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Roundtable

Locating the Backstage of Victorian Religion: Spaces of Irish Catholicism[1]

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ABSTRACT

This introduction to the 'Spaces of Irish Catholicism' Roundtable argues that applying the concept of 'space' to nineteenth-century Irish Catholicism has the potential to offer significant new insights to our understandings of Irish Catholicism and the lives of ordinary Irish Catholics, but also to Victorian Studies and religious history more generally. In particular, it contends that the nature of Irish Catholicism in the later nineteenth century was such that examining its many different spaces offers a valuable means of enacting Peter Andersson's plea to uncover the 'backstage' of the Victorian period. In describing the eight diverse papers that comprise the Roundtable, the introduction argues that a previously identified dichotomy between the 'poetics of space' and the 'politics of space' within the religious realm may need to be rethought.

KEYWORDS: Victorian Studies, backstage, space, devotional revolution, religion, Catholicism

In the realm of Victorian religion, space mattered. *Where* religion was experienced and practised had a great deal of influence over *how* it was experienced and practised. As the religious studies academic Kim Knott has noted, whether scholars have been concerned with 'the poetics of space', i.e. a spatial focus on 'experience, aesthetics, the senses and the sacred', or on 'the politics of space', i.e. a view that sees the production of sacred space as connected to (often contested) regimes of power and knowledge, the spatial turn has been fruitful for our understanding of contemporary religion.[2] The eight essays in this roundtable, focusing on various but cognate aspects of Irish Catholic space in the long nineteenth century, therefore aim to further our understanding of nineteenth-century religion through multi-disciplined and multi-scalar notions of 'space'.

Victorians were, in at least one respect, acutely aware that space was important in framing religious experience. As the historian William Whyte has recently argued, the Victorians decisively 'transformed' sacred space. Across the British world over the course of the nineteenth century, tens of thousands of churches were built, rebuilt, remodelled, and redecorated, their purposes declaimed and debated by clergymen of all stripes.[3] This infrastructural transformation – and, in a British context, the arcane dogma and elite hubris which partially drove it – is

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1 This roundtable grew from a panel at the American Conference for Irish Studies in Cork in 2018, in which Godson, McGee, NicGhabhann and Roddy presented. We are grateful to Dr Síle de Cléir, who expertly chaired that panel, and to audience members for their stimulating questions and comments.

2 Kim Knott, 'Religion, Space and Place: The Spatial Turn in Research on Religion', *Religion and Society Advances in Research*, 1 (2010), 29–43.

3 William Whyte, *Unlocking the Church: The Lost Secrets of Victorian Sacred Space* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

not therefore an untold story.[4] Other forms of contemporary institutional religious space have also come under scrutiny; Carmen Mangion has shown how the sickroom – whether in hospitals or at home – was both a material and an imagined sacred space for English Catholics, and a highly gendered one, in which women religious came to exercise considerable influence, in sharp counterpoint to the clergy-dominated parish church.[5]

Nor has the significance of domestic space to Victorian religious experience and expression been overlooked by scholars: in pioneering work by Coleen McDannell on the United States, and in more recent and ongoing research on Britain by scholars including Deborah Cohen, Sarah Williams, Jane Hamlett and Lucinda Matthews-Jones,[6] the capacity of the home, its material contents and its physical arrangement to actively shape the religious lives of those within it has been shown.[7] What McDannell identified as the development of a 'middle class domestic piety' has been a key concern in such accounts,[8] even if, for Williams in particular, demonstrating the limitations of that rubric has also been paramount. As Williams has persuasively argued, scholars need to go beyond the textual and consider alternative methodologies if they are not to lose sight of, or misconstrue, what remained throughout the Victorian period an enduring working-class religiosity.[9]

This, we contend, is where Irish Catholic space comes in: putting a more expansive set of spatial approaches into conversation has the potential to add far more to our understanding of Victorian spiritual and religious life across class spectrums than has hitherto been appreciated. In particular, it may help us to get beyond rather simplistic notions of public versus private religious spaces. Church and home were by no means the only spaces of religious expression in the nineteenth century,[10] and, as Joy Dixon has astutely pointed out, ongoing perceptions of a 'feminine' domestic religion contrasted with a 'masculine' public piety form an overly simplistic and increasingly unhelpful binary.[11]

While a great deal of this work has centred on Britain, this roundtable rests on the premise that Ireland can be put to fruitful use on the specific matter of the relationship between space and religious experience. Arguably, nineteenth-century Ireland has too often been treated as a case apart from Victorian Britain by scholars of both territories. Indeed, references to nineteenth-century Ireland's Victorian-ness have often come couched in questions marks, or

4 Robin Gill, *The 'Empty' Church Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); G. A. Bremner, *Imperial Gothic: Religious Architecture and High-Anglican Culture in the British Empire, c. 1840–70* (London: Yale University Press, 2013).

