
Sociology of Religion Section

Spring 2003 Newsletter, Vol.IX No.3

<http://www.asanet.org/section34/>

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American Sociological Association

From the Chair

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It is my great pleasure in this brief note to cordially invite all of you to attend the religion section reception during the ASA meetings in Atlanta. As in previous years, we will hold a joint reception with the Association for the Sociology of Religion. The reception is scheduled for Saturday evening (August 16th); please check the final ASA program for the reception time and location. The reception is a wonderful and spirited social gathering and provides us with a great opportunity to renew acquaintances and friendships as well as to meet new people. Please feel welcome to bring along a colleague and especially any graduate students who are discovering the joys of the profession. We also, of course, use the reception to announce and honor the winners of our best book, **article**, and student paper awards. The respective award committees have been working very hard in assessing the submissions and I look forward to congratulating the award recipients. The Atlanta meetings promise to be very rewarding intellectually: in addition to the section and regular religion sessions (see listings elsewhere in this newsletter), the conference program as a whole has several other panels that should be engaging for sociologists interested in religion. Our section day is Sunday, August 17th, and that is when we will have our section's open business meeting, so please come and share your views on the state of the section. Onward to Atlanta!

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Featured Article

Bishops' Political Influence and the Catholic Watergate

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(Adapted from an essay appearing in the May 20, 2003 issue of *Commonweal* magazine.)

There was no bigger story in American religion last year than the scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. The sexual abuse of children by priests and the failure of bishops to address the problem has been called the 'Catholic Watergate' by observers across the theological spectrum. According to George Weigel of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, 'In the first months of 2002, the Catholic Church in the United States entered the greatest crisis in its **history**' (George Weigel, *The Courage to be Catholic: Crisis, Reform, and the Future of the Church* New York: Basic Books, 2002, p. 1.).

Although it is too early to assess fully the consequences of this crisis, sociologists ought to be attuned to a number of areas of concern regarding the largest religious denomination in America. Will the scandal affect the recruitment and retention of priests, or the very structure of the Catholic **priesthood**? Or the willingness of lay Catholics to give their money or time to the church? Or the relationships between bishops, priests, and the laity? Will it lead to a schism in the church, to the founding of an American Catholic Church independent of Rome? Or might the scandal pass without any major **transformation** in church structure and practice?

Beyond internal church matters is the question of the consequences of the Scandal for the public **role** of the church. As a result of the social mobility of individual Catholics and the **aggiornamento** effected within the church by Vatican II, Roman Catholicism has moved **closer** the center of American life in the last forty years than it has ever been. The publication of **two** pastoral letters by the American bishops in the 1980s—*The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response* (1983) and *Economic Justice for All* (1986)—solidified their new position as the most important **religious** voice in American public life.

Just prior to the **publication** of the *Boston Globe's* spotlight investigation in January 2002, I began a national study of the bishops' role in state-level politics. By the time I arrived in **Charlottesville** last August to work on my book, the idea that the **bishops would** even have a political role seemed dubious. The Catholic Watergate threatened to turn my contemporary sociological study into a work of history or, perhaps, fiction.

But a funny thing happened in the course of my research. I found that—even in the wake of the scandal—the bishops could claim victories in every state in which they sought to influence public policy. To take but one example, last fall the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference led the successful

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effort to pass a Religious Freedom Protection Act. This despite the fact that the ACLU of **Pennsylvania** tried to play "the scandal card" during the debate by accusing the church of advocating the legislation in order to shield pedophile priests from legal accountability.

In understanding how the bishops remained politically viable through the 'Long Lent of 2002,' a little sociology goes a long way. My explanation centers on the **structure** of State Catholic Conferences (SCCs) and their multiple bases of political influence.

Part of the problem in understanding the bishops' political advocacy is that not much is known about SCCs. Even the best studies of the bishops' political involvement (e.g., Gene Burns's *The Frontiers of Catholicism* and Jose Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World*) focus exclusively on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). But many of the most important public policies today (on abortion, welfare, capital punishment, etc.) are made by the states. Most SCCs were founded immediately following Vatican II, predating this "new federalism." They are, therefore, **well-positioned** to engage the issues that have devolved to the states.

Like the USCCB, SCCs appear from the outside to be unitary organizational structures. Sociologically, however, it is useful to **see them** as dual structures. I owe the concept of dual structures to Mark Chaves, who observes that many religious denominations are constituted by **two** parallel organizational structures: a religious authority structure and an agency structure" (Mark Chaves, "Intraorganizational Power and Internal Secularization in Protestant Denominations," *American Journal of Sociology* 99:1 (July 1993)). The primary function of the religious authority structure is to control access to religious goods (e.g., the means of salvation). Thus, although the church properly seeks to engage the world, the **raison d'être** of the hierarchy is internal.

