

**SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION: CONTEMPORARY  
DEVELOPMENTS—AN EXPLORATORY CRITIQUE  
FROM A CATHOLIC SOCIOLOGICAL SENSIBILITY**

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*This review essay provides an exploratory critique of one prominent contemporary sociology of religion textbook from the perspective of a Catholic sociological sensibility. It is written with the projection that the critique could eventually be expanded into a more systematic and exhaustive review of other major textbooks in the field. The textbook is analyzed in light of eight fundamental questions.*

**Introduction**

This essay addresses what is no doubt a vexing problem for many serious Catholic scholars who teach within certain disciplines or sectors of either public higher education, non-Catholic private higher education (whether secular or religiously based), or at significantly secularized Catholic institutions of higher education. The general issue involves the difficulty faced by scholars in either identifying or being able to employ textbooks in their fields of study that are either Catholic in orientation, compatible with a Catholic worldview, or at least “objective” in the sense of including a wide variety of competing paradigms, including Catholic or natural law perspectives. The specific issue involves the difficulty that confronts teachers in the area of the sociology of religion, a sub-discipline in an academic field that has been, as a rule, very secularized, progressive in orientation, and often hostile to religion, or to at least traditional manifestations of Christianity, especially to Catholicism.

The specific task of this essay is to provide an exploratory critique of a significant and contemporary sociology of religion textbook from a Catholic sociological sensibility. The textbook chosen for analysis is a more-than-competent work of scholarship co-authored by prominent and well-respected scholars from within the contemporary discipline of sociology and—more specifically—the sub-discipline of the sociology of religion: Kevin J. Christiano, William H. Swatos, Jr., and Peter Kivisto, *Sociology of Religion: Contemporary Developments*, second edition, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2008). The textbook is one of the most respected in the sub-discipline. If this critique is successfully executed, a future goal would be to expand the evaluation and to review other major sociology of

religion textbooks currently available. The critique proceeds by addressing eight important questions.

### **What is the intended audience of the textbook under review?**

There is no single, unambiguous “ideal” answer to this question from a Catholic frame of reference. On the one hand, it is possible to be a serious Catholic scholar and write a technically oriented book geared to an advanced audience of fellow sociologists or to students who intend to pursue advanced work in the field of sociology/sociology of religion. From this perspective, producing future Catholic sociological elites can contribute to the effective stewardship of societal trends, given the well-understood maxim that ideas often radiate downward and outward from the cultural elite sector in which they are generated. However, in general, many Catholic scholars would be wary of the potential in this approach to further exacerbate an existing problem facing contemporary modern civilizations, i.e., the development and strengthening of a gnostic-like class of intellectuals who are, much more often than not, secular and anti-religious in nature. In choosing this option, many serious Catholics who are scholars run the risk of being co-opted in an anti or non-Catholic manner by operating within a secular dominated frame of reference.

On the contrary, many sociologists of religion who operate from a Catholic frame of reference would be inclined to author a textbook oriented to the generally educated citizen and from the tradition of the “public intellectual.” This is so for at least two reasons. First, writing “from the outside” of the secular intellectual enclave “frees” the scholar to avoid the “politically correct.” Second, the Catholic scholar would tend to see scholarship—i.e., honest, objective scholarship—primarily as a tool, as a means to an end, for the advancement of some Christian or natural law inspired good. This general Catholic sensibility to view knowledge as a vehicle to institutionalize some divine end thus is considered even more important than the good of “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” (the latter being viewed as a legitimate but secondary good in the Catholic sensibility). And by writing for the general public, the Catholic scholar is demonstrating a legitimate suspicion regarding the possibility that knowledge can be misused by an elite “knowledge class,” a class typically ignorant of the reality of original sin, at least in their own thoughts and actions. By writing for the general audience, the Catholic scholar is enhancing the possibility of creating the “Good Society” by providing intellectual tools for the enhancement of a widespread, generally educated, and moral citizenry to participate in the

governmental, corporate, and civil spheres of society, thus countering the dominant trend toward a monopolization of power in society. In this sense, what the dedicated Catholic scholar strives for is to institutionalize within society a “Catholic imagination,” analogous (in form although certainly not in content) to the attempt of the Marxist-leaning sociologist C.W. Mills to promote the “sociological imagination” and the Lutheran-leaning, “two kingdoms” sociologist, Peter L. Berger, to promote his “sociology as a form of human consciousness,” with its radically debunking motif regarding all aspects of human and social existence.

