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Where Angels Fear to Tread: Richard Schoenherr (1935–1996)

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Richard Schoenherr, professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, passed away unexpectedly on 9 January 1996. He is **memorialized** in this essay for his scholarly contributions in the areas of teaching, research, and service.

As students of Richard A. Schoenherr at the University of **Wisconsin—Madison**, among the first lessons we were taught was that, especially with respect to engaging the world of religion, "sociologists go where angels fear to tread." Schoenherr's life and work exemplified this maxim until his sudden death of a **heart** attack in his Madison home on 9 January 1996, two days before his 61st birthday.

Schoenherr was born 11 January 1935, in Center Line, Michigan and went on to earn degrees in Philosophy and Theology at Sacred Heart and Saint John's seminaries in Michigan. In 1961, he was ordained a priest in the Archdiocese of Detroit, serving three years as an associate pastor in Pontiac. In 1964, John Cardinal **Dearden** sent him to the University of Chicago to study sociology so that he could teach in the seminary. Instead, after completing his **Ph.D.** in 1970, he joined the **UW** faculty in 1971, where he remained for twenty-five years.

At Chicago, Schoenherr collaborated on two projects which were foundational to his perspective and substantive interests throughout his career. With Peter Blau he theorized and studied complex organizations, and with Andrew Greeley he began his empirical studies of the Catholic priesthood. From 1966–1969, he was a senior research assistant at the Comparative Organization Research Program (**CORP**) and project co-director for the Employment Security Agency Study headed by Blau, who supervised his dissertation, "Task Requirements and Organizational Structure: A Comparative Study of Functional Divi-

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stions." From 1969 to 1971, Schoenherr worked as associate and then senior study director at the National **Opinion** Research Center (NORC) on the first comprehensive study of the sociology of the American Catholic priesthood, *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Sociological Investigations* (1972). His interests in organizations and the sociology of religion fit together snugly because he recognized the Catholic Church as one of the most powerful complex organizations.

More personally, and perhaps more significantly, Schoenherr's time at Chicago (1964-1971) coincided with a time of great ferment in the Catholic Church in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. Schoenherr had an enduring interest in the discipline of priestly celibacy and its **place** in the Church. At Chicago, this interest developed, both intellectually and personally. Not only was the NORC priest study centrally concerned with the issue, but in the autumn of 1970, he ("naively," as he later described it) asked Archbishop **Dearden** of Detroit for a dispensation from the obligations of Holy Orders to marry Judith Woods. Schoenherr had planned to publish the priest survey report in March 1971 and be married late that spring or early summer. As he recounts in the Acknowledgments to his forthcoming book, *Goodbye Fatber*, "The plan blew up in my face...when Cardinal **Dearden** commanded me then and there to cease functioning as a priest. Furthermore, he said I would have to be dropped as study director of the priest survey," which the National Conference of Catholic Bishops had funded. Though he married in December 1970 and was kept on as study director to the end, the events that followed inflicted a wound which never fully healed.

Because of his resignation from the priesthood, the U.S. Catholic Conference (**USCC**) removed his name as co-author of the final report, *The Catholic Priest in the United States*. In response, Greeley countered that if Schoenherr would not be on the by-line, neither should he since they were co-contributors to the final product; corporate authorship should instead be **given** to NORC. But in the end, for reasons unknown to Schoenherr, the book was published with Greeley as its sole author. Nonplussed, Greeley wrote an open letter to Cardinal John Krol published in *America*, a widely read Catholic weekly magazine, reasserting Schoenherr's co-authorship. He also extracted a promise from the USCC that each copy of the book would include an erratum insert—noting the mistake in the authorship. Unfortunately, as Schoenherr later lamented, "No one noticed it."

Despite the shock and disappointment of this incident, Schoenherr deepened his commitment to the vocation of scholarship, broadly understood to include service, teaching, and research (Boyer 1990). His contributions in each area were significant.

Service

Although he resigned from the active priesthood in 1970, Schoenherr never ceased to minister to the many academic and faith communities in which he lived and worked. He was an active member of the St. Paul University Catholic

Center at UW-Madison, especially its community meal program. He shared his social scientific wisdom with the broader public as a frequent speaker and media commentator on topics such as Catholic identity, the eucharist, New Age religion, new religious movements, and of course, the priest shortage and priestly celibacy. Not long before his death he was a featured speaker at the annual conference of the Church reform organization, Call to Action.

Professionally, Schoenherr served for a number of years in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the Treasurer of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and on the Council of the Association for the Sociology of Religion. He also spent a decade in the dean's office at **UW-Madison**, serving as both assistant dean (1978-83) and associate dean (1983-88) for the College of Letters and Sciences.

