Taking a reference-work approach, this chapter describes twelve American dissertations in the sociological study of religion that were written before 1930. The earliest is sermonic in nature. The others better resemble the sociology of our day, but they reveal no conceptual development for the subdiscipline. Rather, they reflect typical studies found in general sociology in the universities at the time: a history of local charities sponsored by a denomination, an evaluation of ministries in an inner-city setting, a handbook for conducting community studies, religious demography, histories of a social institution and of a reform impulse, studies of cultural contact and ethnic settlement, a study of a category of organizations, an anthropological reconstruction of a culture, and a development of a pure type. The hegemony of the University of Chicago in the 1920s in the sociological study of religion, if not in sociology more generally, is evident inasmuch as seven of the twelve—and all of those published after 1918—were completed there.

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1 A list was developed using the author’s personal bibliography of works in the sociology of religion. Several items were deleted on account of not being written in graduate social science or sociology departments. Experience has shown that labels used in Dissertation Abstracts and its later incarnations frequently reflect the subject matter of the inquiry rather than the discipline of the degree; hence that source was not used unless there was an actual abstract to read, which is often not the case for early dissertations. In any case, no claim is made here of the list used being absolutely exhaustive.
This dissertation is a short essay of only 32 pages that reads like an editorializing, almost sermonic, tract. It argues deductively, save for citing facts about poverty, crime, and suicide early on to make the case that social reform is needed. It cites Richard T. Ely approvingly and often, but references to Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner also appear. Pelton accepts Spencer and Sumner’s argument that evolution has produced the best society possible, but he disagrees with Spencer’s pessimism over the ability of humans to improve society through deliberate action.

Contemporary social unrest served as a point of departure for the discussion. Economic changes, the rise of democracy, and the spread of education contribute to social unrest, according to the author, and that unrest itself is testimony to the need for social reform. Despite poverty, unemployment, intemperance, crime, suicide, insanity, strikes, and financial crises, the present structure of society is on the whole successful. Attempting to overthrow the structure, as in the socialist program, is deemed impracticable and, while based in part on noble goals, is also based on covetousness. Thus the author calls for reform within the existing structure of society.

The church, he says, should be neither an advocate for the status quo nor for socialism. “Present progress demands an adherence to the main lines of the present order” (p. 17). But the church is and should be

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2 On the title page of his dissertation, Dewitt Lincoln Pelton (b. 1866) gave Adams as his address, in far north central New York State. He wrote his dissertation for the Ph.D. degree from New York University in 1895; it must have been considered something of an experiment since that was the same year that sociology was first taught there, by Arthur Burnham Woodford. Pelton was an Episcopal priest who was serving as an assistant at St. Thomas’ Church in Manhattan in 1904 when he accepted the pastorate of St. James, Fordham, in the Bronx; he held that post until 1934. He was married and had a son who served in World War I. According to an on-line history of St. James, the Rev. Pelton was described as a tall, thin, ascetic man, who in twenty minute Sunday discourses wended “his way through the learning of the ages to some belief, always in the present and over into the future.” He initiated major building projects for the church and was a world traveler whose talks about his travels, aided by stereopticon slides, were popular. He served as chaplain of the 8th Coast Guard Artillery, the New York National Guard, the Bronx campus of New York University, and as Grand Chaplain of the New York Grand Lodge. The Library of Congress lists one tract that he published at age 62 (Pelton 1928).