The external **face** of the church is organizationally expressed in agency structures. As the name suggests, agency structures "function as the agents of the religious authority structure in the secular world" (Mark Chaves, "Denominations as Dual Structures: An Organizational Analysis," *Sociology of Religion* 54:2 (1993):146-169). Examples **include** missions, social services, publishing and, of course, political lobbying.

Questions about the declining political influence of the **bishops** during the scandal have focused exclusively on the church's religious authority structure. But the primary vehicle of the bishops' influence at the state-level is a dual structure. As agency structures, SCCs have bases of **political** influence that are independent of the moral authority of the bishops and, therefore, an ability to continue acting effectively in the political arena through the crisis.

There are at least three bases of influence that SCCs as agency structures draw upon in their political advocacy: **grassroots** mobilization, Catholic institutions, and political credibility. I will touch on each very briefly.

(1) **Grassroots mobilization.** When I interviewed him recently, Richard Daly of the Texas Catholic Conference told me, "This is a big institution, the Catholic Church. I always use the phrase with the members [of the legislature], 'We have a branch office in every part of your district.' There's hardly a community of any size that doesn't have some Catholic presence. We're **everywhere**." Although not all SCCs utilize these branch offices for **grassroots** mobilization to influence public policy, many do and at times do so effectively. A recent example was a letter writing campaign in New Jersey, orchestrated in part by the New Jersey Catholic Conference, which led to the withdrawal of a stem cell research bill that was expected to sail through the legislature this session (Newark Star-Ledger, 11 February 2003).

(2) **Catholic institutions.** Beyond individual Catholics, the Church has a massive institutional presence in the United States. This includes 1,110 hospitals and health care facilities serving 78,000,000+ individuals, 1,085 residential care facilities serving 415,000+ individuals, and 1,406 Catholic Charities USA-affiliated social service agencies serving 10,600,000+ individuals (Bryan Froehle and Mary Gautier, *Catholicism USA: A Portrait of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books,

2000).

When SCCs speak to public policy, particularly in the area of health and human services, they often do so on behalf of or with the support of these institutions. The Church's tangible history of fulfilling the biblical mandate to **feed** the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the **ill** is a storehouse of legitimacy that SCCs can draw on in their advocacy work—certainly in good times, but perhaps especially in bad times.

For example, when they bring Catholic prison chaplains to the capital, the Connecticut Catholic Conference is able to speak legitimately to criminal justice even if the bishops of Connecticut are under criminal investigation **themselves**.

(3) **Political credibility.** A third source of influence is the political credibility that comes from having relationships with policy makers, providing them useful information, and telling the truth.

Consider, for example, the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference. The executive director, Robert O'Hara, previously worked for 19 years as the director of state government affairs for a local utility in Pennsylvania. As he explains his situation, "The guy who I followed was a bit of a legend. People knew him. He had a good reputation. And I was pretty well-known, too. After 19 years, people know you." O'Hara continues, "We're still only armed with a handshake and a smile around here. But credibility over time means more than just about anything because people get to know you. They may not agree with you, but they don't think you're going to lie to **them**."

Relationships take time, and so the longevity of SCC directors is a great advantage. Even with a number of new hires recently, the average tenure of directors is nearly a decade. And among new hires, there has been a clear trend toward bolstering credibility by picking individuals who already have experience in state government.

This extensive experience is then put into action in the practice of lobbying. Hollywood images of influence peddlers in Gucci loafers doling out money to politicians aside, "the major currency lobbyists pedal today is information" (Dennis Dresang and James Gosling, *Politics and Policy in American States and Communities* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996)). As society has grown more complex and the political responsibilities of state legislatures have increased, legislators rely more and more on interest groups to supply them with the information they need to make policy decisions.

The centrality of information peddling in the legislative process suits SCCs well. As 501(c)(3) organizations, they cannot play the campaign finance and candidate endorsement game. Because information is their main currency, SCC directors frequently tie their credibility to their reputations for "telling the truth." The experience of Robert O'Hara, the former utility lobbyist in Pennsylvania, is typical. "When I first started working for [the utility], I was told that the most important thing you've got up here is your credibility and don't ever lose it. The best way to maintain your credibility is to tell the truth." Some bishops may be suspect in this respect in the wake of the scandal, but this does not directly impugn the reputation of SCC directors like O'Hara.

Understanding SCCs as dual structures helps us to see why the **bishops'** political influence is not wholly dependent on their moral authority. Whether it is desirable for SCCs to have bases of political legitimacy independent of the moral authority of their bishops is, of course, another matter. The fact is, they do, and discussions of the political implications of the scandal ought to recognize this.

Many of the most important questions about the consequences of the scandal are empirical ones, ones which sociologists of religion are well-suited to help answer. While Catholics have done a lot of hand-wringing over the scandal, I hope sociologists will use this historic moment as an opportunity for some hard-nosed empirical analysis and application of the sociological imagination to one of the major institutions in this society. We may be surprised by what we find. I know I was.