

Visible Divinity: The Economics of Irish Catholicism, 1850-1921

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Outline of Project

The cultural history of money and finance is an increasingly vibrant and timely research field. Despite this, we have still a limited historical understanding of one important form of wealth accumulation: fundraising. What made (and, to an extent, what makes) people part with money for ‘non-profit’ causes has only recently begun to attract serious scholarship. This project will contribute significantly to this emerging work by conceptualising one of the most enormous, and in terms of donors perhaps the most socially diverse, transfers of capital in the nineteenth century: the financing of religious institutions. Using the Irish Catholic Church and, significantly, its diasporic outposts in Britain and elsewhere as a case study, and building upon a recently published preliminary study of transnational Irish Catholic fundraising arising out of my doctoral work, this project will explore why people gave money to their church and how this process may have affected cultural attitudes towards money and economic activity in general.

In some respects, the relationship between economics and religion has long been recognised as important. Marx, quoting Shakespeare, considered money a new God in itself – ‘the visible divinity’ – while Weber, in common with the historian R.H. Tawney, famously proposed that Protestantism helped to create the ‘spirit of capitalism’. The latter interventions, in particular, prompted heated historical debate. Not least in an Irish context, where, in the 1960s and 1970s, Emmet Larkin and Liam Kennedy clashed inconclusively over the consequences of the Catholic Church’s economic power. What all of these works share, however, is a focus on the effects – both material and psychological – of religion and church teachings on the wider economy: they ask largely irresolvable questions about whether religion helped to cause or to retard a country’s economic growth. This project will argue, by contrast, that the income-generating capacity and practices of nineteenth-century churches constituted in themselves a significant economic phenomenon, which itself shaped ordinary people’s economic lives and is worthy of closer examination and conceptualisation in its own right.

Aims & Methods

Therefore, partly by taking a cue from recent sociological applications of Durkheim’s sacred/profane dichotomy to contemporary American church fundraising, this project aims to do the following:

1. To produce, using multiple archival and printed primary sources, the first comprehensive quantitative dataset of any country’s religious income and fundraising during this period.
2. To map what were evidently highly successful fundraising campaigns, drawing out and comparing the innovative strategies and mechanisms that were employed. These will include forms of exchange such as ‘selling’ religious services, gambling, in the form of the ubiquitous and often globally advertised parish bazaar raffle, and exploitation of relics, rituals, canonisation and pilgrimage sites as ‘money-spinners’.
3. To establish, using the Durkheimian analysis applied by some sociologists of religion, a typology of donors’ motives for religious giving in its historical context; and to relate this to present-day debates concerning fundraising and how money might be extracted for particular purposes, including religion.

The importance of the transnational

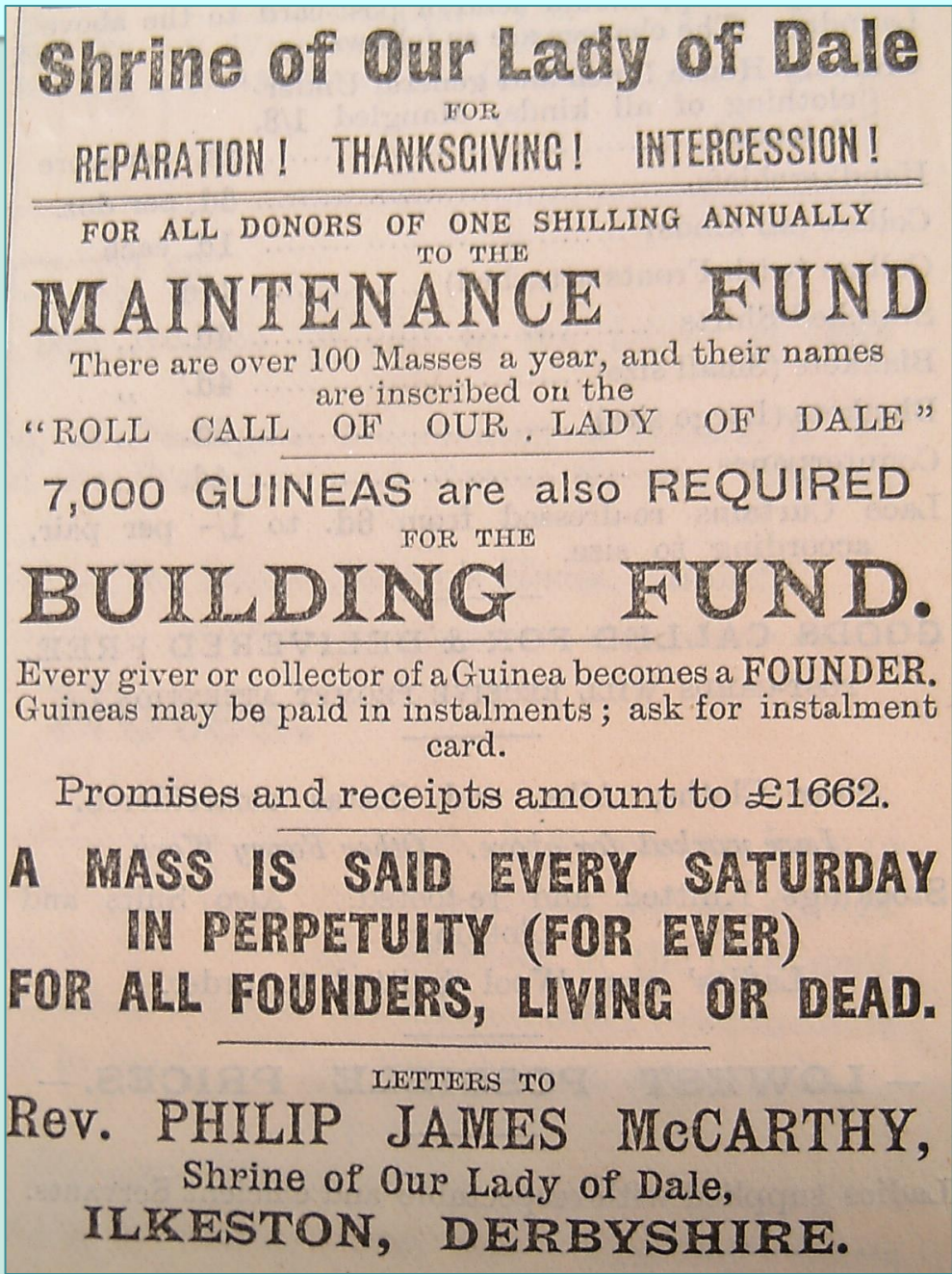
‘...*The new church, I suppose you herd of it is going to be built on Caroeilins hill. Dear brother I suppose you herd of Father O’Neil writing to George Brennan he spoke this morning from the altar of having a letter from him he said he sent five pounds to him and that there was a few other Irish men going to send some to[o]. It would delight one to listen to ‘Father O’Neil this morning to hear the praise he gave him...*’

