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Market Forces and Catholic Commitment: Exploring the New Paradigm

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The traditional paradigm in the sociology of religion sees strength in religious monopolies, attributing to them the ability to sustain an unchallenged, taken-for-granted sacred canopy. The newer paradigm regards religious monopolies as weak, locating religious vitality in pluralism and competition. A crucial test of these competing paradigms arises in the hypothesis that rank-and-file Catholic commitment varies inversely to the proportion nominally Catholic within any appropriate set of units of analysis. Results based on the 102 Roman Catholic dioceses of the United States show that ordination rates, the ratio of priests to nominal Catholics, and Catholic school enrollment are proportionately highest where Catholics are few. Results based on the 50 states show the same inverse relationship between the percent Catholic and the ratio of priests to Catholics. These data also show that the smaller a state's Catholic minority, the higher the circulation rate of the *Catholic Digest*.

Stephen Warner (1993) identifies current theoretical disputes in the sociology of religion as "a paradigm shift in process." Tracing the older paradigm to the founders of the field, he shows how it interprets religious phenomena on the basis of the received wisdom about the European religious experience. He then outlines how an accumulation of anomalies, most of them stemming from the American religious experience, has prompted the emergence of a newer paradigm. He identifies the central dispute between paradigms as the view taken of religious pluralism, competition, and monopoly (he sees the debate over secularization as derived from these issues).

A brief examination of two hypothetical societies will clarify how the two paradigms differ. In Society A the Roman Catholic Church is virtually the only religious denomination available, and more than 90 percent of the population would state that as their religious preference if asked. In Society B many different faiths flourish, most of them Protestant, and Roman Catholics are but a tiny minority.

For generations social scientists have assumed that the average person's day-to-day experience of the sacred would be far more intense in Society A, where the universal religious culture would permeate all institutions. There, rates of religious participation would be high, as would levels of belief. In addition, the clergy would be held in unusually high regard and many young men would choose to become priests. Conversely, say proponents of the older paradigm, Society B would experience far lower levels of religious participation, because the cacophony of competing sects would confuse and alienate many people. Moreover, given the lower level of individual commitment, and deprived of its ties to business and political elites, the Roman Catholic minority would be far less able to generate religious vocations; hence, comparatively smaller proportions will be attracted to the priesthood in Society B.

Why has this been the prevailing wisdom? The European experience seemed to show that monopoly firms are unusually strong and that this is especially true when the "commodity" involved concerns the sacred. Durkheim was most emphatic about the superiority of monopoly faiths, and stressed the corrosion of moral integration that inevitably followed if and when religious pluralism developed ([1897] 1951). In Durkheim's opinion, religion's power comes from its universality, from penetrating all aspects of a culture:

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[Religion] socializes men only by attaching them completely to an identical body of doctrine and socializes them in proportion as this body of doctrine is extensive and firm. The more numerous the manners of action and thought of a religious character are, which are accordingly removed from free inquiry, the more the idea of God presents itself in all details of existence, and makes individual wills converge to one identical goal. ([1897] 1951:159)

In contrast, where multiple religious groups compete, Durkheim believed that each discredits the other and encourages the view that religion per se is open to question, dispute, and doubt; hence, "the less it dominates lives" ([1897] 1951:159).

This position is most effectively represented today by Peter Berger (1967), who argues that pluralism shatters the "sacred canopy" of a society — a canopy that cannot exist except as sustained by a monopoly faith. Why? Because pluralism calls into question the plausibility of all religions and deprives them "of their status as taken-for-granted" (1967:151). In a later work, Berger (1979:xi) explained that "in the pluralist situation . . . the authority of all religious traditions tends to be undermined." Thus Berger traces secularization — the decline of religious institutions — to the rise of religious pluralism.

Until the past decade or so, very few objections have been raised to the claim that pluralism begets secularization. Indeed, it would be fair to call it the orthodox social science position, regarded as virtually self-evident even by Protestant seminary professors when they waxed sociological about secularization. As Harvey Cox (1965:1) put it, pluralism exposes "the relativity of the myths and traditions men once thought were unquestionable."

