UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Saint Peter's Leaky Boat: Falling Intergenerational Persistence among U.S.-Born Catholics since 1974

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5m25t61z>

Journal

Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review, 77(1)

ISSN

1069-4404

Author

Hout, M

Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.1093/socrel/srv057

Peer reviewed

2015 Paul Hanly Furfey Lecture

Saint Peter's Leaky Boat: Falling Intergenerational Persistence among U.S.-Born Catholics since 1974

Michael Hout*

New York University

Since the 1950s, one-of-four American adults has been a Catholic. That constant fraction hides substantial change. Higher fertility, more immigrants, and a relatively young age distribution implies growth, not stasis. The demographic advantage is reflected in the growing fraction of adults who were raised Catholic. The fraction raised Catholic exceeded one-of-three Americans in recent years. The difference between one-of-four and one-of-three means substantial defection. More than ever, people raised Catholic are leaving; most drop out of organized religion altogether. Measures of core beliefs and strength of identity changed less, overall, implying that it was inactive and weakly identified Catholics who left. Identities, beliefs, and practices among millennials with no religious preference, but Catholic roots underscore the degree to which changes are rooted in disaffection with organized religion. Among people who were raised Catholic, the traditional sexual ethic continued to erode, but papal authority has not changed across recent cohorts.

Key words: Catholicism; demography; beliefs; attendance.

The Catholic share of the population is among the most boring statistics in the annals of population data. Every survey in the last 60 years puts the Catholic share of the population right around one-fourth. The most recent General Social Survey (GSS) reports that 25 percent of Americans are Catholic (Smith et al. 2015).¹ Stark and Glock (1968) found 26 percent Catholic in the first national estimate

*Direct correspondence to Michael Hout, New York University, New York, NY, USA. E-mail: mikehout@nyu.edu.

¹The weighted percentage is 25 percent; the unweighted percentage is 24 percent; the weights correct for the way the GSS handles nonresponse in the first round of each year's survey so weighted percentages are better estimates of population percentages than unweighted ones are. I assume that the GSS is well known, but I include a small data Appendix,

from a NORC study in 1964. As early as 1952, Gallup reported that 25 percent of American adults they polled were Catholic (Gallup 2015). All the published estimates from 1952 to 2014 I could find were between 24 and 28 percent.

Yet just below that placid surface, strong currents stir the waters. Catholic demography implies growth, not stability. Catholic women bear more children;² more immigrants come from Catholic countries than elsewhere.³ Unless Catholics die younger than others (and the few estimates we have of mortality by religion suggest the opposite [Hummer et al. 2004]), above-average fertility and high immigration imply growth. The Catholic population ought to be growing faster than the U.S. population on the whole, and the percentage Catholic among American adults ought to be rising instead of flat.

The demographic current shows itself in the percentage of Americans who report being raised Catholic. In the most recent data, almost 36 percent of American adults said they were raised Catholic, significantly more than the 27 percent observed in 1984. The GSS began asking “What religion were you raised in?” in 1974. From that first year until 1988, the percentage raised Catholic averaged 28 percent, just 2 percentage points above the percent Catholic (which averaged 26 percent 1974–1988). In 1989, the gap between the percentages raised Catholic and currently Catholic edged up to 3 percentage points, and it has grown ever since, with no sign of slowing, to just over 10 percentage points in the most recent data. Figure 1 shows the two trends year-by-year (raw and smoothed percentages). The smoothed time line for percentage *currently* Catholic is essentially flat (the slight downward tilt is not statistically significant); the percentage *raised* Catholic started upward in the late 1980s and continued to climb through the most recent survey, passing one-third between 2010 and 2012 and reaching 36 percent by 2014.⁴

The gap between currently and raised Catholic began to grow at the same time that the percentage of Americans with no religious preference began rising (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014). This is not a coincidence. About half of the people who were raised Catholic but were not currently Catholic at the time of interview had no current religious preference, roughly one-quarter were conservative Protestants, and a quarter had some other religion.⁵ In the 1970s and

highlighting the main features relevant to this analysis. The full codebook is online (Smith et al. 2015).

²Birth statistics do not record mother’s religion; this is my own calculation from the GSS data.

³Asian immigration might have surpassed immigration from Latin America in the last four or five years (Pew Research 2015), but that is a very recent change in the flow of immigration. The stock of foreign-born Americans is still predominantly from Catholic countries.