Parts of the Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto volume should be accessible to the beginning student. Overall, however, much of the volume presumes a knowledge and familiarity with the sociology of religion literature that is at the graduate student level and above. At times, the co-authors are also not content to describe and critique differing positions within the sub-discipline without taking quite specific positions regarding the current debates within the field. (Examples include their opposition to secularization theory, their rejection of the sociological tradition associated with Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, and their evaluation of the worthiness of specific scholars and their work; see especially Chapter Three). The point is not that partisan criticism cannot be a part of the intellectual, scholarly enterprise but that it should not be a central feature of an introductory textbook, which should be concerned with objectively introducing beginning students to the content and the basic parameters of the field.

### **What is the overall purpose of the textbook under review?**

In theory, textbooks can serve one or several potential purposes. The most obvious potential purpose is the enunciation of the general modes of analysis and bodies of research findings in the field. This is what sociologists would term the “manifest function” of a textbook and what the novice to any academic subject expects to receive when reading the volume. In the context of a non-Catholic academic/intellectual environment in which a pluralism of perspectives should be respected, this manifest function, if met, would be more than acceptable to the Catholic scholar.

However, many times this manifest function aimed at producing balance is not met. Another hidden, or what sociologists call “latent,” function might be to advocate for a particular school of thought within a discipline (e.g., Marxism, feminism, capitalism). Just as it would be improper for a Catholic scholar to teach narrowly from within

his own tradition in a non-Catholic academic environment, this option violates—especially for the introductory student—the legitimate expectation to be presented with all sides of various arguments and issues.

Another latent function of any textbook might be to serve as an ancillary agent of social change within society and to further one side or another (empirically speaking and of recent history, almost always of a progressive or utopian nature) of the contemporary culture war taking place within nations and globally. This lack of balance is especially unfair to the beginning student.

Yet another latent function might be to promote the idea that sociological/intellectual modes of thought are equivalent to, and coterminous with, enlightened modes of thought. This position is in tension with the natural law tradition espoused by the Catholic Church, one that argues that right reason is accessible to all and not just to some privileged elite. Conversely, a textbook could promote sociological thought as providing a contribution to a more interdisciplinary, pluralistic, and complex conception of the relationship of the individual to society, one that includes a healthy respect for the natural law insights written into the heart of all. This latter option includes the possibility that an honest and objective sociology of religion textbook could serve an important, albeit secondary, role in pursuing issues dealing with ultimate truth, the nature of the “good society,” and the demands of living the good, ethical, or even holy, life. Such a use of sociological knowledge, obviously, is viewed favorably by the Catholic sensibility.

On one hand, the co-authors certainly cover a significant portion of key theories, issues, and content within the vast domain of the sociology of religion. Regarding the issue of the textbook content, it usefully includes much material on religious groups outside of the Judaic-Christian heritage, reflecting appropriately the demographic changes in America that have taken place since the twentieth century. (p.3)

On the other hand, the book is marred slightly by the authors’ penchant to “score points” for their respective side in the swirling debates within the field, on such subjects as secularization theory (they basically oppose it) and the utility of rational-choice, exchange, and symbolic interaction theories (they promote them against those in the Durkhemian and “cultural camp” who tend to give the symbolic realm of culture a reality partially independent of individual subjective meaning systems). The point is not that authors do not have a right to their preferences, but that such partisanship is not appropriate in an introductory textbook dedicated to teaching beginning students the basics of the field.

Even more noticeable, at least from a Catholic sensibility, is the authors' obvious bias in favor of liberal presuppositions supporting autonomy in most things and, as such, rejecting, or at least being indifferent to, the claims of the natural law (e.g., implicitly favorable understandings of homosexuality, pp. 204–208, and abortion, pp. 197–199). Regarding the former issue, the authors observe that “the selective citation of biblical passages is usually employed as a way of indicating that to be a Christian means to disavow homosexuality” (p. 204) while ignoring the obvious reality of progressive religionists radically “symbolically reconstructing” those very same passages to fit their own secularizing designs. Regarding the latter issue, the authors report on the attitudes of mainstream Protestants as follows: “Considering it a good thing to reduce those situations where people feel compelled to seek out abortions, (for example, in the cases of unmarried teenagers, the very poor, and those living in psychologically stressful circumstances), they at the same time affirm the right to do so if it is warranted” (p. 199). The authors do not provide any elaboration on the logic that “warrants” abortion in the cases mentioned above. The authors tend to promote stereotypical understandings of any organization whose worldview represents anything close to a “constrained” moral system, one that places limits on choice, even reasonable limits on individual behavior.