5 Carmen M. Mangion, '"To console, to Nurse, to Prepare for Eternity": The Catholic Sick-room in Later Nineteenth-Century England', *Women's History Review*, 21 (2012), 657–72.

6 Coleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840–1900* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986).

7 Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and their Possessions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Sarah Williams, 'Is there a Bible in the House? Gender, Religion and Family Culture', in *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800–1940*, ed. by Sue Morgan and Jacqueline DeVries (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 11–31; Lucinda Matthews-Jones, 'Settling at Home: Gender and Class in the Room Biographies of Toynbee Hall, 1883–1914', *Victorian Studies*, 60 (2017), 29–52.

8 On middle-class domestic piety, see also Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Routledge, 1987).

9 Williams, 'Is there a Bible in the House?'; S. C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark, 1880–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

10 Lucinda Matthews-Jones, 'Oxford House Heads and their Performance of Religious Faith in East London, 1884–1900', *The Historical Journal*, 60 (2017), 721–44.

11 Joy Dixon, 'Modernity, Heterodoxy and the Transformation of Religious Cultures', in *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800–1940,* ed. Morgan and DeVries, pp. 211–30.

seen 'Victorian' used merely as an unexamined synonym for 'later nineteenth century'.[12] Yet just as cultural histories of sport, art, and science increasingly use 'Victorian' in a sense that recognizes the interconnectedness of these islands and of the wider empire,[13] we argue that developments in Irish Catholicism are not only better examined and understood within a wider Victorian context, but that, by doing so, the Irish case can in turn yield important insights for Victorian Studies.

Several factors underpin this premise. First, scholars have traditionally understood Irish Catholicism as undergoing a transformation of its own in the mid-Victorian period – what one historian, Emmet Larkin, influentially termed a 'devotional revolution' and dated to the generation after the Great Famine (i.e. *c.* 1850–1875).[14] While the notion that a pre-Famine society characterized by widespread adherence to a quasi-pagan folk religion gave way to one dominated by the bourgeois 'modernity' of a more orthodox, chapel-centred and clergy-led religion is far too neat on both counts, the overall picture of profound changes in religious practise and identity across the century does hold water, and provides a fertile basis on which to ask deeper questions about the nature of ordinary lay people's religious lives. Put simply, where experience is changing and contemporaneously perceived as undergoing change, its traces are more apparent to historians and other scholars who seek to understand it.

Second, an application of spatial analysis to Irish Catholicism gives us an opportunity to acknowledge, at the outset, the sometimes complex and competing disciplinary notions of what 'space' and 'spatial' actually mean – if they have meaning, in fact.[15] The very phrase which forms the sub-title of this roundtable 'spaces of Irish Catholicism' will conjure up different conceptions of what those particular spaces might be for different scholars, as amply demonstrated in the contributions below. For some it may simply evoke the dramatic explosion in varied Catholic built infrastructure in nineteenth-century Ireland; for others the widespread injection of drama and intricate elaboration into the physical design of Catholic churches, with squat, functional chapels gradually being superseded by grand gothic piles. Some will be reminded of the reality that these newer buildings were some of the most totemic and visible on the Irish landscape, while others will note the fact that the very construction of these literally parochial buildings routinely relied on global networks, chiefly in relation to money acquired from donors across the Irish diaspora, and architectural and liturgical items made by craftspeople from continental Europe. This is before one even gets to spaces of religious expression and experience not related directly to the church building itself: the home, the cemetery, or indeed the wider Catholic world, both literal and figurative, in which all of these sat. Crucial to all of these, however, is materiality. If we accept Leif Jerram's dictum that 'space is material, location is relational, place is meaningful', and that historians in particular have been slow to recognize the value of and employ the methodologies implied in that first clause, then this roundtable represents, in part, an effort to test that idea.

[12] See Matthew Campbell, 'Victorian Ireland?', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 10 (2005), 297–303 and Peter Gray, ed. *Victoria's Ireland? Irishness and Britishness, 1837–1901* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004).