Images of the universal piety of medieval Europe, of peasant villages where everyone gave unquestioning assent to the local priest, sustain the traditional paradigm. Unfortunately, this is bad history: Religious indifference, not piety, was rife in medieval times (Thomas 1971; Johnson 1976; Stark and Iannaccone, forthcoming). Moreover, faith in the superior capacity of religious monopolies to generate piety is at extreme variance with empirical trends in the United States. Here, the development of the most pluralistic and competitive religious economy in world history did not produce religious ruin as faiths, unshielded by a sacred canopy, withered away. To the contrary, the rise of pluralism and competition produced an uninterrupted upward trend in the level of individual religious mobilization (Finke and Stark 1992). Americans are far more likely to be active in church today than they were in colonial times. Moreover, in all eras the more conservative religious bodies have prospered, while the more liberal and "modernized" bodies declined (Finke and Stark 1992).

As is typical in science, when faced with serious anomalies, proponents of the traditional paradigm have made vigorous efforts to dismiss or discredit the American example (Wilson 1966, 1982; Wallis 1986; Wallis and Bruce 1984; Dobbelaere 1987; Hunter 1983, 1987; Lechner 1991; Chaves 1991). But, as Warner notes, the anomalies eventually have led to the emergence of a new paradigm. The new paradigm draws its dissenting evaluations of monopoly, pluralism, and competition from modern economics (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987; Stark and Iannaccone 1992, in press; Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1991, 1992). Consequently, social scientists sharing this perspective would, in fact, attribute high levels of religious participation and a strong Catholic church to Society B, while deducing widespread religious apathy and disaffection for Society A.

To facilitate the application of economic theories to religious phenomena, we conceive of the religious activities of any society in terms of a "religious economy" (Stark 1985; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987; Finke and Stark 1988). Religious economies are like commercial economies in that they consist of a market made up of a set of current and potential customers and a set of firms seeking to serve that market. Moreover, as with commercial economies the major variable of interest is their degree of regulation. Some religious economies are restricted by state-imposed monopolies; some are virtually unregulated.

To the degree that a religious economy is unregulated, the laws of supply and demand yield the deduction that the religious economy will be very pluralistic. That is, the "natural" condition of religious economies is one in which a variety of firms cater to the special needs and tastes of specific market segments, in precisely the same way that competition produces specialization among commercial firms in free markets. This variety arises because a single form of a product is inherently unable to satisfy divergent tastes. Or, to note the specific aspects of religious firms and their "intangible" products, pluralism arises in unregulated markets because a single religious firm cannot be at once worldly and otherworldly, strict and permissive, exclusive and inclusive, expressive and reserved, while the market always will contain distinct consumer segments with strong preferences on each of these aspects of faith.¹ These segments are inherent in the human condition, stemming from such variables as social class, age, gender, health, and life experiences (Stark and Bainbridge 1987).

Because these diverse consumer preferences are strong, religious economies never can be fully monopolized, not even when backed by the full coercive powers of the state. Hence, even at the height of its temporal power, the medieval church was surrounded by heresy and dissent. Of course, when repressive efforts are very great, religions competing with the state-sponsored monopoly will be forced to operate underground. But whenever and wherever repression falters, vigorous pluralism will break through.

It follows that, to the extent that only one faith is available without risk of sanctions, religious apathy and indifference will be high. That is, if the market is inherently segmented, whenever the religious economy tends toward monopoly substantial demand must go unsatisfied and many consumers will withhold their patronage.

Moreover, because so much of the religious "product" necessarily is intangible and concerns the far distant future, vigorous marketing activity is needed to maintain high levels of consumption (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). But this is not how monopoly firms function. It is an axiom of economics that monopoly firms are lazy. Writing in 1776, Adam Smith noted how state-supported, monopoly faiths lack "exertion, . . . zeal and industry." In such circumstances,

the clergy, reposing themselves upon their benefices, had neglected to keep up the fervour of faith and devotion of the great body of the people; and having given themselves up to indolence, were incapable of making vigorous exertion in defence even of their own establishment. ([1776] 1937:741)

In contrast, where an unregulated market gives full rein to pluralism, firms will sharply differentiate their products as they seek maximum penetration of specific market segments, and all significant segments will be pursued vigorously. Describing conditions in the United States early in the nineteenth century, Martin E. Marty noted:

Here was a textbook example of free enterprise in the marketplace of religion, a competition in which the fittest survived. Whenever someone discovered new nooks and crannies in the spiritual landscape, they quickly developed new movements or sects. The message of the aggressors to the uncommitted was "Be Saved!" and to each other, "Adapt or die." (1984:169)