**Is the work under review highly specialized within a sociological frame of reference, or does it include significant interdisciplinary aspects?**

Either of these options might be preferred by the Catholic sociologist. One can make the case that Catholic scholars trained in sociology must be thoroughly informed on every major issue in the sub-discipline of the sociology of religion—to be, in essence, “masters of their own specialized domains.” Clearly the movement toward ever more specialized work has its positive outcomes including expanding the areas of research within disciplines and sub-disciplines, increasing the precision and accuracy of research findings, and increasing the opportunities for Catholic scholars to engage in meaningful professional exchanges with their non-Catholic peers. Given that the model of highly specialized research is the academic norm in the American university, and especially within elite institutions, those academics who are generalists and interdisciplinary in nature risk negative consequences in hiring, employment, and publishing. Most contemporary academic journals are interested only in publishing very specialized scholarship

or, as some critics claim, scholarship that is centrally and unprofitably focused on minutiae and that contributes little or nothing to societal welfare or to the total stock of useful and practical knowledge. These critics contend that much published research in contemporary academic journals is written more or less as union credentials to gain entrance into guaranteed life-time employment and to further upward mobility in the privileged life of the college-employed scholar. To the degree that these critics are correct, academics are violating the opportunities afforded them to perform important work in their pursuit of truth and knowledge necessary for the promotion of the common good.

Regarding the threat of being overspecialized, the co-authors did “better than they know.” On the one hand, they consciously declare that their volume is a sociological tome and they make it a point to differentiate sociological from theological, philosophical, and other humanistic perspectives. In fact, however, the authors demonstrate some sophisticated interdisciplinary leanings, making cogent and relevant analogies to thinkers from other interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives. On the other hand, and more negatively, the authors do not explicitly address or acknowledge the reality that the discipline of sociology is not fully autonomous—that, in essence, sociological presuppositions find their ultimate source of inspiration from the discipline of philosophy and others outside of the realm of sociology, narrowly defined. Discussions on such key issues as the nature of the human being (e.g., the questions of freedom, sexuality, spirituality, materialism, and rationality) and the constitution of the good society are not explicitly or systematically incorporated in the text; these “philosophical” or “theological” or “humanistic” issues, the claims of positivistic sociologists notwithstanding, are inevitably part of the sociological enterprise properly understood.

### **Is the work under review primarily theoretical/conceptual or empirical/factual in nature?**

The obvious ideal in social scientific scholarship is to have a mutually beneficial balance between theory and empirical findings. The relationship between the two should be ongoing and dialectical with theory shedding light on the “facts of the matter” and the sheer “facticity” of empirical evidence serving to validate, modify, or reject theoretical formulations and concepts.

However, there is a subtle but real difference in emphasis between schools of thought that are based on first principles (whether religious or secular) and those that are inherently and intrinsically

relativistic. Those scholars who acknowledge the inevitable role that metaphysics plays in the social scientific enterprise (e.g., work inspired by Christian or Catholic or Marxist or feminist premises) would place a priority on the theoretical/conceptual while those who deny the importance or reality of such considerations (e.g., positivists or nominalists) would tend to emphasize what for them is the time and location specific reality of the empirical, factual situation. Put another way, for the latter there are no universal regularities in social life. For the former, the social world changes only in its particularities but universal regularities are detectable because of the claim that there are certain eternal truths that govern social life. In the realm of the sociology of the family, for instance, there are those scholars who conclude that “there is no such thing as *the* family” based on their understanding of the incredibly pluralistic and complex configurations of family life found throughout time and space. To the contrary, a natural law theorist (in the tradition of the Catholic philosopher/sociologist, Jacques Leclercq) would posit a “core” conception of the family—one that could have a range of variability within it—thus positioning the natural law theorist to claim that some empirical expressions of marriage and family life are “functional” and “normal” and others “dysfunctional” or “pathological” and would be in a position to attempt to demonstrate the plausibility of the assertion through empirical evidence. Now that the heyday of the radicalized sociology that first emerged in the mid-1960s has faded a bit, it is not too surprising to see increasing evidence of secular mainstream social scientists such as Princeton University’s Sara McLanahan and the University of Chicago’s Linda Waite producing objective social science research that generally supports the conclusions of Catholic-informed sociologies.

