CHAPTER FIVE

THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF AMERICAN CATHOLICISM: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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More than fifty years ago, sociologist John Donavan (1954: 104), a member of what was then called the American Catholic Sociological Society, reflected on the sparse treatment of American Catholicism as a topic of research among sociologists of religion by commenting as follows on the narrow focus of extant research articles: “Their approach is problem centered and devoted to 3 areas: (1) Catholic immigrants and the practice of the faith . . . (2) the Catholic parish and parish problems . . . and (3) problems of external relations . . . [including] tensions with other groups.” Considering the time of his writing, and the minority status of Catholics both in American society and in the American Sociological Society (wisely renamed the American Sociological Association in 1959, as the era of acronyms emerged), it is not surprising that most of the research up to that point was problem focused. Catholics were, at the time, relatively new immigrants to the United States; they were still struggling to assimilate into American society, and although they were less frequently victims of the kinds of overt anti-Catholicism that characterized the nineteenth century, they still faced a variety of stereotypes that portrayed them as being of lower social class, anti-intellectual, and lacking aspirations for upward mobility.

Much has changed since those early days of the sociological investigation of American Catholicism. No longer are Catholics outside of the mainstream of American society or the sociological establishment, and the sociological study of Catholicism in the United States has expanded to cover a variety of topics beyond those that initially concerned the early pioneers in the field. The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on these changes in the sociology of American Catholicism by: (1) tracing the development of the sociological investigation of American Catholicism through its formative years from the 1930s to the early 1960s; (2) summarizing the major issue areas that have occupied the attention of sociologists of American Catholicism since the 1960s, when significant
changes occurred in the Church and in American society; and (3) pre-
senting what I regard as the most important and promising avenues of 
future research on the Catholic Church in America.

In order to make my presentation manageable, I have purposely 
limited my focus to research that has been conducted by social sci-
entists, primarily sociologists of religion, who employ social science 
research methods to investigate issues central to the religious life of 
the Catholic Church in the United States. This excludes journalistic 
accounts and social commentaries about American Catholicism, as 
well as the scholarly literature in the fields of history, law, philosophy, 
education, and so on pertaining to this topic. It also excludes writings 
of sociologists of religion when those writings do not rely on social 
science methodologies (which, when considering Andrew Greeley’s 
penchant for writing novels, narrows his writings considerably). I have 
also purposely omitted discussion of the extensive literature within 
other subfields of sociology that have examined issues peripheral to 
the central religious mission of the Church (e.g., the literature within 
sociology of education on the “Catholic school advantage,” which 
examines the effect of Catholic schooling on academic achievement).
My interest is really in the sociological investigation of the communal 
religious life of the Catholic Church in the United States, the social 
forces that have influenced that communal religious life, and the trends 
in the religious beliefs, values, practices, and identities of American 
Catholics. I begin by discussing the earliest pioneers in this field, the 
obstacles they faced in gaining legitimacy for the sociological study of 
American Catholicism, and how their research during the 1930s, ’40s 
and ’50s helped lay the foundation for the revival of the sociology of 
religion within the discipline of sociology during the 1960s.

Pioneers of the Sociological Investigation of American Catholicism and the 
Obstacles They Faced: The 1930s to Early 1960s

The earliest pioneers of the sociological study of American Catholicism 
were not always welcomed within the institutional spheres their lives and 
work bridged—the sociological establishment and the Catholic Church. 
Their lack of acceptance within the sociological establishment, it is fair 
to say, was largely due to their willingness to adopt a normative, Catho-
lic approach to their research, despite the insistence of many leaders 
in the profession that all sociologists be value-neutral. Their lack of