Thus it follows that, other things being equal, where there is greater pluralism, overall levels of religious participation will be higher, *as many firms will, together, be able to*

1. The Roman Catholic Church often manages to function as a cluster of subdenominations that vary on significant aspects of religion. For example, neighborhood parishes often reflect the differing tastes of wealthier and poorer parts of cities. Religious orders often have served as "internal sects" that allow those seeking very intense, otherworldly religion to obtain it (Stark and Bainbridge 1985). This greater institutional flexibility may play an important role in the church's ability to generate higher levels of commitment where it is the monopoly faith, than can Protestant monopolies (Iannaccone 1991). The advantage is only relative, however. The Catholic church seems to do better where it can maximize its appeal to segments of the market.

meet the demands of a much larger proportion of the population than can be the case when only one or very few firms have free access to the market. Notice that the emphasis is on variations in the behavior of religious firms, rather than on variations in the religious need of individuals. Or, as Terry Bilhartz (1986:139) put it, the emphasis has shifted from the demand side to the "supply side."

Fully in accord with supply-side logic, if pluralism results in more vigorous religious firms, then it also follows that *the greater the pluralism, the higher the level of commitment of the average member to his or her religious preference*. Thus the average Catholic should be more ardent in Society B, where the Catholic Church is but one of many competing firms, than in Society A, where the market is nearly monopolized by Catholicism.

In this essay we offer a crucial test of this deduction and hence of the traditional and the new theoretical paradigms in the sociology of religion. Specifically, we shall test the hypothesis that *Catholic commitment varies inversely to the proportion nominally Catholic within any appropriate set of units of analysis*.

"CATHOLIC" SOCIETIES

The initial stimulus for this essay came from a chance observation, while leafing through the *Catholic Almanac* (1987), that "Catholic" nations seem strangely lacking in priests. For example, in Colombia, where, according to census as well as church statistics, about 95% of the population is Catholic, there are only 1.3 diocesan priests to serve every 10,000 Catholics. Even adding in all of the priests belonging to religious orders, there are only 2.1 priests per 10,000 Catholics in Colombia. Since priests cannot conceivably serve such huge flocks, and since the Colombian church has not sent urgent pleas for priests from abroad, clearly most Catholics in Colombia do not avail themselves of the services of the church. Hence, the question arises, what does it mean to be a "Catholic" nation? Indeed, are there any nations where most people are active and Catholic? Our theory, of course, would suggest that there are not.

Lest it be thought that Colombia is a deviant case, we note the following rates per 10,000 Catholic population, including religious order priests: Argentina 2.0, Brazil 1.1, Bolivia 1.4, Chile 2.2, Costa Rica 2.1, Ecuador 1.8, Mexico 1.4, and Peru 1.3.

In contrast, the United States has 10.9 priests per 10,000 Catholics, and Canada has 10.8. Roughly speaking, "Catholic" Latin America has fewer than 20% as many priests to serve its Catholic population than does "Protestant" North America.² Similarly, there are 9.2 priests per 10,000 Catholics in "Protestant" Australia, 15.2 in New Zealand, and 14.3 in England, where Catholics make up less than 10% of the population. However, Catholic Portugal has only 5.0 priests per 10,000, Spain has only 8.6, and even Italy has fewer than England with 11.1. Moreover, Italy's rate is greatly inflated by the thousands of priests belonging to religious orders who are stationed in Italy, but who remain citizens of other nations and do not serve Italian parishes. But what about Ireland, where there are 17 priests per 10,000 Catholics and where the church claims 93% as members? In Ireland the Catholic Church's role as the primary vehicle for national resistance to external domination has served as a functional alternative to minority status. That is, for much of its history, the Irish Catholic majority was a stigmatized religious minority when seen within the context of the British Isles (Stark 1992).

These casual observations about "Catholic" societies caused us to undertake this study of the effects of relative monopoly status on Catholic commitment.

2. In fact, at present more than 2,000 priests from the United States are serving as "foreign missionaries" in Catholic Latin America.

THE SAMPLE

The study is based on the 102 Roman Catholic dioceses of the United States. The virtues of this data set are these:

First, the units are relatively small and reflect the social scope that people most readily experience. That is, on the interpersonal level Catholics do not experience the religious composition of the United States so much as they experience the religious composition of their community. If they live in Dubuque, Iowa, their daily experience will be shaped by the fact that two-thirds of their fellow residents have their names listed on the roles of a local Catholic parish. If they live in Des Moines, Iowa, however, where only one person in ten is Catholic, they will experience their religious identity as part of a tiny minority.