Sociologists who are Catholic and who accept the concept of a “Catholic informed” sociology and whose work would be led by natural law theoretical underpinnings would operate out of a decidedly minority position in the secularized discipline. Even those sociologists who are also serious Catholics and who do not consciously integrate the metaphysical and social scientific realms nonetheless unselfconsciously migrate to a slightly greater emphasis on the theoretical and conceptual (and in a way leaning in a Catholic direction) over the empirical/factual.

The co-authors certainly make no conscious attempt to integrate first principles into their work and their overall interpretative schema is clearly relativistic in its implications. However, their work is periodically punctuated with the larger issues of theological and philosophical discourse. Their work, furthermore, has the correct mix, from a Catholic sociological sensibility, of theory and empirical work,

with the former being correctly granted more importance. The authors specifically quote the work of Peter L. Berger in stating that “the interest of the sociologist is primarily theoretical”( p. 35). They continue immediately that “we don’t actually get around to doing sociology until we start explaining whatever data we have found...Gathering statistics or conducting interviews or doing participant observation is not sociology; we start doing social science when we explain why the results we have found are as they are” (p. 35). The authors’ point here was precisely the same made by some of the early Catholic sociologists in the debates with the narrowly positivistic sociologists of the early twentieth century. At the same time, a review of the textbook’s content does, indeed, confirm the authors’ contention that they have included a great deal of factual information from varied sources. Of course, the reality that the authors have demonstrated a useful ratio of theory to facts says nothing about the utility of the theories chosen, how they have been applied, or of possible theoretical frameworks ignored.

**Is the work under review primarily national  
(i.e., focused on the United States) or global in nature?**

Again, a Catholic frame of reference does not clearly or unambiguously dictate whether a sociology text should be national or global. The advantage of having a textbook geared to the national situation from which the author writes and teaches is obvious enough: it makes it easier for students to grasp the connection between sociological theories and concepts and the empirical, factual world in which they themselves are embedded. To emphasize the national is to increase the relevance to the reader of the sociological lectures offered and material read. The advantage in having a textbook that offers a great deal of global, historical, and cross-cultural material is to broaden the students’ knowledge beyond their familiar surroundings and thus to guard against the “ethnocentrism” structured into the socialization process. Conversely, a global perspective puts more of a burden on both the teacher and student to accurately describe and understand social contexts outside of their everyday existence. Most scholars, I suspect, would agree that a common and acceptable compromise is to base one’s readings and lectures on material from the national scene while incorporating selectively a healthy amount of cross-cultural and comparative material.

Two caveats from a Catholic perspective are offered here. One is that the Catholic Church, as a universal and global institution with corresponding interests, would both expect and require its scholars to

have an understanding of the global situation and also a Catholic response to the ethical problems and promising opportunities found around the world. The other is that the present vogue in cross-cultural studies, defended as an extension of the intellectual requirements of diversity and multiculturalism, provides a smokescreen for many scholars to espouse an unbalanced, unfair, and inaccurate understanding of the role of Western civilization, America, and Catholicism throughout world history. Examples of these intellectual abuses are Marxist-oriented explanations (e.g., Rosa Luxemburg's discussion of imperialism and Immanuel Wallerstein's "core-periphery" analysis) and various "theologies of liberation." Catholic scholars should be expected to include some material from around the globe and—in all cases—to present analyses that are truthful, objective, accurate, realistic, and offering social policy solutions geared to the promotion of the common good.