- Family pressure to donate to the Irish Church in a letter to a migrant in the US from Ireland (1870)

‘...*St. Louis, Missouri ‘I did very poor work during this week, I never met a town of its character and population so stingy. Some refuse, a few give a little (grumbling all the time) none give well. The place is over-run with local beggars - nuns and monks and all sorts - and three or four strange ones were also in the field. Besides this the people are not in the habit of giving ...’*

‘...*In the course of the day I was conducted from house to house by two Corkmen, and thus raised 140 dollars. I was struck by the polite and cheerful manner in which I was everywhere received. When I was introduced into a house the people were not embarrassed or displeased, but welcomed me heartily, were glad to see me, had hoped I would call, for they had heard of the object of my mission, regretted they had not more to give, but gave their little cheerfully...*’

- Contrasting experiences, recounted in diaries, of Irish priests fundraising among the diaspora (1870s)



Catholic funding appeals in Salford diocesan magazine *The Harvest: The afterlife and Irish life, the supernatural and the national are all invoked.*



Key Questions

- How much money did the Irish Catholic Church raise for itself during this period and by what means?
- Were there differences in the ways that clergy among the Irish diaspora went about fundraising in ostensibly very different societies?
- In light of Weber’s thesis, did the church use its regular appeals, consciously or unconsciously, in ways that fomented or reinforced particular attitudes towards finance - or ‘cultures of money’ - among its congregations?
- What factors motivated a relatively poor population, both in Ireland and outside it, to give such large sums of money to their church?
- Did such considerations vary among social classes, between the urban and rural parish, between the Irish at home and abroad, or between men and women?
- Did the gender, class, political outlook or professional status of fundraisers matter to those canvassed?
- Was money donated to the church considered, to use Durkheim’s construct, somehow ‘sacred’: a sacrificial and selfless expression of faith? Or was it ‘profane’: a payment for commoditised religious services or an instrumental bid for preferment in this world or the next?

Outputs

- Monograph entitled *Visible Divinity*
- 2 x peer-reviewed journal articles
- Inter-disciplinary symposium on Economics and Religion

Key Readings

Karl Marx, ‘The power of money in bourgeois society’ in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Trans. Moscow, 1959), pp 126-31
Max Weber, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (London, 1930)
Emmet Larkin, ‘Economic growth, capital investment, and the Roman Catholic Church in nineteenth-century Ireland’ in *American Historical Review*, 72 (1967), pp 852-84
Liam Kennedy, ‘The Roman Catholic Church and economic growth in nineteenth century Ireland’ in *Economic and Social Review*, 10:1 (1978), pp 45-60
Sarah Roddy, ‘The spoils of spiritual empire: emigrant contributions to nineteenth-century Irish church-building’ in *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 5:2 (2012), pp 95-116
Christopher Herbert, ‘Filthy Lucre: Victorian ideas of money’ in *Victorian Studies*, 44:2 (2002), pp 185-213
Emile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life* (Trans. Oxford, 2001)
James Hudnut-Beumler, *In pursuit of the Almighty’s dollar: a history of money and American Protestantism* (Chapel Hill, 2007)
Jared L. Peifer, ‘The economics and sociology of religious giving: instrumental rationality or community bonding?’ in *Social Forces*, 88:4 (2010), pp 1569-94
Peter Munday, Hilary Davidson and Patricia Snell Herzog, ‘Making money sacred: how two church cultures translate mundane money into distinct sacralised frames of giving’ in *Sociology of Religion*, 72:3 (2011), pp 303-26
Russell W. Belk and Melanie Wallendorf, ‘The sacred meanings of money’ in *Journal of Economic Psychology* 11 (1990), pp 35-67
Viviana R. Zelizer, *The social meaning of money* (New York, 1994)