But **his** service to the academic community was not limited to institutional positions. He touched many on an individual level as well. Although he had fewer graduate student advisees than many of the **UW-Madison** faculty, those who did have the good fortune to cross paths with him were typically affected very profoundly. Several of his students spoke to this effect at his funeral, as did the first author of this essay: "In all of my interactions with him, I never felt that Richard saw me only or even primarily as a student. He dealt with me first and foremost as a person, a rare experience in graduate school. For those who see higher education as a moral enterprise, dedicated to the cultivation of persons and not just minds, the heart of the University of Wisconsin is smaller without Richard Schoenherr."⁹

Teaching

For years Schoenherr was *the* sociologist of religion at **UW-Madison**, one man in a department of fifty. While this isolated him somewhat, it also freed him to pursue a truly unique vision of the sociology of religion as a field of inquiry. His presentation of the sociology of religion in the introductory course he regularly taught was *non-reductionist* (in the spirit of Robert Bellah [1970]) and *experience-centered*. While it is increasingly recognized among sociologists that the experiential is an important dimension of religion (Yamane & Polzer 1994), Schoenherr had to go outside of the discipline for the intellectual resources necessary to argue that religious experience is the *core* of religion. He turned to what can loosely be called "the phenomenology of religion." The heart of the class as Schoenherr taught it was a series of readings and lectures on the experiential core of religion which built on work by theologians (Rudolf Otto and Martin Buber), historians (Mircea Eliade), philosophers (Gerardus van der Leeuv) and psychologists (Abraham Maslow and Ken Wilber). Sociologists were noticeably absent.

His desire to understand **the** phenomenology of religion, however, did not come at the expense of his interest in the social scientific study of religion, an enterprise to which he was equally committed. Thoroughly versed in the classics and tirelessly up to date on current trends in the field, he took time to

ensure that graduate students in his courses were adequately socialized into the profession. But the true beauty of his teaching was seeing the handful of students each semester who came away from his course with a new vocabulary for understanding their own religious experiences. In a secular university in which religious perspectives on human life are almost wholly excluded (Marsden 1994), Schoenherr offered students an alternative. Deeply rooted in the Catholic campus parish and St. Benedict's ecumenical faith community in Madison, Schoenherr encouraged others to search for understanding in religious forms of the East and West, in contemporary and ancient spiritual traditions, in majority and in minority faiths, and especially in the mysticism that transcends specific religious institutions. Selena Fox, priestess of a **Neo-Pagan** group in Madison, characterizes Schoenherr's vision of religion (and, indeed, of **life**) as holistic: *interdisciplinary, interfaith, international, and multicultural."Students responded to his unique approach by seeking him out from all over the UW campus.

Research

Of course, "scholarship" is less commonly associated with teaching and service than with "research," and Schoenherr's contributions here were considerable as well. His first major work was the standard in the sociology of organizations, *The Structure of Organizations* (1971), written with Peter Blau, which was nominated for the **ASA's** Sorokin Award in 1972. Later, in nominating him for the **ASA's** Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award in 1995, Schoenherr acknowledged the extent of his debt to Blau: "If emulation is the highest compliment paid those we admire, that is the compliment I try to pay him. Anyone who knows the field can see Peter's influence in my work, something I am proud to claim."

UW-Madison is well known for its rugged empiricism, and this orientation suited Schoenherr's disposition well. Data always mattered very much to him, and he was as cautious and methodical in collecting them as anyone. In fact, his practice of pursuing uncompromisingly rigorous research was even criticized by Andrew Greeley in his autobiographical *Confessions of a Parish Priest* (1987), where Greeley wrote of Schoenherr's work habits: "Unfortunately, he was and is a slow, cautious and methodical worker, the kind of man who produces good research but only after many years" (p. 325). In a field overrun with hurried and inconsequential studies, Schoenherr's patience was indeed counter-cultural; what Greeley saw as a liability, the rest of us should recognize as a virtue.

Although he was trained as and always remained an organizational sociologist, Schoenherr's post-doctorate academic career was centered in the sociology of religion and distinguished by a devotion to studying the Church he loved. With Greeley, he developed a causal model of resignations from the priesthood, most fully presented in the 1972 NORC study. He later collaborated with others in exploring status attainment in the clergy before turning his attention back to the growing concern over the declining number of priests in the American Church. His empirical work on this issue culminated in a 1993 book, written with his

student Lawrence Young, *Full Pews and Empty Altars: Demographics of the Priest Shortage in United States Catholic Dioceses*, In a benchmark analysis, Schoenherr and Young documented what everyone had suspected: that there had been a major decline in the active U.S. diocesan priest population since the 1960s and there was no evidence for a reversal of the trend in the near future. Based on a longitudinal census registry they constructed for some 35,000 clergy in 86 Catholic dioceses, Schoenherr and Young reported a 15 percent decline in the number of active priests between 1966 and 1984. Moreover, based on their analysis of ordination rates, net migrations, resignations, retirements, and deaths, they forecast a 40 percent decline from the 1966 level by 2005. This at the same time the number of lay Catholics was steadily increasing, creating an ever widening gap in parish churches between the "full pews and empty altars."

