 2019 he completed a second doctorate in Sociology at the University of Warwick, with the title "Contemporary Atheism and Nonreligion in Britain and the USA: Empirical and Theoretical Studies".</p>		

Bullivant's research within the quantitative sociology of religion, which is associated directly with this impact case study, began with a British Academy Quantitative Skills Acquisition Award in 2013, to explore patterns of Catholic disaffiliation, which was published as an article in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* during 2016 (3.1). This work prepared the way for his 2019 monograph *Mass Exodus* (3.2). This project equipped Bullivant with the necessary technical skills to undertake further research using high-quality, recurrent, nationally representative datasets (e.g., British Social Attitudes, European Social Survey, International Social Survey Programme, General Social Survey) and national censuses (Ireland, UK). Bullivant's ongoing secondary analyses of these sources has underpinned the reports around which this impact case study revolves.

St Mary's University formally launched the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society in 2015. One strategic aim of the centre is 'to make a major contribution to academic, ecclesial, and public debates concerning the place of religion (and nonreligion) within contemporary societies.' Central to this have been a regular series of research reports, written by members of the Centre, and specifically intended for wide public dissemination.

As part of this series, in 2016, Bullivant produced a statistical report on 'Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales' using recent British Social Attitudes Data (3.3). In this report he profiled the Catholic population of the United Kingdom and provided up-to-date statistics on religious affiliation in England and Wales as a whole. This work was expanded upon in 2017 when he examined the "No Religion" Population of Britain, again using data from the 2015 British Social Attitudes Survey, now augmented with data from the 2014 European Social Survey. In this report Bullivant examined the proportion of the British population who identify non-religiously (3.4). His next report expanded upon this subject by comparing levels of non-religious identity and practice across twenty-two European countries (3.5).

In 2017, as a direct consequence of his research in the quantitative sociology of religion, Bullivant was commissioned by the Iona Institute to produce a report, which was to be their response to the official Irish consultation regarding potential changes to the religion question for the 2021 Irish Census. Drawing upon his experience using and comparing these kind of data Bullivant was able to identify several methodological issues regarding survey questions about religious affiliation (3.6).

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Stephen Bullivant, 'Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain: A Quantitative Overview', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 31/2 (2016), 1-17.
2. Stephen Bullivant, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2019).
3. 'Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales: A Statistical Summary Based on Recent British Social Attitudes Data' (Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, 2016), available online at: <http://www.stmarys.ac.uk/benedict-xvi/contemporary-catholicism.htm>
4. 'The "No Religion" Population of Britain: Recent Data from the British Social Attitudes Survey (2015) and the European Social Survey' (2014) (Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, 2017), available online at: <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/no-religion-population.aspx>
5. 'Europe's Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-16) to inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops' (Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society; Institut Catholique de Paris, 2018), available online at: <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/europes-young-adults-and-religion.aspx> [Also available in French and Polish versions]
6. 'The Question(s) of Religion in the Irish Census: Submission to the Central Statistics Office's Census 2021 Consultation on behalf of the Iona Institute' (Iona Institute for Religion

and Society, 2017), available online at: <https://ionainstitute.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/The-Question-of-Religion-in-the-Irish-Census.docx>

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

##### **Decisions taken by the Irish Central Statistics Office on the approved wording of the Irish Census 2021.**

In 2017 Bullivant was commissioned by the Dublin-based Iona Institute to produce a report on religious survey methodology, focusing on how slight changes to question wordings can have large consequences (3.6). This report had been commissioned because of Bullivant's skills, knowledge, and reputation in the field of the quantitative sociology of religion (5.1). The Iona Institute is a charity which promotes the place of marriage and religion in society, alongside promoting freedom of conscience and religion, and the right to life.

In November 2017 Bullivant's report was submitted by the Iona Institute to the Irish Central Statistics Office (CSO) in response to their Public Consultation in advance of the Irish Census 2021 (5.1). Specifically this submission related to the possibility of changes to "Question 13. What is your religion?". The CSO received 115 responses on this point, resulting in a decision at the Census Advisory Group (CAG) meeting for a subgroup to meet in January 2018 to assist the CSO in framing a revised question in religious affiliation for testing in the Census Pilot (5.2, p.6). The CSO invited organisations not represented at the main CAG meeting, but who made a submission as part of the consultation, to this subgroup meeting. In consequence, representatives from five groups – the Iona Institute, the Church of Ireland, the Methodist Church, the Humanist Association of Ireland, and Atheist Ireland – met with CSO officials as part of a 'Census Consultation Subgroup on Religion', at the CSO Dublin headquarters on 22 January 2018 (5.3). Bullivant attended on behalf of the Iona Institute (5.1).