On this issue, Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto did better, from a Catholic sensibility, than they acknowledge. Their book is focused on the American social context of religion. However, the authors provide numerous cross-cultural examples of religious developments, movements, and organizations. For one thing, as they correctly acknowledge, this cross-cultural representation is required in any competent textbook given the realities of globalization, mass communication, and widespread immigration to the United States. The authors, furthermore, correctly point out that these processes produce a certain homogenizing effect while—in other cases—generating revitalization movements in traditional religiosity as well as the creation of new religious movements. The incorporation of the latter fact forces one to conclude that the protestantization of the world is, at best and empirically speaking, highly problematic, at least in terms of the global diffusion of the *contents* of a Protestant religious worldview. The possibility of the global diffusion of the Protestant *form* of religious belief, that is, what Ernest Troeltsch termed "mysticism" and others call religious individualism, is also very problematic, although perhaps slightly less so. The textbook is totally innocent of any reference to Catholic ideals associated with a "true development" of peoples, one simultaneously fostering the improvement of both the material and spiritual condition of human beings around the globe.

### **What is the presumed direction of social change evident in the textbook under review?**

Many textbooks consciously or unconsciously avoid offering any definitive cognitive or normative answer to the question. The task of the Catholic scholar in this case is to discern just what is the implicit worldview about social change found in the textbook. The best that a scholar operating from a Catholic perspective can hope for is that any such discussion includes many competing explanations, tentatively proposed, with an honest presentation of the evidence, counter-evidence, or lack of evidence for any particular explanation included.

If the Catholic scholar is able to identify a textbook that is legitimately pluralistic regarding competing theories of social change, then it would be relatively easy for the instructor to include a brief Catholic critique of each theory offered. Catholic scholars would be most sympathetic to those theories that would acknowledge that, while the options for the immediate future are restricted somewhat by the state of present cultural and structural configurations, the longer term future should be viewed as open, depending on the actions or inaction of human agents. Any of the prevalent theories of social change may be predictive of the future, but only provisionally depending upon the interaction between human action and social and historical contingencies. Ideally, the social change theory presented should be portrayed as an empirical possibility and not as inexorable or inevitable as in the case of Marxist or evolutionary—whether secular (e.g., Auguste Comte) or liberal Protestant (e.g., Talcott Parsons)—frameworks.

In sociology, Catholic inspired thinkers would be more oriented to the “actionist” perspective, as contrasted with the more deterministic, “structuralist” position that downplays critical reflection and free will on the part of individuals and—conversely—over-emphasizes the impact of the cultural and structural environment on thought and action. An important “Catholic-like” proviso, however, to the “actionist” position must be included. This is to incorporate some understanding of a constant, if malleable, understanding of human nature that serves to accurately put limits to the utopian fantasies spawned by those who are completely trapped within the boundaries of the modern, secular consciousness.

From the mid-1960s onwards, it has become much more frequent to witness scholarship that is built around some singular progressive worldview, whether it be from a Marxist, feminist, sexual liberationist, or culturally relativistic perspective. Using such a book in a public institution of higher education does an injustice to the incoming

introductory college student (although such books are less objectionable for the advanced reader or consumer who knows in advance what to expect). The same criticism, of course, would be true if using a specifically Catholic textbook in such a setting—bracketing the fact of the empirical unlikelihood of this representing a practical option. If a Catholic scholar finds, for whatever reason, that he/she is forced to use a textbook that is single focused, imbalanced, and antagonistic to the Catholic worldview, then there is an obligation to somehow present to students—through handouts, internet resources, information placed on the blackboard, etc.—material that presents a more accurate and well-rounded discussion of the crucial issue of social change in society.

While, normatively, the textbook co-authors embrace a liberal Protestant position similar to Earnest Troeltsch's prediction of universal individualization in religious thought and action, the underlying theory of social change that they seem to indicate is the dominant cognitive reality is rational-choice theory. The latter posits a quantum amount of required sacredness in any society, which can manifest itself in just about any variation. The authors' normative desires and cognitive understandings of contemporary religion are meshed in the proposition that all individuals need some sort of sacred attachment and all individuals will choose their own form of sacredness from an infinite variety of possibilities. The authors posit that there is no particular direction to history other than the instituting of choice in the selection of religious attachment. In the contemporary American situation, the authors see "de-Christianization" occurring, as new religious movements emerge or other world traditions gain dominance over Christianity in the West. (p.82) This projection seems reasonable but leaves unaddressed the possibility of various revitalization movements re-Christianizing significant sectors of a now considerably (but not totally) secularized and de-Christianized civilization.