⁴Here and elsewhere I round percentages independently, yielding some odd-looking details like 25 percent being 10 percentage points less than 36 percent. Carried to more decimal places, the numbers are 25.38 percent currently Catholic and 35.59 percent raised Catholic, a difference of 10.21 percentage points.

⁵These fractions are based on my calculations from the pooled 2012–2014 GSSs. The exact percentages are 49 percent no preference, 28 percent conservative Protestant, and

FIGURE 1. Percentage Currently Catholic and Raised Catholic by Year: Adults, 1972–2014. *Note:* Dots show the original data; lines show the smoothed trends. Data smoothed by locally estimated regression. Data weighted to correct for sampling design changes and follow-up of initial nonrespondents. Religious origin was not asked in 1972. *Source:* Author's calculations from the General Social Surveys 1972–2014 (Smith et al. 2015).

1980s, most former Catholics switched to Protestant denominations. Pooling all the GSSs from 1973 to 1987, 51 percent of former Catholics were currently Protestant, and former Catholics switched to mainline Protestant denominations at twice the rate they switched to conservative ones (34 percent compared with 17 percent).

STRENGTH OF IDENTIFICATION ACROSS COHORTS

Catholics increasingly described themselves as “not strong” in their attachment to Catholicism over the last decade (Schwadel 2013).⁶ Overall, religious strength changed little among Americans, even as the percentage with no religious preference rose, so the Catholics stood out in his analysis.

Figure 2 shows the trends in religious preference, religious upbringing, and religious strength as they combined for people who were either Catholic or were Catholic at the time of interview by year, from when strength was first asked in 1974 to the most recent survey in 2014. The zero-point part-way up the vertical

23 percent other. I report rough fractions in the text because the estimates have margins of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

⁶His source, like mine, was the GSS. The exact question in the GSS is “Would you call yourself a strong X or a not very strong X?” (where the GSS interviewer inserts the answer to the religious preference question for X).

FIGURE 2. Catholic Share of the Total Population by Year, Strength of Current Religion and Religious Origin: Adults, 1974–2014. *Notes:* Percentages above the zero line indicate strength of Catholic preference; percentages below the zero line indicate the strength of new preference or no religious preference among persons raised Catholic. Data smoothed by locally estimated regression. *Source:* Author's calculations from the General Social Surveys, 1974–2014.

axis divides the current from the former Catholics. As in figure 1, the percentage currently Catholic changed little, so the area above zero changed little over time (the downward trend was too slight to be statistically significant). Current Catholics did not describe themselves as “strong” as often in recent years as they used to; the decreased strength of attachment that Schwadel (2013) documented shows up here as a narrowing of the dark gray band and the spreading light gray band. The former-Catholic population grew sharply, as shown here by the growing wedge below the zero-point on the vertical axis. All three formerly Catholic groups got larger after 1988. Defection to no religious preference grew most, but switching, with or without strong attachment to the new religion, increased, too.

Figure 3 takes the cohort perspective on the same phenomenon. This view amplifies all the changes visible from the period perspective. Although we cannot hope to separate age, period, and cohort effects, the cohort data are interesting for their strong trends even if they are not purely cohort trends. Among Americans born 1905–1924, 27 percent were raised Catholic; slightly more left than were converted. But even in these cohorts, strength of Catholic attachment waned. After the 1925 cohort, defection grew, accelerating for cohorts born since 1975. Among baby boomers, born 1945–1964, there was a significant segment of former Catholics who were strongly attached to their new religion. Many were divorced Catholics who wanted to remarry but could not do so in the Catholic Church (Hout 2000). Increasingly, though, it is the people with no religious preference—the “nones”—who are the most numerous former Catholics.

FIGURE 3. Catholic Share of the Total Population by Year of Birth, Strength of Current Religion, and Religious Origin: Adults, 1974–2014. *Notes:* Percentages above the zero line indicate strength of Catholic preference; percentages below the zero line indicate the strength of new preference or no religious preference among persons raised Catholic. Data smoothed by locally estimated regression. Labels for subgroups centered above the average year of birth for that subgroup. *Source:* Author's calculations from the General Social Surveys, 1974–2014.