Second, the units are a relatively homogeneous set and hold relatively constant a host of cultural, economic, and political differences that would be entailed in a study based on comparisons across societies.

Finally, since variations in the Catholic composition of various parts of the nation reflect differential patterns of ethnic settlement rather than variations in coercive exclusion of non-Catholics, these data provide an exceptionally strong test of the theory. We elaborate this point in the conclusion.

The reasons for selecting data from the 1960s and early 1970s will be spelled out in the discussion of specific measures, which follows.

MEASURING COMMITMENT AND MONOPOLY

The intensity of religious commitment typically is indexed from self-reports of various aspects of religious belief and practice. For our purposes, such measures have two shortcomings. One is practical: It would cost a fortune to conduct a survey with a sample sufficiently large to permit reliable characterization of any substantial number of aggregate units. But even more important is that measures such as these are easily inflated and can be fulfilled at relatively low cost. We prefer measures of commitment that are costly, in the sense that much is invested or foregone to fulfill them, and that can be measured by objective rather than subjective criteria.

Religious vocations fulfill both criteria. Becoming a priest is not a matter of agreeing with a battery of questionnaire items or even of regular attendance at Mass. Moreover, the number of priests serving in a particular diocese and the number of ordinations into the priesthood are easily and accurately counted and regularly reported.

Men training for the Roman Catholic priesthood live in semicloistered conditions, are subject to tight discipline, and follow rigorous daily schedules providing little unstructured time. Priests also take lifelong vows of chastity. Upon ordination, a Catholic priest, unlike most Protestant clergy, will not be assigned a congregation, but must anticipate spending at least ten years as an assistant to the pastor of a parish. Altogether, these are serious costs and reflect a serious level of commitment. One might argue that these costs are offset by such worldly rewards as status, prestige, and comfort. However, the social origins of priests make it evident that they need not have entered the priesthood to have equalled or surpassed the worldly rewards associated with the role of priest. Hence, their primary motivations must be religious, as a host of studies have shown (Fichter 1961; Schoenherr and Greeley 1974; Verdick, Shields, and Hoge 1988).³ We will develop two measures of Catholic commitment based on vocations.

3. It is commonly argued these days by some Catholic liberals, and especially those espousing Liberation Theology, that the rate of religious vocations is not a measure of authentic commitment, but is a mere externality reflecting a narrow and transient form of religiosity. But alternative, more authentic, forms of commitment are invariably expressed in such metaphorical terms as to be impossible empirically to measure. Moreover, we have chosen to avoid

Ordinations

Our first measure is a ratio of the number of ordinations in the three-year period 1972 through 1974 to the estimated number of Catholic males attaining their fourteenth year in the period 1960 through 1962, and who would, therefore, have turned 26 during the three ordination years.

The number of ordinations for each diocese is from *Annuario Pontificio* and the estimate of the number of Catholic males attaining age 14 is constructed from a history of baptisms in each diocese. Details of the estimation procedure are provided in the appendix. The choice of this denominator is based on the fact that most decisions to enter the seminary are made between ages 14 and 19. Moreover, migration into and out of areas as large as American dioceses is very low for persons in this age group. Therefore, the number of 14-year-old males in a diocese is a reasonably good index of the population available for recruitment and ordination into the priesthood.

There are two kinds or classes of Catholic priests, secular and religious. Secular priests are those who serve as parish clergy in each diocese. They are recruited from the local population, are ordained in the diocese by their local bishop, and usually remain within their diocese of origin. Religious priests are members of religious orders having national and even international jurisdictions. Hence, religious clergy may or may not have been recruited from the diocese in which they were ordained. Indeed, more than half of the ordinations of religious priests during the 1972-1974 period occurred in only six of the 102 dioceses, and 22 dioceses reported no religious ordinations. In contrast, all but two dioceses ordained at least one secular priest. Prior to 1968 the number of ordinations per parish reported in *Annuario Pontificio* did not separate them on the basis of secular and religious clergy. Since it proved important to restrict the analysis to secular priests alone, we selected our time frame subsequent to 1968. Because an ordination is a very significant event in any diocese, the numbers reported for publication in *Annuario Pontificio* are unlikely to be in error. To overcome the measurement problems created by the fact that ordinations are not frequent events in most dioceses, we have merged the data for a three-year period: 1972-1974. We selected this period because shortly thereafter there was a steep decline in ordinations, reducing the number of cases on which to base ordination rates for dioceses.