**What is the underlying conception of the discipline of sociology vis-à-vis the realm of "values" in the textbook under review? Put another way, to what degree are the intellectual traditions and interpretative lens utilized consistent with a Catholic intellectual worldview?**

From the perspective of a Catholic-informed sociology or social science, sociology is not a completely autonomous discipline; the empirical facts about the social world that the social scientist is concerned with discovering and gathering are influenced by values. The scholar, from the Catholic perspective, should approach the quest for an

objective understanding of social reality through the recognition and taking into account of how values affect the various stages of the scholarly research process. They are: 1) the *motivation*, or, in many cases, the *ideological agenda* of the individual researcher; 2) what the researcher considers (or does not consider) to be either a worthy *research project* or *social problem* to be alleviated; 3) the *analytical concepts, definitions, and theoretical frameworks* that the researcher either creates or decides to employ; 4) how the researcher chooses to *interpret* data or, conversely, what aspects of social reality the researcher considers to be irrelevant in analysis; and 5) what the researcher considers to be possible *social policy* recommendations.

While the authors of *Sociology of Religion* make reference to many competing sociological frameworks, they have their favorites. Two are the economically colored perspectives of rational choice and exchange theory, both based on an underlying understanding of the human being as “*homo economicus*.” Whether or not this preference reflects the Protestant heritage of two of the co-authors, William Swatos, an Episcopalian, and Peter Kivisto, a Lutheran, is a speculation that could be subsequently investigated.

Another favored theoretical perspective is symbolic interactionism with its focus on the creative activity of individuals operating within the constraints of some social context. Such a perspective can be successfully integrated with a Catholic understanding of human freedom and dignity and—viewed as a limited tool—this perspective can be useful. However, it can be reified by its practitioners and expanded beyond its proper scope. Indeed, utilizing this perspective as they do, the authors could be charged with “reducing” religion out of existence. As they state, “there is no ‘thing’ out there that is religion...What we call ‘religions’ are systems of action that humans do that we as students of human behavior see as somehow sufficiently like each other and different from other systems of action to give them a common name” (p. 18). While it is quite acceptable from a secular sociological perspective to “bracket” the reality of the supernatural, it is not acceptable to eliminate its possible reality via definitional manipulation. It would have been acceptable if the authors stated that the secular sociological discipline makes no claim, either way, about what is “out there.” Another way of explaining the textbook’s reductionist direction is to point out that the co-authors implicitly view sociology as a self-contained, fully autonomous entity instead of acknowledging that different sociological camps depend, in crucial but mostly unrecognized ways, on divergent philosophical underpinnings. In their attempt to “differentiate the sociological approach to religion clearly from

important philosophical questions” (p. 37), the authors ignore the inevitable gray area of overlap between philosophical presuppositions and the cognitive claims of particular sociological schools of thought. They come perilously close to turning symbolic interactionism into its own atheistic worldview, instead of using it as a provisional and practical tool in the analysis of social life.

Another consequence of the manner in which the co-authors embrace symbolic interactionism is that they eliminate the possible utility of any secular sociological perspective (e.g., Sorokin, Durkheim, Parsons, or Bellah) that posits the cultural realm possessing even a semi-autonomous status. Their logic, as well, eliminates any traditionally based “religious sociology” that is anchored by any conception of universally valid principles or truths (e.g., from Scripture, the natural law, the Magisterium of the Catholic Church). They state:

...a sociologist of religion needs to recognize the tentativeness and fragility of religious structures of meaning...As ideational systems, religions are always in interaction with material culture, social structure, other cultural systems, and individual personalities...Religion is *infinitely* variable...Only ecclesiological presuppositions and prejudices warrant the notion of religious fixity; thus analyses in the sociology of religion need to be attentive to change as *inherent* in religion, just as change is in other institutional spheres and cultural dimensions. (p. 82)

The criticism offered by a Catholic sociological sensibility here is *not* that it is incorrect to note the dialectical relationship between ideas and their social context but to warn the co-authors that they themselves come close to reducing the ideational world to the material world or beliefs to social structure and social interaction. Their position would preclude the possibility of a Catholic sociologist developing, for instance, a theory of social change that is, in any sense, analogous to John Cardinal Newman’s understanding of organic change within the realm of ideas as enunciated in the latter’s *On The Development of Doctrine*. Newman’s emphasis on granting the realm of Catholic ideas a certain semiautonomous status, that is, allowing material states of being to contour but not reduce out of existence the realm of symbolic culture, represents the reverse bias of the situationalist presuppositions of the co-authors.