At this meeting two proposals were put forward by the CSO. Option A was to keep the 2021 Census question regarding religion fundamentally the same as that asked in the previous 2016 census. This was to ask, 'What is your religion?' and then follow this question by a list of options to provide greater depth. Option B was to replace this question with a new two-part question. This would have involved asking "Do you have a religion?" with an option of "Yes/no" and then asking; "If yes, what is your religion?" (5.3).

In his report Bullivant had argued strongly in favour of Option A (3.6). During the Census Consultation Subgroup meeting several alternative proposals were discussed, including a significant change, which would have included practice and identity within a single question (e.g., 'What religion *do you practise*?'). As the official Minutes record, drawing on the evidence and argument submitted in his report, Bullivant strongly "opposed the inclusion of practice in the wording of the question and suggested it would only work as a separate question". During the discussion, Bullivant also suggested that, if – as a significant proportion of the 115 consultation responses had complained – the current wording was felt to be too 'leading' in nature (i.e. presuming that the respondent has a religion), then the best possible compromise would be to *retain* the current wording but add "if any", to the wording for this option, "to help improve understanding of the question" (5.3).

Following this meeting, the CSO made the decision to "test the two new variants of the religion question in the Census Pilot, with the 'No religion' option placed at the top of the category list in Form A and the inclusion of "if any" in the wording of the question" (5.4, p.5). The Census pilot tested two versions of the religion question in September 2018: the Bullivant-modified version of Option A ("What is your religion, *if any*?") and an unchanged version of Option B (5.5). As the CSO's official "Report on the Public Consultation on Content of Census 2021 and the Census Pilot Survey 2018", released in July 2019, makes clear, the CAG's final recommendation was for Option A (5.6, pp.15-16).

Along with their other recommendations, Option A was "approved by the Government in July 2019, confirming the content of the Census 2021 questionnaire and bringing the consultation phase of the project to a conclusion" (5.6, p.28). Hence, Bullivant's work in the quantitative

sociology of religion had been deployed to make a direct, substantive, contribution to the way in which Ireland will henceforth collect its key statistical indicator of the country's religious make-up. Bullivant's arguments and research directly affected the wording that will be used officially to gauge the religious affiliation of Ireland's c.5 million inhabitants in 2021 (5.1).

On 15 September 2020, in consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, on the advice of the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the Irish Government announced the postponement of the 2021 Census to 3 April 2022. The questions will remain unchanged, however.

### **Informing the wider public discussion around changes in religious behaviour in contemporary society.**

Bullivant's work on religious affiliation has informed the media reporting around changes in religious behaviour in contemporary society and his public-facing reports have received significant levels of international press attention. Key findings from his 2016 report on 'Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales' (3.3) were, for example, the main headline on *The Guardian* newspaper's front-page on 23 May 2016, the day that the report was released in the Houses of Parliament (5.7a). Coverage followed in, inter alia, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Independent*, *Daily Mail*, *Week*, and *Time* (5.7b-f). Meanwhile, his 2018 report on 'Europe's Young Adults and Religion' (3.5), which was also published in French and Polish, garnered articles from leading outlets in over a dozen languages (5.8a-h). 'Counters' on newspaper websites reveal, for example, that *The Guardian*'s reports on (3.3) and (3.5) have been shared from their website 4.8k and 8.2k times (5.9a-b). The respected media tracking agency *SharedCount*'s analytics suggest that these two articles garnered 42.9k and 58.9k Facebook shares respectively (5.9f). Other articles on Bullivant's work in the *Daily Mail* and *Breitbart* (both of whose websites have 'counters') have attracted hundreds, and in one case thousands, of shares and comments (5.9c-e).