Priests

We also computed a second measure of religious vocations as a simple ratio of priests to Catholic population for each diocese. The logic of this measure is that where a larger proportion of the local Catholic population is pious, larger numbers will have entered the priesthood. This ratio is essentially a cumulative measure of ordinations and is subject to distortion by age structure and by the history of migration. Younger populations are likely to have fewer priests relative to their Catholic population because a large proportion will not yet have attained the age of ordination. Dioceses that have experienced relatively high rates of out-migration, such as the older Catholic areas of the Northeast and Midwest, will have a high ratio of priests to population, because the Catholic population will have shrunk but the priests will have remained. Unlike Protestants, Catholic priests do not follow their flocks: Only families and individuals migrate; parishes do not. Diocesan priests almost always remain in their diocese of ordination. Although religious orders sometimes assign priests to growth areas, this is not a major factor in their location. Growth areas will lack priests until they produce enough of their own. While these imperfections reduce the at-

this entire development by basing our study in a period when the traditional interpretation of Catholic commitment was virtually unchallenged.

tractiveness of the ratio of priests to Catholics as an index of vocations, the measure's greater reliability is that it is based on substantially larger numbers.

However, our initial preference for the ordinations index rather than the ratio of priests to Catholics is based not so much on a preference for purity of measurement over good stochastic properties as it is on our concern about the likely bias associated with correlating two ratios that share a somewhat poorly measured component. That is, the ratio of priests to Catholics shares the number of Catholics per diocese with our key independent variable, the ratio of Catholics to the total population residing within the geographic boundaries of the diocese. The Catholic church does not maintain a highly accurate register of members. Diocesan membership totals are summed from estimates of membership by each parish, and these parish estimates always include a substantial subjective component (Glock and Stark 1966). This measurement error is correlated, and when, as in the present instance, the shared error is in the numerator of one variable and in the denominator of the other, any "spurious" component of the correlation is negative. Since we predict a negative correlation, the measure based on the ratio of priests to Catholics might be an unsatisfactory dependent variable. Fortunately, we can compare results obtained from this measure with those obtained when the ordination ratio is used to measure commitment.

Degree of Monopoly

As noted above, our measure of the extent of a Catholic monopoly on religious membership within a diocese is based on the ratio of Catholics to the total population in the years during which the ordainees were about 14 years old. We also have acknowledged that the total number of Catholics within dioceses is not well counted. However, for purposes of measuring our independent variable, the data seem sufficiently accurate. We only need to rank the dioceses with reasonable accuracy, not pinpoint their exact Catholic populations. National totals as reported in the *Catholic Directory*, the source of our membership statistics, are in reasonably close agreement with national survey studies, although for well-known reasons surveys always find more Catholics than the church reports.⁴ One study, conducted about a decade prior to the period from which our data come, established a high degree of internal consistency of the reported Catholic population and the reports of baptisms and deaths also reported in the *Catholic Directory* (Kirk 1954). To guard against the possibility of regional variations in local counting of Catholic membership, we show results

4. Membership figures reported by American Christian denominations are based on the number of persons actually listed on local parish or congregational rolls — that is, on people who are formal members (even if not very active). However, many Americans who are not formal members will report a denominational preference when asked. Thus polls find that more than 90% of Americans have a religious preference, but it appears that only about 60 to 65% are formal members. Unfortunately, it is impossible to correct poll data by subtracting a constant fraction from each denomination, since there seem to be huge denominational differences in the proportions of those who name a denomination and actually belong. For example, in the merged G.S.S. samples for 1972-1991, 164 people said they belonged to the United Church of Christ and 208 said they were Congregationalists. An informed analyst might "know" that the two groups ought to be merged, since more than three decades ago the Congregationalists renamed their denomination the United Church of Christ. Adding them together, we would estimate that 1.4% of Americans belong to the U.C.C. However, an even more informed analyst might wonder if people who still call themselves Congregationalists have had any contact with an actual congregation during the past 30 years, since they seem to have missed the name change. If we omit them as merely "cultural" Congregationalists, we reduce our estimate of the U.C.C. to only 0.6% of the American population. According to U.C.C. statistics, 0.7% of Americans belong to their denomination. In this instance we have discovered an obvious "giveaway" for distinguishing real and cultural members. In most cases, however, there is no such basis for making this distinction. Therefore, as in the case of people who say they are Catholics or Baptists, it is impossible to make such a correction, even though it is quite clear that a substantial number claiming either affiliation are merely "cultural" members. In contrast, 0.4% of GSS respondents gave their religious preference as Church of the Nazarene, which is extremely close to the official membership reported by the Nazarenes of 0.3% of the population. Similarly close fits characterize many other evangelical Protestant denominations. Thus, poll data are almost worthless for estimating denominational membership, but are an excellent barometer of such things as regional variations in denominational makeup.

