Christian Smith, a noted sociologist of religion at the University of Notre Dame, recently suggested that the sociology of religion suffers, despite itself, from an important weakness. In the hierarchy of the many and various fields of sociology, the sociology of religion would often be perceived as less serious, more subjective, and thus less suitable for delimiting the central axes and perspectives of general sociology (Smith et al. 2013). In this veritable manifesto, signed by several other eminent colleagues, José Casanova among them, Smith invites the community of researchers not only to redouble the rigor of studies of the religious and religions but also to reform their theoretical premises in order to understand better that these are working neither on an epiphenomenal object or for the success of a given religion. In its way and in another context, this discussion harkens back to another, older, one that aimed as much at rebranding the sociology of religion as a science—the discussion concerning the “metamorphosis” of the Congrès International de Sociologiedes Religions (CISR) in the 1970s (see Poulat 1990). It also echoes numerous discussions that took place in the circles of French Canadian sociology of religion, influenced, as we will see, by a religious sociology often conceived as a stimulus to pastoral work and as a servant the Church (see Doyon 1960).

Then as now, it seems that the issue of scientific legitimacy traversed and still traverses the field. Quebec was no exception—on the contrary. It is as if the national history of the sociology of religion of French Canada can be read as a long evacuation from the clerical universe and a progressive establishment of autonomy for the field of the study of religious phenomena—despite all privileging of the study of Catholicism. In French Canada, it will be understood that this discussion goes beyond the narrow issue of what constitutes “science.” It wedds it to the nascent modernity that has been as much founded over the ruins of Catholic tradition as because of it. This complicates the task of the historian.

As in other cases, the progress of the sociology of religion is marked by its historical, social and religious context. That of post-World War II French
Canada is at the same time marked by that of the United States, where industrialization, urbanization and secularization provide a general tone. But the French Canadian context is also very unique.\(^1\) A French-speaking society in North America, French Canada is the only majority Catholic nation in the former British America. Retaining its own culture after the English colonization at the end of the eighteenth century, the province of Quebec, then called Lower Canada and later French Canada, preserved a relative autonomy in language, law and religion.\(^2\) Meanwhile the English conquest shattered the social hierarchy of the former New France, above all transforming the apex of this society—particularly its military, political and economic elite. This chance historical happening would confer an unanticipated role upon a Church that remained in place. This type of colonization thus placed the diocesan clergy in the position of principal spokespersons for the French Canadian society before the conquering English.\(^3\) From a status of one actor among others in New France, the Church thus quickly became the privileged interlocutor with the British Crown grappling with a bourgeoisie that was supplanting the hereditary aristocracy. This new position led to playing a transitional role at the core of civil society. Hospitals, asylums, nurseries, academies, technical schools, and universities gradually became the responsibility of the secular clergy and new masculine and feminine religious communities that were recently founded or imported from Europe (Rousseau 2005).

After 1840, thanks notably to the work of the second bishop of Montreal, Msgr. Bourget, French Canada experienced a sort of religious revival that consolidated the position of the Church in the major institutions that established the social context (Rousseau and Remiggi 1998). In command of the French Canadian society, the Catholic Church recruited vocations without much problem. In fact, the religious vocation was wedded to various important social responsibilities, and its prestige grew to the extent that the establishment of the clerical context defined the principal institutions of French Canada. Thus a remarkable increase of the total of religious personnel per 1,000 inhabitants is reported to go from 5.9 in 1890 to 13.1 in 1931—a total that would remain almost unchanged up to 1961. There would be 47,128 diocesan and regular clergy and

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1 For a more complete historical account, see Meunier and Nault (2014).
2 On the British colonial policy of indirect rule, see H. Guindon (1990).
3 Stewardship and its political and economic aftermath returned rapidly to Europe. We add that some religious communities (above all the masculine communities, such as the Jesuits) were summoned back to Europe. A recent publication on the Franciscan Recollects seems to relativize this conclusion, however. They continued to exist and act, as did the Sulpicians, without having to assume the position of diocesan clergy (Galland 2012).