[13] See Tom Hunt, *Sport and Society in Victorian Ireland: The Case of Westmeath* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007); Kathryn Milligan, 'Social Smoking and French Fancies: The Dublin Art(s) Club, 1886–98', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 25 (2020), 365–80; Diarmid A. Finnegan and Jonathan Jeffrey Wright, 'Catholics, Science and Civic Culture in Victorian Belfast', *British Journal for the History of Science*, 48 (2015), 261–87.

[14] See Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850–1875', *American Historical Review*, 77 (1972), 625–52.

[15] See Leif Jerram, 'Space: A Useless Category for Historical Analysis?', *History and Theory*, 52 (2013), 400–19.

Third, the particular nature of Irish social structure in the nineteenth century means, almost by default, that the essays for this roundtable also consciously take up the challenge laid down by Peter K. Andersson in his provocative 2015 'How civilized were the Victorians?' think piece, and by some of his responders, who have echoed his call to explore an 'extra-verbal', 'backstage' version of Victorian culture that is less metropolitan, less elitist, less exclusively British and, we might add, within the then United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, less exclusively English.[16] In particular, Katrina Navickas's advocacy of the utility of labour geography for scholars attempting to 'get at' working-class experience strikes a chord with many of the contributors to this roundtable. This is the notion that such an approach, as Navickas puts it, 'situates the agency of workers and their collective organizations within a multiscalar space, connecting the real experience of local struggles to national and global ideas and movements'.[17] In other words, focusing on material spaces relating to working life can be one way to interrogate lives less examined by Victorianists.

This has, we argue, a potentially fruitful Irish counterpart. In the relative absence of industrialization, and in the context of what became near-universal Mass attendance and greatly increased ritual devotions,[18] the Catholic Church in nineteenth-century Ireland was arguably a, if not *the* key focus of everyday plebeian activity. Therefore, if we examine the many diverse spaces associated with Irish Catholicism, we can potentially open a window into seeing those lower down the social scale as people who had agency, inner lives, lives beyond the livings they worked to earn, a culture of their own and a religious experience of their own, all of which were influenced, in multiple ways, by the spaces in which they were expressed and experienced. Moreover, taking Navickas's 'multiscalar' qualifier into consideration means that the lives of ordinary Catholics of all classes are placed in a suitably global context. As Colin Barr has rightly noted on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 'throughout the English-speaking world, Irish Catholics and their descendants were born in Catholic hospitals, educated in Catholic schools, married other Catholics, read Catholic books and newspapers, joined Catholic societies, and were buried in Catholic cemeteries'.[19] If this implies, as Barr's book title seems to, a sense of an Irish version of disciplined, Victorian 'civilization' to parallel that rightly challenged by Peter Andersson for Britain, then it too, deserves to have its 'backstages' brought into the light.

The papers in this roundtable will therefore address, to varying degrees, a series of interlinked questions, many of which have resonance far beyond the Irish Catholic Church:

- How does 'space', in all its multifarious guises, shape religious experience?
- How do space and materiality interact in religious contexts?
- What is the relationship between physical space and imaginative space in a religious context?
- How are local sacred spaces and landscapes impacted by transnational exchanges and processes?

16 Peter K. Andersson, 'How Civilised were the Victorians?', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20 (2015), 439–52.

17 Katrina Navickas, 'Searching for the Material in Peter K. Andersson's "How Civilized Were the Victorians?"', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 22 (2017), 99–104.

18 David W. Miller, 'Irish Catholicism and the Great Famine', *Journal of Social History*, 9 (1975), 81–98; David W. Miller, 'Landscape and Religious Practice: A Study of Mass Attendance in Pre-Famine Ireland', *Éire-Ireland*, 11 (2005), 90–106; Larkin, 'Devotional Revolution'.

19 Colin Barr, *Ireland's Empire: The Roman Catholic Church in the English-speaking World, 1829–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 481.

- What does a spatial lens, applied from different disciplinary perspectives, do to enhance our understanding of social and cultural change, and of non-elite perspectives?
- How can this way of understanding Irish Catholicism, specifically, help us to interrogate the 'Victorian-ness' of Ireland in the mid- to late-nineteenth century?