We understand the “rise of the nones” to be a combination of politically motivated period effects and value-driven cohort effects (Hout and Fischer 2014). Catholics who held liberal or moderate political views distanced themselves from the bishops’ stances regarding abortion, marriage, and other social issues by stating no religious preference *if they were not active in the church*. Active Catholics who held similarly liberal or moderate political views tended to continue to identify as Catholic and advocate for change in the church (Dillon 1999). They are also increasingly skeptical of authority, eroding the teaching authority of the hierarchy in succeeding cohorts (Alwin 1990; Greeley 1977; Hout and Fischer 2014). This part of the change is less-well understood. We noted that trends first identified by Alwin (1990) continued through recent GSSs. We also confirmed (and extended) Alwin’s conclusion that the new orientation toward independent thought (at the expense of obedience to authority) was mostly a cohort phenomenon. We linked it to a crisis in religious authority first identified by Greeley (1977). First with respect to birth control, then for other matters of what he called “sexual orthodoxy” (Greeley 1977; Hout and Greeley 1987), Americans in general and American Catholics in particular were coming to their own conclusions about the implications of faith for daily life. They were not going their own way with respect to salvation, dogma, or tradition. But they increasingly kept their own counsel with respect to private matters. They mixed the church’s position in with other views, and arrived at conclusions.

More recent cohorts—especially the so-called millennials who reached adulthood after 2000—are detached, not only from organized religion, but from most social institutions. They are marrying later than older cohorts did, their work takes the form of loosely coupled “gigs” as they have trouble (or reject) building careers, and they generally do not vote. Whether the millennials are abandoning institutions or institutions are failing to incorporate them is not at all clear from the indirect measures we have available. But it would be an error to think that the prevalence of no religious preference and lack of religious attachment among those who have a preference is just a Catholic phenomenon or even just a religious one. Many institutions are implicated, and sociology needs a broader take on the slow integration of the millennial generation into major social institutions.

While the millennials’ weak attachment is not specifically a Catholic phenomenon, the wedge between Catholic origins and current religious preference among millennials is distinct, compared with the generational trends in other religions. Figure 4 contrasts the Catholic cohort pattern with cohort shifts among conservative and mainline Protestants and people raised with no religion.⁷

The conservative Protestants most closely resemble the Catholics, but there are important differences between conservative Protestants and Catholics. First, the conservative Protestant population changed less than the Catholic population. Although Conservative Protestants were a slightly smaller share of each cohort born after 1965 than before, the net change was just 3.5 percentage points—small compared with changes in other denominations. The main changes were a sharp rise in people raised conservative who had no religious preference at the time of the interview and a drop-off in the rate of conversion into conservative Protestant denominations. Perhaps the most substantively significant data for the comparison between conservative Protestants and Catholics are that the fraction currently strongly identified with the religion. That percentage decreased by almost half among people raised Catholic and currently Catholic but did not change significantly among people raised conservative Protestant and currently conservative Protestant.

The mainline Protestant story is the prototype of religious demography (Hout et al. 2001). In the nineteenth century, over half of Americans were raised as mainline Protestants (Fischer and Hout 2006). By the 1905 cohort (the first in figure 4), about 42 percent of all Americans were raised in a mainline denomination. That percentage fell rapidly and almost linearly down to about 11

⁷I use the same classification scheme here as in Greeley and Hout (2006). Most Baptists, Pentecostals, Missouri Synod Lutherans, member of Church of Christ, people who described themselves as “Christian” instead of Protestant, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses were classified as conservative. Methodists, most Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, members of the United Church of Christ or its constituent denominations (Congregational, most Reform), Unitarians who first describe themselves as Protestants, and Protestants who claim no specific denomination. Members of traditionally African American churches are a separate category, too small to be represented in figure 4.

FIGURE 4. Distribution of the Population by Year of Birth, Strength of Current Religion, Current Religion, and Religious Origin: Adults, 1974–2014. *Notes:* Percentages above the zero line indicate strength of current preference if currently prefer original religion; percentages below the zero line indicate the strength of current preference for new religion or no religious preference. Data smoothed by locally estimated regression. *Source:* Author's calculations from the General Social Surveys, 1974–2014.

percent for the most recent cohort—an unbroken decline of roughly one-third of 1 percent per year for 90 years. The low birth rate of mainline women accounted for almost all of the decline through 1998 (Hout et al. 2001). Since then, mainline Protestants have had slightly larger families, but still less two children per couple, averaging 1.9 births, compared with 2.25 among conservative Protestants and 2.20 among Catholics;⁸ the smaller fertility difference. The switching rate slightly favored mainline Protestant denominations in most years.