separately for the major census regions. Furthermore, we created an additional region of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California in order to test our theory separately for heavily Hispanic dioceses, which might reflect the lower levels of commitment typical of Latin American Catholic culture.

Finally, we assess the role of parochial school education as a mediating variable linking local Catholic commitment to ordination. That is, where a higher proportion of Catholic families send their children to parochial schools it is reasonable to assume a higher average level of religious commitment. And parochial schools play a major role in promoting vocations. The presence of clergy in these schools provides role models and the opportunity for direct recruiting. Research shows that priests are overwhelmingly the products of their parish schools (Fichter 1961). We measure exposure to parochial school as the estimated proportion of a cohort's school years that were spent in parochial schools — the specific cohorts being those on which the ordination rates are based.

RESULTS

Our primary hypothesis is: *Ordination rates will be negatively related to the proportion Catholic.* This follows from our theoretical analysis showing that monopoly faiths will tend to be lazy and will fail to mobilize high levels of commitment. For the nation as a whole, the hypothesis is strongly confirmed by the results of logistic regression. In the regression the proportion Catholic is converted to odds so that the coefficients may be read as the proportionate increase in the odds of an ordination associated with a proportionate increase in the odds of being Catholic. The actual coefficient is $-.217$ with a standard error of $.057$ — a highly significant result.

It might be suggested that the result is an artifact of regionalism wherein the highly Hispanic areas have high proportions of "nominal" Catholics, but very low levels of practice. And, indeed, Table 1 reveals that the Hispanic dioceses have by far the lowest ordination rates (an average rate of 104 per 100,000 Catholic males reaching age 25 during 1972-74).

TABLE 1

RESULTS USING ORDINATION RATES				
	Logistic Regression Coefficients Between Ordinations and % Catholic		Ordinations per 100,000 Catholic Males, 1972-74	% Catholic
	b	SE (b)		
Nation N = 102	-.217**	.057	169	22.3%
Within Regions:				
East N = 25	-.248	.205	183	37.8%
Midwest N = 36	-.421**	.144	159	23.3%
South N = 18	-.218**	.065	263	8.1%
West N = 11	-.123	.361	178	13.4%
Hispanic* N = 12	-.456**	.117	104	22.3%

*Texas omitted from the South; and New Mexico, Arizona, and California omitted from the West to create the Hispanic region.

**More than three times its standard error.

But notice, too, that the Southern dioceses, with by far the lowest proportion of Catholics, have by far the highest average ordination rate — 263. Table 1 also shows the logistic regression results for the four major census regions, modified to provide a Hispanic region as well. The main finding is essentially replicated. In all five regions, the odds of ordination respond negatively to the odds of being Catholic, and the coefficients are of approximately the same magnitude as the overall result. Three of the coefficients are significant, which is respectable given the reduced numbers of cases.

We replicated this analysis using the ratio of priests to Catholics as the measure of commitment. The results were the same, except that they generally are even stronger (see Table 2). What about the role of Catholic education? As mentioned, studies show that among those who enter the priesthood, the proportion educated in church schools is utterly lopsided relative to that of Catholics generally. Since there is little reason to expect that Catholic education would more than marginally increase the numbers of Catholics in the population, it would be unconvincing to suggest that Catholic education could render our results spurious. However, it is entirely plausible that Catholic education might act as the intervening variable linking the proportion Catholic to ordination. If, as we argue, Catholic commitment slips as the proportion of Catholics increases, then the fraction attending parochial schools should also decline as the portion Catholic increases.