Written by an interdisciplinary collection of social, cultural and economic historians, art and architecture historians, and geographers, each with their own particular arguments to make, the papers below nonetheless offer multiple thematic insights that speak to one another. This brief introduction can highlight just a few. Key amongst them, given the central role accorded to Larkin's 'devotional revolution' by many of the contributions, is a challenge to the neat chronology of that concept and a complicating of the supposedly 'civilizing' nature of the changes implied by it, a parallel to Andersson's challenge on the Victorians. As Cara Delay astutely notes in her piece on nineteenth-century Irish deathscapes, we must 'rethink the notion that Victorian spatial reforms were a complete departure from the past . . . Victorian civilizing movements were both built on existing practices and clashed with them'. Indeed, Gerry Kearns, tracing the Catholic Church's coming of age through expansion of its built infrastructure in nineteenth-century Dublin, skilfully shows how the city's sacred spaces were layered upon one another; religious space was 'encod[ed], decod[ed], and re-cod[ed]' over the course of many generations before and indeed after the 'devotional revolution'. If Kearns also shows Dublin's particular geographical and often class-based limitations on the spread of Catholic space relative to rural Ireland in this period, Conor Dodd's piece, read in conjunction with Delay's, complicates an oft-assumed urban-rural divide within Irish Catholicism. The new prominence of Catholic spaces, typified by the expansion and increasing elaboration of Glasnevin cemetery, was, Dodd shows, bound up with attempts to control often raucous and 'uncivilized' lay behaviour that were no less contested in Dublin than they were in the rural areas that are Delay's focus. In essence, traces of traditional religious practices and rituals and attempts to curtail or co-opt them are often inscribed in the new, 'modern' and 'civilized' spaces of Catholic Ireland if one simply asks how particular spaces came into being.

Investigating how spaces came into being also does much work for Karly Kehoe and Ciaran O'Neill, whose provocative titular question 'was there a Catholic Atlantic?' focuses on the presence of Catholics throughout the British Empire. Often overplayed, in the sense of confident assertions of a parallel 'Irish spiritual empire', and simultaneously underplayed, in the sense of an absence of lay Catholics from the picture, Kehoe and O'Neill show how placing Irish Catholicism and Irish Catholics in their myriad local, national and transnational contexts outside Ireland itself may offer a way for Irish historians of the nineteenth century to tackle a question that Victorianists focused on Britain have long grappled with, namely participation and culpability in imperial exploitation. With its broad canvas of imperial space, this piece shows the complexity of the Victorian 'backstage', even in the Irish context. For my own piece on fundraising among the Irish Catholic diaspora, I similarly found that focusing on small-scale, local encounters within a broader imagined Catholic 'empire' can fundamentally change our perceptions of some of the grand narratives – whether of Catholic empires or Catholic communality – that contemporary Irish Catholics employed and that historians, myself included, have sometimes been too ready to (albeit critically) repeat. Yet another transnational space of Irish Catholicism is important for Caroline McGee, who deftly shows how the new Catholic spaces of the 'devotional revolution' relied on a rising religious consumerism that crossed borders and created a materiality that was familiar across the Catholic world.

That materiality as Niamh NicGhabhann and Lisa Godson each note, was crucial to forming new ways of being, new ways of feeling and new ways of identifying for Irish Catholics. The 'compelling and charismatic spaces' that the Church increasingly occupied, NicGhabhann persuasively argues, must be seen not just in terms of the material 'magnificence' that the clergy and others aspired to, but as evidence of the '"more-than-architectural" experiences of those who inhabited them', and of their emotional, sensory and communal engagement with their religion. Complicating this further is Godson's assertion that the prescriptive nature of new Catholic spaces, in the chapel and in the home, imparted new 'bodily knowledge' to lay people, knowledge which punctuated everyday life in ways that sometimes hint at the rich inner lives of the laity.

This roundtable, therefore, deals as much in the poetics as the politics of religious space. Perhaps above all it shows both the difficulties of untangling the two and perhaps also the folly of any attempt to do so in a religious context. While the materiality of the many Catholic spaces examined is frequently (and rightly) of central importance below, contributors to this roundtable take seriously the reality that sacred spaces were designed for sincere religious purposes, that their designs were often based on particular theological ideas, and their uses governed by personal faith as much as institutional prescription. Through the eight papers below, we hope readers understand that in the Victorian Catholic Church's assertions of power over behaviour, bodies, capital, narratives, and space of various kinds, there may also be the immanent possibility of drawing out the experiences, emotions and inner lives of both the people asserting that power and the people over whom that power was asserted.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.