The “rise of the nones” resulted from defection from all religions and greater persistence among those raised with no religion. I discussed the political and value-driven changes with respect to defection from Catholicism; those same patterns apply for other Christian origins. What is visible here but not discussed before are the ways in which being raised with no religion in the 1990s differed from being raised with no religion back in the 1940s or earlier. In the days when having no religion was not nearly as common as it is now, almost all people raised with no religion married a person who had a religion. When they did, they (at least nominally) switched to that religion (Hout and Fischer 2002). In more

⁸The GSS asks about number of children ever born, whether they were still alive or not. I report the average children ever born to people who themselves were born 1955 or later and at least 40 years old at the time of the interview. Differential mortality probably does not bias the comparisons because none of the respondents was over 59 years old at the time of interview. Fertility calculations usually are based on women only; I pooled men and women because the difference between them was not statistically significant and including the men improved statistical power.

recent cohorts, so-called mixed marriages involving one spouse with a religious preference and the other without a preference have become more prevalent. In the most recent cohorts, the growing prevalence of no religious preference has also led to homogamous no-religion marriages, that is, marriages in which neither spouse has a religious preference. All of these trends reinforce the inter-generational transmission of the unchurched identity.

To summarize, the Catholic population has been a remarkably steady share—roughly one-fourth—of the total population at least since the early 1950s. But the fraction of Americans raised Catholic has grown since around 1985. The disjuncture is due to Catholic defections, both to other religions and to no religious preference. The defections stemmed from political factors linked to the times, and changes in values across cohorts. Because Catholic demography is distinct, the mix of changes among Catholics differed from that among Protestants.

These changes all refer to religious affiliations. They may have implications for beliefs, identity, and practice, but none of the relationships are incontrovertible. In fact, as we will see in the next section, affiliations have changed more than beliefs, identities, and practice.

BELIEF, IDENTITY, AND PRACTICE

Popular discussion of the “nones” often conflates their rise with a trend toward atheism. That is wrong; the category Claude Fischer and I call “unchurched believers” grew faster than the very slowly growing atheist and agnostic subpopulations (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014). These conclusions about the general population hold for the former Catholics who now have no religious preference, too, as I will show in this section.

Here, I explore two beliefs, two identities, and two practices, then turn to a do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude, and, finally papal infallibility. I focus on people raised Catholic, born between 1980 and 1996, who currently have no religious preference, that is, on “millennial nones” who have Catholic roots, when I have enough data on that subgroup.

The “millennial nones” with Catholic roots hold many conventional religious beliefs. Slightly more than half believed in life after death and/or God when interviewed by the GSS over the past decade (see figure 5). The question about life after death is a simple dichotomy first used by Gallup in the 1940s. The belief in God question differentiates six shades of belief: “I don’t believe in God” (labeled “Atheist” in the figure); “I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out” (labeled “Agnostic”); “I don’t believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind” (labeled “Believe in a higher power”); “I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others” (labeled “Believe sometimes”); “While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God” (labeled “Believe with doubts”); “I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it” (labeled “Believe, no doubt”). “Millennial

FIGURE 5. Distribution of the Beliefs, Identities, and Practices: Persons Born 1980–1996, Raised Catholic, Currently No Religious Preference. *Source:* Author's calculations from the General Social Surveys, 2006–2014.

nones” with Catholic roots were more likely to believe in a “higher power” than in a personal God; one-fourth of them expressed belief in a personal God. That will seem like a lot of belief to those who think that “none” implies atheist; they will be further surprised to see that only one-eighth of the “millennial nones” with Catholic roots were atheists. On the other hand, these statistics are not very good news for Catholic Church leaders who might want to evangelize young ex-Catholics. The observation that only one-fourth of the group believes in a God the church would recognize implies that the majority are beyond the church’s reach. Half believe, but their beliefs were vague. The life after death that 55 percent anticipated was more a reunion with relatives “on the other side” than Christian salvation (Greeley and Hout 1999).

This sense of vague belief continues in the contrast between the GSS’s two identity questions. They ask people to describe themselves on “religious” and “spiritual” continua. People do not have to choose between spiritual and religious; the GSS asks two separate questions. In figure 5, we see that “millennial nones” with Catholic roots, like “nones” in general, were far more spiritual than religious—at least twice as spiritual, by this calculation. Sixty percent described themselves as “slightly spiritual,” “moderately spiritual,” and “very spiritual” (combined) compared with slightly less than 30 percent who described themselves as slightly or moderately religious (only one percent said “very religious”). The degree of spiritual identity may stand out in contrast to “religious,” but its extent should not be exaggerated, though. “Not spiritual” was the modal response (41 percent), followed by “slightly spiritual” (33 percent).