TABLE 2
RESULTS USING RATIO OF PRIESTS TO CATHOLICS

	Logistic Regression Coefficients Between Priests/Catholics and % Catholic	
	b	SE (b)
Total	-.259**	.045
Within Regions:		
East	-.166	.111
Midwest	-.513**	.100
South	-.387**	.081
West	-.090	.200
Hispanic	-.366*	.129

*More than twice its standard error.

**More than three times its standard error.

These expectations were generally fulfilled. A greater proportion of Catholic families do send their children to parochial schools in response to a less Catholic environment. And, as Table 3 shows, parochial school enrollments do account for some portion of the association between ordinations and the proportion Catholic, but the latter retains a significant independent effect. The mediating influence of Catholic education is far smaller when the ratio of priests to Catholics is used as the measure of commitment. The reason is that the association between Catholic schooling and the ratio of priests is not very strong. This probably reflects the fact that most priests in these data received their educations long before the rapid expansion of Catholic education that occurred in the 1950s, and that this expansion was not a direct reflection of prior levels of Catholic schooling, but involved a significant redistribution of Catholic educational activities. Thus, our measure of Catholic education is appropriate for studying ordination in these cohorts, but of little value when applied to the priesthood as a whole.

Overall, the results offer a robust and consistent confirmation of our hypothesis: The weaker the church numerically, the stronger it is in terms of member commitment.

Proportionately speaking, the "Protestant" South is the leading source of priestly vocations, while the Hispanic area lags far in the rear.

TABLE 3

ADDING PAROCHIAL SCHOOLING TO THE LOGISTIC REGRESSIONS

	Proportion Catholic		Parochial School Attendance	
	b	SE (b)	b	SE (b)
Ordinations	.145*	.054	.368**	.077
Priests/Catholics	.231**	.046	.145*	.066

*More than twice its standard error.

**More than three times its standard error.

Shortly before this essay was scheduled to appear, the opportunity arose to replicate the findings on an independent data set. The units of analysis were the 50 states. For each, the percent Catholic was calculated based on 1988 data published in the *Catholic Almanac, 1989*. The number of diocesan priests per 10,000 Catholics was calculated from the same source as was the ratio of the total number of priests to parishioners. Each variable displayed a great deal of variation. Thus, the ratio of priests to parishioners ranged from 23.9 per 10,000 Catholics in Arkansas, 21.9 in Alabama, and 20.2 in Mississippi, down to 6.3 in Texas and 8.2 in Rhode Island. Finally, the percentage of Catholics who subscribe to the *Catholic Digest* was calculated using 1990 data provided by the Audit Bureau of Circulation.

The results appear in Table 4. Both ratios of priests to parishioners are strongly, negatively related to the percent Catholic, fully replicating the findings based on dioceses. Perhaps even more impressive is the huge negative correlation between percent Catholic and the *Catholic Digest* circulation rate. The larger the percentage of Catholics in a state's population, the lower the proportion who express their commitment by subscribing to this national Catholic periodical.

TABLE 4

A REPLICATION BASED ON THE 50 STATES

	Correlations (r) with Percent Catholic
Priests per 10,000 Catholics	-.56**
Diocesan priests per 10,000 Catholics	-.40**
Percent of Catholics subscribing to the <i>Catholic Digest</i>	-.73**

**Significant at the .01 level.

In addition to these results, elsewhere the senior author has reported very strong negative correlations between the proportion Catholic and the ratio of priests to Catholics, using 45 nations in which the Catholic church is active as the units of analysis (Stark 1992).

CONCLUSIONS

Earlier in this essay we noted that American Catholic dioceses present an especially strong test of the theory that monopoly faiths are weak, because American Catholics have long confronted an unregulated religious economy as a minority body in the overall sense, even if they often have been a local majority. Hence, from the start, the church in America has had to compete to hold its members and to mobilize their active support — for American Catholicism has no church lands or tax support. Indeed, the church in America faced the task of activating the waves of nominally Catholic immigrants and persuading them to be far more active than they had been in Europe and to support their local parish with voluntary donations (Shaughnessy 1925). The vigorous methods by which the American Catholic Church met the challenges of a competitive environment is one of the more fascinating chapters in the history of American religion (Finke and Stark 1992). For example, no sooner had Catholics seen how effectively the evangelical Protestant bodies were using revival meetings to intensify commitment and attract new members than they launched revival campaigns of their own. Nor was this a momentary or peripheral aspect of American Catholicism. Beginning in the 1830s and lasting well into the twentieth century, Catholic revivalism was as regular a part of Catholic parish life as it was among the Baptists, Nazarenes, and other evangelical Protestant denominations (Dolan 1978).⁵ Just as local evangelical Protestant churches staged frequent revivals based on a short visit by a traveling evangelist, so most local Catholic parishes received frequent visits by members of one of the evangelizing orders.