Another issue of importance is the use of concepts, specifically, that of “denominationalism” (cf. Chapter 4). The authors neutrally

define the concept as one “now used in pluralistic societies for those forms of organized religious expression that generally support the established social order and are tolerant of one another’s practices.” (p. 93) However, instead of limiting their definition to what is essentially meant by a “religious sub-culture,” the co-authors go further and introduce an unnecessary liberal Protestant and relativizing interpretation of denominationalism. They write:

Lying far beneath the nominal divisions that cut like fences across the religious terrain of the United States are veins of truth and tradition that burrow below the boundaries and enrich the foundations of many churches. It is to these underground lodes of inspiration, and not to the ‘accumulated corruptions of the Church through the centuries’ standing above ground, that contemporary Americans instinctively turn in public discussions of religion. (p. 95)

The concept of denominationalism thus is shaped by the co-authors in a way that would deny, via definition, the Catholic Church (or any other religious entity) any claim whatsoever in possessing *even a relative advantage* in truth and morality vis-à-vis all religious competitors. Note here the implicit and unstated acceptance on the part of the co-authors of what George Lindbeck refers to as an “expressive/experiential” form of religion over religions in which doctrine and propositional truths are constitutive and central.

Another issue mentioned in this sub-section concerns the question of interpretation, or what claims the researcher decides are important and should be included in an analysis and what realities are to be ignored. Two examples offered by the co-authors are here scrutinized, one involving a decision to include something that should not have been included and the other involving a glaring omission.

Regarding the former, the co-authors make the argument that the Ayatollah Khomeini’s criticism of Western ideas and practices is essentially the same as Pope Leo XIII’s response to American civilization in the latter’s 1899 apostolic letter, *Testem benevolentiae* (pp. 75, 78). The co-authors confuse a rejection of modernity, *tout court*, with an intelligent and selective acceptance and rejection of certain aspects of modern life. “Each case...,” for the co-authors, “...like *Communist ideology in the Soviet regimes* [italics added], is an attempted monopoly of thought control—or the social condition of monopolism, the antithesis of pluralism” (p. 78). As such, the co-authors show both their uncritical acceptance of liberalism and individualism in the U.S. and

their willingness to bring up the worn canard of anti-Catholics on the relationship of Catholicism in America to the idea of “freedom.”

Regarding the latter, the co-authors’ analysis of the state of the contemporary Catholic Church in the United States (cf. Chapter Eight) almost exclusively relies on the work of progressive Catholic (e.g., Richard McBrien, William D’Antonio, Jose Casanova, Richard Schoenherr, among others) and non-Catholic scholars (e.g., Dean Hoge, an Episcopalian whose work has both predicted and advocated the movement of Catholicism towards the Episcopal Church) who have a demonstrated track record of antipathy toward the religious institution, at least as it has historically understood itself. The work of the priest-sociologist, Father Andrew M. Greeley, is especially highlighted, including an uncritical presentation of his by now standard charge and complaint that the 1968 promulgation of *Humanae Vitae, in and by itself*, led to a widespread loss of Magisterial teaching authority among American Catholics (p. 216). The authors’ sociological discussion of the sexual abuse scandal (pp. 219–223) is fundamentally flawed, not so much in what they say—their analysis focuses on the indefensible cover-up by the bishops and other Church bureaucrats—but in what they refuse to discuss and analyze. The egregious omission in the co-authors’ discussion of the sexual scandal that plagued the Catholic Church is the lack of any substantial analysis of the role played by the actual perpetrators of sexual abuse who, empirically and overwhelmingly, were active homosexual male priests. For instance, the authors make no mention, even by way of critical response, of Michael Rose’s thesis in *Goodbye Good Men* about the infiltration of a homosexual movement within the Catholic Church and its consequences. Even in the authors’ brief mention (one paragraph, p. 221) of the John Jay College Study on sexual abuse, there is no mention of the words “homosexual” or “homosexuality.” Their references to homosexuals throughout the book focus on the latter’s status as a discriminated against minority. The co-authors offer nary a word about the possibility, even presented as an alternative perspective, of any psychological and social dysfunctions being associated with homosexuality or any scurrilous or reprehensible ethical behavior manifested by some sectors of the homosexual movement. Readers will note numerous references, however, about the excesses of conservative and fundamentalist Christians.