The data on religious practice align with the millennials’ aversion to a religious identity. Sixty percent of the “millennial nones” with Catholic roots never

FIGURE 6. Percentage Agreeing or Disagreeing that They Can Find Their Own Way to God Without Churches or Religious Services by Current Religious Preference and, If No Preference, Belief in God: Persons Raised Catholic. *Source:* Author's calculations from the General Social Survey, 2008.

prayed or attended religious services. Few of those who described themselves as “slightly spiritual” ever prayed or attended service (not shown in the figure), indicating that to be “slightly spiritual” is to cross a very low threshold. Prayer was ever so slightly more common than attending services; after all, prayer does not entangle one with an organized religion the way a church service does. Ten percent prayed daily and another nine percent prayed several days a week, compared with only 5 percent who attended services once a month or more often.

The prevalence of unchurched believers among the “millennial nones” with Catholic roots underscores how a widespread aversion to authority contributed to the tendency to hold no religious preference (Hout and Fischer 2014). It is a kind of hyper-individualism, a DIY spirituality at work here. To extend that interpretation beyond the tests in Hout and Fischer (2014), I turn to a question that was asked as part of the most recent International Social Survey Program (ISSP) religion module, fielded in the 2008 GSS. People were asked to agree or disagree with the proposition that they can “find their own way to God without churches or religious services.” Figure 6 shows the results for three groups of people with Catholic roots: those with any current religion, those with no current religion, and for the subset of those with no current religion who believe in God or a higher power.⁹ All three groups show a clear agreement that can find

⁹Because this item was only asked of one half of the respondents to one GSS, I had to include all people who were raised Catholic, regardless of age or year of birth. There were not enough millennials in the data file to support a separate calculation for them.

a personal path to God. Contrary to expectation, the people with a religion agree more than those without. That is in part because unbelievers are as likely to say they “can’t say” as to answer the question. Unchurched believers were more likely to strongly agree that they could find their own path to God. DIY spirituality was the prevailing stance to toward God among the “millennial nones” who believed in or acknowledged God.

The “DIY” approach likely involves a broad and shallow approach. We have no direct evidence on this; we have to piece it together from questions that get at it indirectly. The two most telling ask ISSP respondents to compare religions. When asked to agree or disagree with the statement “We must respect all religions” in 2008, 81 percent of “nones” with Catholic roots agreed. That was identical to the percentage of people raised Catholic who were currently Catholic. And the “nones” were slightly (not significantly) *more* likely to strongly agree. When asked to choose the statement that comes closest to their personal view about religions from these: “there is little truth in any,” “there are basic truths in many,” and “there is one true religion,” another 81 percent of “nones” with Catholic roots agreed.¹⁰ They were significantly different from current Catholics on this item. While 19 percent of “none” with Catholic roots picked “little truth in any” and none picked “one true religion,” only 3 percent of current Catholics picked “little truth in any,” 89 percent picked “truth in many,” and 8 percent picked “one true religion.”

These indirect indicators could be consistent with a variety of interpretations of the current state of religiosity. Discussing this research with a friend of one of my sons, I came upon this summary. She told me she was “open to the idea of having a religion,” but because of “their history and misogyny and my own lack of effort,” she had not yet found one. Her expression has too many facets to fit into a GSS question, so I would not subject it to a social science test. But as she blended tradition, exclusion, and personal effort, she gathered the key elements of her generation’s stance. Taken that way, it is informative, even on its own.