As a result of their vigorous marketing efforts, American Catholics have long displayed very high levels of commitment when compared with the "Catholic" nations of Europe and Latin America (Stark 1992). Consequently, data on American Catholic dioceses confront the theory with a maximum challenge: predicting that despite having been greatly strengthened by competition generally, local variations in the proportion Catholic still will produce significant variations in commitment. That we obtained clean, clear, and robust findings seems especially strong support for the theory.

Even where the Catholic "monopoly" is the informal accident of migration rather than a creature of state policy, the organizational response is one of reduced vigor with a concomitant reduction in commitment. Conversely, where the church is numerically weak it is far more vigorous and effective. Perhaps this is what the Apostle Paul (II Cor. 12:10) meant when he wrote "When I am weak, then am I strong."

Be that as it may, these findings contribute substantially to the burden of contrary evidence that is bringing down the theoretical paradigm that so long dominated the sociology of religion. With the American example in front of us, we finally have begun to recognize that European doctrines about the power of religious monopolies and the weakness of religious pluralism are uninformed. Indeed, hindsight shows that sociologists of religion may have paid too much attention to the *wrong* Europeans. Instead of going along with European sociologists who pontificated in splendid isolation, we should have heeded the many nineteenth-century European visitors to America who tried to explain the vigor of American religious pluralism to their friends back home (Powell 1967). What is most striking in this literature is the frequent resort to economic reasoning about the benefits of competition. Francis Grund, an Austrian writing in 1837, is typical. Noting that "In America, every clergyman may be said to do business on his own account," Grund concluded:

5. Indeed, when the Baptists bought seven private railroad cars and put them into service as railroad churches (complete with organs and a seating capacity of more than 100) to missionize the American West, the Roman Catholics were the only denomination to follow suit, putting three railroad churches into service (Mondello 1987).

Not only have Americans a greater number of clergymen, than, in proportion to the population, can be found either on the Continent or in England; but they have not one idler amongst them; all being obligated to exert themselves for the spiritual welfare of their respective congregations. The Americans, therefore, enjoy a threefold advantage: they have more preachers; they have more active preachers, and they have cheaper preachers than can be found in any part of Europe. (quoted in Powell 1967:77,80)

Thus, not only are sociologists of religion busy constructing a new paradigm, they may be discovering some new intellectual forebears as well.

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APPENDIX

The estimate of the number of Catholic males attaining age 14 in each diocese in 1961 is based on the reported number of baptisms in the diocese in 1947 adjusted for net migration and discounted slightly for mortality. The migration adjustment incorporates the assumptions that the cohort, locally and nationally, experienced no change due to international migration or change in religious affiliation. From 1948 to 1961 the local cohorts are adjusted on the basis of the discrepancy of the number of baptisms in a diocese from the number expected, given the proportion of national baptisms occurring in the diocese the previous year and the number of baptisms nationally in the current year. Assuming that the natural growth in baptisms is constant over dioceses, the discrepancy between observed and expected baptisms will reflect migration by young Catholic families. To infer how many net moves occurred among those a year old in 1947, a national schedule of age-specific migration rates was used to construct ratios for the number of migrants per "migratory birth." These ratios were applied to the discrepancies over each of the 14 years. The result of this procedure was to decrease cohort size in some older dioceses in the Northeast and Midwest and to increase cohort size in parts of the South and Southwest. The procedure is conservative relative to the use of uncorrected 1947 baptisms, since it reduces the ordination rate in areas low in Catholic population and increases the rate in the highly Catholic areas. Moreover, the adjustment does not appear to generate influential cases — the coefficients reported in this essay are not altered when those dioceses most affected by the adjustment are deleted. The results are also little affected when the Mexican-American dioceses of the Southwest, which are most likely to deviate from the assumptions relative to international migration, differential fertility, and differential mortality, are excluded from the regressions.