Introduction: Pastoral Sociology in Western Europe, 1940–1970

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From the 1940s onwards, Catholic and Protestant clergy in Western Europe increasingly found themselves exposed to cartograms, graphs, and tables with socio-religious data about church life at local, regional, national, and even international levels. Although religious statistics had a long prehistory, the scale on which they were collected as well as the graphic means of representation favoured by mid-twentieth-century sociologists of religion was perceived as ‘new’ and ‘modern’. The spread of graphs and cartograms reflected the growing influence exerted by sociologists of religion within the churches. These ‘pastoral sociologists’, as they were called at the time, did not come from ‘outside’ but were often employed from ‘within’, by church agencies that felt a need for ‘empirical’ reorientation in the perplexing years following World War II. By the 1960s, the field of ‘pastoral sociology’ had achieved a solid position in the
'pastoral field,' as one might call it with a nod to Pierre Bourdieu. A considerable number of parish priests and pastors had arrived at the conclusion that it was necessary not only to tell people how to practice their religion, but also to investigate what religion actually meant to people. Consequently, sociological inquiry became a major source of inspiration and legitimation for reform-oriented clergy. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), for instance, explicitly encouraged Catholics across the globe to embrace sociological techniques to come to terms with socio-religious change.

Despite these high expectations, pastoral sociology and its role within the postwar churches have not received a great deal of scholarly attention. This neglect can easily be explained. For one thing, the emergence and development of pastoral sociology hardly fit the disciplinary genealogies cherished by professional sociologists. In most cases, these genealogies are narratives of continuity and progress which move from the rise of social surveys in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (via the founding fathers of the social sciences around 1880 and the ‘classical era’ from the 1890s to the 1910s) to the ‘professionalization’ of the field in the decades after 1945. Against this historiographical background, pastoral sociology seemed to be little more than a quasi-amateurish type of research conducted for, on behalf of, and by the churches. Typical is the response by Jacques van Doorn, a leading Dutch sociologist, who contrasted his own ‘modernity’ in the second half of the 1950s to the ‘bias’ and ‘subjectivity’ of pastoral sociology as practiced in confessional sociological institutes as the Catholic Socio-Ecclesiastical Institute (Katholiek Sociaal-Kerkelijk Instituut).3

Historians of theology have hardly shown more interest in pastoral sociology. Although practical theologians like Norbert Greinacher in Germany were not afraid of adopting sociological categories, sociology primarily seemed to serve as theology’s ‘other.’ Whereas sociologists typically justified their growing influence in the pastoral field with sharp dichotomies between sociology and