PAPAL AUTHORITY

Greeley (1977:126–51) worked out an explanatory model for the drop in church attendance among Catholics between 1963 and 1974. He emphasized two factors: growing opposition to traditional sexual orthodoxy and rejection of papal authority. He showed how they accounted for all but a small residual of declining attendance. American Catholics were not staying home from Mass in rebellion against Vatican-II reforms such as everyday language at Mass or having the priest face the people while consecrating the bread and wine. They were protesting the fact that reform failed to acknowledge the changing circumstances

¹⁰I combined the 1998 and 2008 ISSPs to get more statistical power for this item.

of raising children. Catholics were using birth control and did not want to be called sinners for doing so. In an era that lauded “question authority,” married Catholics questioned the authority of the Pope to teach when he did not account for their needs in a sphere of life where his vows kept him from taking part in choosing for himself. Greeley warned that promoting and emphasizing traditional sexual orthodoxy could contribute to a further erosion of papal authority. People could start questioning other teachings. Catholic church attendance had dropped from 63 to 49 percent following *Humanae Vitae*; it would drop farther as it turned out. Our reanalysis of the sexual orthodoxy data confirmed its status as the source of falling church attendance (Hout and Greeley 1987:333–34); GSS data showed that sexual orthodoxy remained relevant through 1984, even though attendance had, by then, achieved what we called a “new equilibrium” at around 45 percent.

We had less to say in 1987 about papal authority. We had used confidence in religious leadership as a proxy for papal authority. We would have preferred something more direct, but, at the time, the GSS did not ask about the Pope directly. Since 2004, however, current Catholics in the GSS have been asked to give their view of whether it is true or not that “under some circumstances, the Pope is infallible when he speaks on matters of faith and morals.” This was not one of the items in Greeley’s original papal authority index, but it captures his concept (and it is much closer than confidence in people running organized religion to doing so). Figure 7 shows the answers arrayed by year of birth.

Barely half of contemporary Catholics affirm the Pope’s infallibility. The view is more prevalent among the most senior cohorts than among baby boomer and younger cohorts. The erosion of papal authority among Catholics seems to have stopped as the youngest cohorts differ little from baby boomers. We cannot compare time periods with data collected in the 2000s, but the differences

FIGURE 7. Attitude toward Papal Infallibility by Year of Birth: Persons Currently Catholic, 2004–2014. *Source:* Author’s calculations from the General Social Surveys, 2004–2014.

among cohorts suggest that papal authority stopped falling in the 1980s.¹¹ Cohorts that came of age over the last 30 years were equally supportive and equally skeptical of the Pope's claim to speak infallibly on matters of faith and morals. The issue also seems to have receded from Catholic consciousness. Over one-third of Catholics today could not say if the Pope was infallible or not; in the youngest cohort, almost half had no opinion.

Greeley predicted that too much emphasis on sex would undermine authority. We have certainly not heard less about sexual orthodoxy during the ensuing decades. Perhaps Greeley was wrong. Perhaps the leadership continued to teach sexual orthodoxy without undermining their authority any further. Another trend complicates that view of things, though. The leveling in evidence across cohorts here came about just as more Catholics began to leave the Church. We unfortunately do not have answers to the infallibility question for people raised Catholic who were no longer Catholic at the time of the interview. But if they took strong doubts about infallibility with them out of the church as they left, then a flat trend among those left behind is exactly what we should expect to see. Perhaps the dissent Greeley anticipated lies just beyond the view of the data.

DISCUSSION

Readers of a certain age no doubt hear echoes in these data of Sheila Larson, the woman interviewed in *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1985). She made many statements about finding her own way to spiritual fulfillment; *Habits* quotes her saying, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church." Sheila's particular framing of personal religion was stunning, of course. The authors emphasized her case in the conclusion as well as the chapter on religion. Reviewers from *Newsweek* to *Contemporary Sociology* mentioned Sheila and her "Sheilaism." Almost everyone was confident that she was typical of a new thread in American religiosity or spirituality. Subsequent data, much of it presented here, were consistent with the special attention her case garnered.

Americans expressed their individualism in matters of religion long before Sheila Larson, of course. Thomas Jefferson wrote to Ezra Stiles Ely in 1819, "You say you are a Calvinist. I am not. I am of a sect by myself, as far as I know." Catholics resisted individualism more than most Americans did. In much of his writing, Greeley emphasized the communal aspects of rite and membership, emphasizing the constraints (and social capital) of the neighborhood experience (Greeley 2000:111ff).

¹¹I pooled all the 2004–2014 GSSs to maximize the statistical power of these calculations; the differences among years are slight, though large enough to be statistically significant at conventional levels. A fuller analysis of this item would account for period as well as cohort differences.

We noted that our focus on the church attendance of *current* Catholics over the 1973–1984 period could understate change if some Catholics were not only avoiding Mass but had stopped identifying as Catholics. Again calling on the GSS, we noted that the probability of being currently Catholic given a Catholic upbringing had not changed over the 11 years of observation we had available then. At that point, most former Catholics were Protestants. The “rise of the nones” started a few years later.