There are also many other illustrations of a less than fully rounded and balanced discussion of important issues. The co-authors’ mention of divorce (p. 201) does not include any discussion of the claim of scholars (e.g., Judith Wallerstein) that it often produces negative consequences for the children of divorce. Likewise, in their discussion

of career-oriented marriages (p. 202), there is no reference to scholars claiming significant dysfunctional consequences for children for some types and amounts of day care (e.g., Mary Eberstadt). In their citing of a 1993 Gallup Poll indicating that 60% of U.S. Catholics agree with the ordination of women (p. 192), the authors fail to make a distinction between the responses of two groups, which sociologists (e.g., Father Joseph Fichter) term “nuclear” and “nominal” Catholics. In their claim of “how little the manifold social transformations since the 1960s have interfered with the loyalty of U.S. Catholics to their Church and the faith that it guards,” the authors do not include the counter-claim of orthodox Catholic sociologists that what is being purposely masked is the growth in a widespread number of “generic Christians” (cf. David Carlin) and a massive “secularization from within” (cf. Joseph A. Varacalli).

**In light of the Catholic critique of the textbook under review, what are the prudential judgments and possibilities involved in developing a specifically “Catholic informed” sociology of religion textbook with an eye to where such a textbook, realistically speaking, might be utilized and adopted?**

Given the anti-traditionalist, anti-conservative, and anti-Catholic discrimination that is currently a reality in the academy and the lack of a fully articulated and recognized Catholic social science perspective to counter effectively such discrimination, the general and prudent response would be for Catholic scholars to write their own non-Catholic sociology of religion textbooks that are balanced and include material from the Catholic intellectual heritage. This would constitute a significant improvement over what is now recognized as scholarship in secular sociology of religion textbooks. It may lead some scholars and students to investigate and pursue study from authentically Catholic perspectives.

However, there would be some real utility for other Catholic scholars to write their own Catholic inspired sociology of religion textbooks. First, a proviso: Such a textbook, practically speaking, would only be adopted for classroom use in the relatively small number of serious Catholic institutions that also offer sociology on their curriculum. Such a textbook, however, could be a valuable addition for libraries, public and private, religious and non-religious, which are concerned with providing their readership a broad spectrum of intellectual offerings. It could also find its way into more than a few of the private libraries of scholars of religion who either accept the Catholic worldview or, at least, respect it and want to learn about what it might

offer scholarship in general. Some of the material and forms of argumentation offered in a specifically Catholic textbook might then be transferred, selectively, into more secular, mainstream texts.

A second proviso: Given the wariness of the intellectual enterprise in the present climate, any specifically Catholic inspired text must be executed professionally and inclusively. It must include the material—or at least the central material—that is found in the major non-denominational, secularized texts, and it must be presented fairly and accurately. There are two foci that differentiate the specifically Catholic sociology of religion textbook from the secular sociology of religion textbook that includes Catholic material. The first is the issue of the *amount* of Catholic material incorporated in the textbook, which would be greater in the former enterprise. The second is that the more formally Catholic intellectual exercise would specifically see it as one of its central and systematic tasks to respond critically, from a Catholic perspective, to the non-Catholic assumptions, theories, interpretations, and social policy formulations that presently dominate the academy and scholarship.

The existential and social situation of the Catholic scholar may be the determining factor in deciding which project makes more sense to pursue. Serious Catholic scholars who find themselves employed in major non-Catholic or secularized Catholic college settings could realistically “go with the flow” and author the more pluralistic, albeit still secular, textbook that selectively incorporates Catholic perspectives. The scholar who finds himself in an institution of higher education that puts a premium on specifically Catholic scholarship is in a position to author the more specifically Catholic attempt at scholarship without suffering any employment related penalties, (outside of the real chances of hurting any transfer possibilities to a non-Catholic institution sometime later in the scholar’s career). Both enterprises have their benefits for Catholic scholarship, scholarship in general, and the welfare of civilization.

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