While the data presented in *Full Pews* has never been disputed by social scientists, the future projections and conclusions drawn from those data drew scorn from some in the Church hierarchy, reopening the wounds Schoenherr suffered twenty years earlier in his study with Greeley. His research was castigated by a Cardinal of the Church who said of a prepublication report, "I reject [the study's] pessimistic assessment and feel that the Catholic church has been done a great disservice by the...report... The study presumes that the only factors at work are sociology and statistical research. That is nonsense... Our future is shaped by God's design for his church—not by sociologists" (Mahony 1990). As a consequence of such criticisms and other more direct interventions, Schoenherr was, as he put it, "blacklisted" and left unable to secure additional funding to follow up the projections made in *Full Pews*.

While *Full Pews and Empty Altars* reinforced Schoenherr's reputation as the "sociologist who studied priests" (*New York Times* obituary, 11 January 1996), for years he was busily cobbling together a broader understanding of the importance of the declining priesthood population. The trend so meticulously documented in *Full Pews* was, for Schoenherr, the pivotal piece in a much larger puzzle **being** worked out in the Catholic Church and, indeed, in society generally, a puzzle he finally completed not long before his death.

At the time of his death, Schoenherr was copy-editing his *magnum opus*—*Goodbye Father: Celibacy and Patriarchy in the Catholic Church* (to be published by Oxford University Press)—the fruit of his lifetime of participation in and research on the Roman Catholic Church. This companion to *Full Pews and Empty Altars* provides the theoretical context in which to understand the organizational demography of the Catholic Church in the United States. The full argument of *Goodbye Father* in all its complexity and nuance cannot be presented here. We can say that it should be of interest not only to sociologists of religion but to all sociologists who would like to see what a creative and passionate, critical and engaged, nonparochial sociology might look like.

Goodbye Father will stand as the definitive statement of Schoenherr's theoretical, empirical, and personal understanding of the Church as a complex organization similar to others in an organizational society, but also unique *sui generis* because it "deals explicitly with ultimate reality which transcends ordinary space

and time" and "is the sacramental means of human fulfillment, a way to unite consciousness of Absolute Being." In viewing the Church in this way, Schoenherr combined his seminary training in theology, his primary sociological training as an organizational analyst, and his more recent forays into phenomenology of religion and transpersonal psychology in a way that is truly unique to his work. In the Acknowledgments, Schoenherr presents an intellectual autobiography which names the many thinkers **who** influenced his work, a diverse collection of individuals rarely spoken of in the same breath: Max Weber, Peter **Blau**, Charles **Perrow**, and Howard **Aldrich** on organizations; Robert **Bellah**, Clifford Geertz, Thomas **O'Dea**, Peter **Berger**, and Rodney Stark on the sociology of religion; Otto, Buber, and **Eliade** on the experience of the sacred; philosopher Paul **Ricoeur** on hermeneutical analysis; feminist scholars Rosemary Reuther, Carol Christ, Starhawk, Elaine Pages, Daphne Hampson, Sandra Schneiders, and **Gerda** Lerner on patriarchy and religion; Abraham **Maslow** and Ken Wilber on transpersonal psychology. Not a standard intellectual heritage for a sociologist, but Richard Schoenherr would not and could not be confined by disciplinary boundaries or conventional wisdom, being drawn instead to where angels fear to tread.

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Appendix

Selected Major Publications: Richard Schoenherr

1971. *The Structure of Organizations*, with Peter Blau. New York: Basic Books.
1972. *The Catholic Priest in the United States: Sociological Investigations*, with Andrew Greeley. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.
1974. "Role Commitment Processes and the American Catholic Priesthood," with Andrew Greeley. *American Sociological Review* **39:407-26**.
1982. "Social Change in Religious Organizations: Consequences of Clergy Decline in the U.S. Catholic Church," with **Annemette** Sorensen. *Sociological Analysis* **43:23-52**.
1987. "Power and Authority in Organized Religion: **Disaggregating** the Phenomenological Core." *Sociological Analysis* **47:52-71**.
1988. "Demographic Transitions in Religious Organizations: A Comparative Study of Priest Decline in Roman Catholic Dioceses," with Lawrence Young and Jose Perez Vilarino. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* **27:499-523**.
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