The powerful religious metaphor at the time of *Humanae Vitae* was Peter Berger’s “sacred canopy.” Berger posited a theory of belief-centered religion susceptible to unraveling if the fabric was torn. According to Berger, reason and science threatened to bring about that kind of unraveling. The ensuing trends have an entirely different flavor. They are neither rational nor elite-driven (Fischer 2010:223–25).

Another canopy may have unraveled, though. According to Greeley’s birth control hypothesis, the teaching authority of the Catholic hierarchy was the canopy. Once Catholics questioned the birth control ban, they were likely to obey less and less. Catholic obedience unraveled not over the creation of life as recounted in Genesis but over the creation of each life in particular. Once lay Catholics reserved that decision to themselves, the Catholic hierarchy had to prove the relevance of its teachings on more and more issues. The presumption of authority was lost. As the late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago put it, American Catholics had come to act like Protestants. They listened, some read, but they took it all under advisement. In matters of great concern to the organized church, American Catholics decided for themselves.

Then came the scandals. In writing about the “rise of the nones,” I have never emphasized Catholicism’s sexual abuse crisis, mainly because that would amount to a specific hypothesis for a general phenomenon. Almost all organized religions in the United States were leaking members. In my view, and data are not specific enough to test it, sexual abuse did not affect affiliation directly, but it confirmed for some that the Catholic Church lacked teaching authority on matters of sexual conduct.

The power of the authority-as-canopy metaphor is that, once started, unraveling is irreversible. A push invites a pull, but an unraveling cannot be repaired without getting outside the canopy. Greeley rejected Berger’s reason versus belief version of the canopy (Greeley 1990), but he saw the Catholic Church’s loss of authority as unraveling just as Berger saw the cosmological canopy unraveling.

In one of his last social science books on Catholicism, Greeley (2004) argued that once Catholics rejected the birth control ban, they disposed themselves to objecting to other church teachings. Authority, once lost, like cloth unraveled, would not easily be restored. His prescription was rooted in his story-based sociology of religion. From *The Catholic Myth* (1990) onward, he had been arguing that in their stories of creation (and, in Christianity, redemption), religions achieved “an aura of factuality,” as Geertz (1993:90) memorably called it. Indeed, Greeley was profoundly influenced by Geertz’s approach according to which story begets

community begets belief system begets religious organization. And so, to recover, the Catholic Church needed a parish-level mission “to invite, charm, and enchant the laity as they approach the Sacraments, instead of imposing rules and regulations, creating obstacles, and demanding compliance” (2004:169). Invite people to the telling of the stories. Include anyone who shows interest. Reach out.

My research reported here and elsewhere is my academic interpretation written for academics. I do not presume or aspire to advise the Catholic hierarchy on how to approach the trends I document. I bring up Greeley’s recommendations to acknowledge his uncanny ability to translate academic findings into action and recommendations. He worked from a comprehensive overview of religion in society. He understood how practices fit together to yield statistical findings and how, if you did not like the findings, you had better change your practices. He knew what he was talking about, and his recommendations on these and other matters have withstood the test of time.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate this lecture to the memory of Andrew M. Greeley, my mentor, collaborator, and dear friend. I thank Melissa Wilde for inviting me, leading the discussion in Chicago, and giving me great comments on the penultimate draft of this paper. I also thank the others who asked questions at the Furfey lecture in Chicago; your questions and comments helped sharpen the focus of this paper as it transitioned from lecture to article. Thanks, too, to Claude Fischer for useful comments.

FUNDING

I acknowledge the financial support of the National Science Foundation (SES-1260440) and the NYU Population Center. Views expressed are my own and do not represent those of the National Science Foundation or the Population Center’s funders.

APPENDIX

The GSS began in 1972, fielded annual surveys most years until 1994, and has conducted biennial surveys since 1994. When it was an annual survey, the average sample was 1,500 adults; the biennial design now calls for a target sample of 3,000 households, although budget constraints have led to smaller targets in some recent years.

The GSS consists of a representative sample of households in the United States. An adult is randomly selected within each sampled household for the interview. For the years 1972–2014, over 96 percent of U.S. adults lived in households. The interview is designed to be conducted in person, and to last about

90 minutes. Some interviews are conducted by phone call. In 2004, over 20 percent of interviews were completed on the telephone (the highest ever); since 2008 between 10 and 13 percent of interviews were completed by phone.