Bullivant's research has, moreover, been cited or discussed in the media *outside* of news items. The reports have provoked leaders and op-eds in a diverse array of outlets (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Spectator*, and *Psychology Today*; (5.9f-j), has inspired panel and/or phone-in discussions (e.g., Sky News, BBC 5 Live, LBC, multiple local BBC stations), and been cited in 'Thought for the Day' during Radio 4's flagship *Today* (5.9k). More telling is the fact that these data have been cited in areas of the media *not* normally associated with 'religion news' reportage – including a *Grazia* feature by the presenter of *Love Island* (trailing a BBC 5 Live documentary in which Bullivant was interviewed), *Stylist*, and the BBC's youth-directed Newsbeat website (5.9l-n).

The reach of this research has had impact upon how the contemporary religious landscape is framed and interpreted in the public square. Graphics from Bullivant's reports have been reproduced in standard textbooks, including the official study guide for OCR 's Religious Studies A level, and the forthcoming 8<sup>th</sup> edition of Anthony Giddens' *Sociology* (5.10a-b). Information from these reports is cited regularly as 'background context' for religion-related stories *not* focusing on the reports themselves. In the wake of the Notre Dame fire in April 2019, several news reports and op-eds used data from (3.5) as a touchstone. For instance, a *Washington Post* op-ed titled "Notre Dame fire an apt metaphor – and a sad warning" quotes – and in the online version links to – "a study by the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society" as evidence that: "only 26 percent of French young adults consider themselves Christians, and 65 percent say they never pray" (5.10c). A *Newsweek* article 'fact-checked' a segment on Fox News' primetime *Tucker Carlson Tonight* (episodes averaging 3.8 million live viewers that month) which claimed that "according to some polls, the French are [...] among the most godless people" by devoting a paragraph to "figures in a report called 'Europe's Young Adults and Religion' by Professor Stephen Bullivant from St. Mary's University in London" (5.10d).



**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 1) Letter from the Iona Institute discussing Bullivant's impact on the Irish Census questionnaire.
- 2) Census Advisory Group Meeting - Minutes, 12 December 2017.
- 3) Central Statistics Office (Ireland), Meeting of Religion Subgroup – Minutes, 22 January 2018.
- 4) Census Advisory Group Meeting - Minutes, 21st February 2018.
- 5) Irish Census Pilot Household Forms A and B, 2018.
- 6) Central Statistics Office, *Report on the Public Consultation on Content of Census 2021 and the Census Pilot Survey 2018* (July 2019).
- 7) Media Reports Evidencing 2016: a. *Guardian* 23 May 2016; b. *Telegraph* 23 May 2016; c. *Independent* 23 May 2016; d. *Daily Mail* 23 May 2016; e. *Week* 24 May 2016; f. *Time* 24 May 2016.
- 8) Media Reports Evidencing 2018: a. BBC 22 March 2018 Indonesian; b. *Economist* 28 March 2018 English; c. *La Croix* 22 March 2018 French; d. *iDNES* 21 March 2018 Czech e. *Tempi* 25 March 2018 Italian f. *Kristeglit Dagblad* 23 March 2018 Danish; g. *Metro* 21 March 2018 Flemish; h. *Akit* 23 March 2018 Turkish.
- 9) Media shares data, op-ed, radio, and tv discussion evidencing: a. and b. 2016 and 2018 *Guardian* article shares from website; c. and d. 2016 and 2018 *Daily Mail* article shares from website; e. *Breitbart* 2018 article comments on website; f. SharedCount analytics for *Guardian* 2016 and 2018; g. *Guardian* op-ed 22 March 2018; h. *New York Times* Op-ed 5 June 2016; i. *Spectator* leader 28 May 2016; j. *Psychology Today* Op-ed 24 May 2017; k. BBC 'Thought for the Day' transcript 25 May 2016; l. *Grazia* feature 22 December 2018; m. *Stylist* feature 3 May 2017; n. BBC *Newsbeat* feature 21 May 2018.
- 10) Textbook permissions documentation and background data: a. Permission to reprint OUP 'Religious Studies for OCR; b. Permission to reprint in Giddens' *Sociology*; c. Op-ed in *Washington Post* 23 April 2019; d. *Newsweek factcheck* 16 April 2019.