Cases collected prior to 2004 were mostly self-weighting; the exceptions were oversamples of African Americans in 1983 and 1987. Since 2004, the study design has called for random sampling some initial nonrespondents and dropping them so the field costs could be concentrated on the random subset of nonrespondents randomly selected for intensive recontact. This complication requires the use of weights to correct for the differential treatment of cases. The compound response rate resulting from these procedures has averaged slightly over 70 percent of the initial list of addresses.

If people were to answer every GSS question, the interview would last well over two hours. To shorten the time the survey takes, some items were designated to “rotate,” that is to be asked of some respondents but not others. Three overlapping ballots (labeled A, B, and C) were constructed. Some rotating items appear on ballots A and B, others on A and C, and a third subset on ballots B and C. These rotating items are thus asked of a random two-thirds of the sample. Researchers can use two-thirds of the interviews to study associations between core items and any one of the rotating items, but only one-third of the interviews to study associations between some pairs of rotating items. Before 1987, the rotation was year-to-year instead of household-to-household. Thus, in the early GSSs, only core items appeared every year; rotating items appeared two years out of three.

The GSS fosters innovation and experimentation in the form of one-time-only “modules.” Some modules are paid for out of the National Science Foundation funds that support the main project; others are paid for from other sources. The GSS includes the possibility of international comparison in the form of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), a set of 60 questions decided by international participants and fielded in all participating countries. Religion was the theme of the ISSP in 1991, 1998, and 2008.

REFERENCES

- Alwin, Duane F. 1990. “Cohort Replacement and Changes in Parental Socialization Values.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 52:347–60.
- Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. 1985. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dillon, Michele. 1999. *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith, and Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fischer, Claude S. 2010. *Made in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fischer, Claude S., and Michael Hout. 2006. *Century of Difference: How America Changed Over the Last One Hundred Years*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Gallup. 2015. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1690/Religion.aspx>. Accessed October 21, 2015.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1993. “Religion as a Cultural System.” In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, edited by Clifford Geertz, 87–125. London: Fontana Press.

- Greeley, Andrew M. 1977. *The American Catholic: A Social Portrait*. New York: Basic Books.
- . 1990. *The Catholic Myth*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons/Macmillan.
- . 2000. *The Catholic Imagination*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2004. *The Catholic Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Greeley, Andrew M., and Michael Hout. 1999. "Americans' Increasing Belief in Life After Death: Competition and Assimilation." *American Sociological Review* 65: 813–836.
- . 2006. *The Truth about Conservative Christians*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hout, Michael. 2000. "Angry and Alienated: Divorced and Remarried Catholics in the United States." *America* (December 16):10–2.
- Hout, Michael, and Claude S. Fischer. 2002. "Explaining the Rise of Americans with No Religious Preference: Generations and Politics." *American Sociological Review* 67:165–90.
- . 2014. "Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987–2012." *Sociological Science* 1:423–47.
- Hout, Michael, and Andrew M. Greeley. 1987. "The Center Doesn't Hold: Trends in Church Attendance, 1940–1984." *American Sociological Review* 52:325–45.
- Hout, Michael, Andrew M. Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde. 2001. "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 107: 468–500.
- Hummer, Robert A., Christopher G. Ellison, Richard G. Rogers, Benjamin E. Moulton, and Ron R. Romero. 2004. "Religious Involvement and Adult Mortality in the United States: Review and Perspective." *Southern Medical Journal* 97:1223–29.
- Pew Research Center, 2015. "Modern Immigration Wave Brings 59 Million to U.S., Driving Population Growth and Change Through 2065: Views of Immigration's Impact on U.S. Society Mixed." Washington, D.C.: September.
- Schwadel, Philip. 2013. "Changes in Americans Strength of Religious Affiliation, 1974–2010." *Sociology of Religion* 74, no. 1:107–28.
- Stark, Rodney, and Charles Y. Glock. 1968. *American Piety*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smith, Tom W., Peter V. Marsden, and Michael Hout. 2015. General Social Surveys, 1972–2014. [machine-readable data file]. Principal Investigator, Tom W. Smith; Co-Principal Investigators, Peter V. Marsden and Michael Hout, NORC ed. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 2015. 1 data file (59,599 logical records) and 1 codebook (3,485 pp).