

The sociology of Catholicism: A review of research and scholarship

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Abstract

This article seeks to review recent research and scholarship in the sociology of Catholicism, as well as focusing on areas needing greater attention. In taking stock of this literature, I identify institutional change, church-society interactions, institutional resources and influence, and the church as international actor as four key topics that have engaged scholarship. I review existing research under each, as well as highlighting gaps and blind spots that invite further inquiry of this specific religious group.

KEYWORDS

sociology Catholicism international comparative agenda-setting

1 | INTRODUCTION

The sociology of Catholicism has experienced impressive expansion over the last 20 years or so and continues to grow. This article attempts to map recent published literature on this religious tradition across a number of organizing themes, and to identify areas needing further research.

Catholicism has claimed the attention of sociologists over the years because it represents an interesting and fertile prism through which a range of issues of wider ongoing concern to sociologists such as authority and power structures, the politicization of religion, the development of a moral order, the impact of broader cultural developments on social institutions, and more can be studied, especially in international comparative terms. Of course, this is true for other religious traditions as well but most of these topics or issues also have a uniquely Catholic expression.

Even though Catholicism is a global religious institution of historic and contemporary political impact and significance (Casanova, 1993, 1994), with a presence in virtually every corner of the globe, its sociological study, as with sociology more generally, has been largely dominated by US-based and, to a lesser extent, UK-based, research. Stated differently, the study of Catholicism is a well-worn path in Protestant-heavy American and British sociology of religion (Bruce, 2013; Greeley, 1979; Hornsby-Smith, 1987, 1989), but much less so in other national sociologies.

American sociologists themselves have not frequently investigated this religious group outside of their own national setting.

And while perceptive reviews of prior work exist (e.g., Cavendish, 2007; Greeley, 1979), unfortunately these do not consider Catholicism beyond the US case. Tellingly, the last edited collection on national varieties of global Catholicism, bringing together scholarly reflections on more than 20 local contexts in varying world regions, dates back to over 30 years ago (Gannon, 1988). The question remains of how far the US-heavy focus of research reflects the experience of Catholicism in other settings, especially those with very different social conditions to those prevailing in the US case.

In addition, while the literature reflects the use of a wide range of data and methodologies including social surveys, participant observation, content analysis, and so forth, it is also characterized by unevenness. Existing research is dominated by qualitative studies and large-scale social surveys, with mixed-method-based designs (e.g., Baggett, 2009; Bullivant, 2019) being uncommon. Qualitative work typically focuses on a single case, but some cross-national studies also exist (e.g., Mooney, 2009; Palacios, 2007). Even so, within the qualitative tradition there are some neglected approaches such as object elicitation, which recent studies have sought to address in relation to Catholic religiosity in non-Western contexts (e.g., Morello, 2018). On the quantitative side, while several US nationally representative studies exist (e.g., D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Meyers, 2001; D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Gautier, 2007; D'Antonio, Dillon, & Gautier, 2013), cross-regional comparative approaches are relatively scarce (e.g., Conway & Spruyt, 2018).

Empirically, prior research shows that overall slightly more than a quarter (29.7%) of social scientific studies of Catholicism report positive findings (i.e., findings which report positive outcomes for religious phenomena at the individual, organizational or societal level). To put this figure in context, 23% of articles about Protestants reported positive findings. Compared to other Christian traditions, studies of Catholicism tend to be less likely to consider religion as a primary explanatory variable (41.7% vs. 49.6% for Protestantism), pointing to the relative weakness of the “strong program” (i.e., the positing of religion as a causal or predictor variable) in this faith tradition (Smilde & May, 2010).

As with any other religious tradition, Catholicism is embedded in a broader social context which has evolved significantly over time, especially since Vatican II (1962–1965). Compared to 50 or 60 years ago, Catholicism today is facing challenges that would have been largely unheard of in earlier generations, including growing secularization, lay demands, sexual scandal, personnel shortages, and more (Cavendish, 2007; Greeley, 2004a; Seidler & Meyer, 1989; Zech et al., 2017). And it is clear that these shifting social realities have influenced the topics, issues and problems sociologists of Catholicism have taken up. In this regard, I identify institutional change, church-society interactions, institutional resources and influence, and the church as international actor as the key issues that have engaged scholarship. Although these themes partially overlap, nonetheless they provide a useful framework for organizing the literature.

Given the quite expansive literature on Catholicism and the constraints of a single review article, a brief note on the (in)exclusion criteria is in order. I included studies in this review with a disciplinary focus on sociology, except for making a point of comparison with another discipline. As this is more a representative than an exhaustive review, space limitations precluded tackling every area of study: some domains, such as ethnic groups are not included and, in any case, are already well served by existing research bibliographies (e.g., Bruce, 2013).

This article is organized around the four analytical themes. Under each theme, I first discuss published studies in a “where we have come from” section. Following this, I then discuss gaps and blind spots in the literature and directions for future research, mapping out “where we might go” in the future. Here, I pay particular attention to the “de-centering” agenda (Bender et al., 2013; see also Casanova, 2006; Smith et al., 2013) of going beyond US-based studies by conducting more international comparative research. The final section summarizes the article and offers some reflections on the broader lessons of the review.

As mentioned, I organized the literature around four major themes, which are discussed in turn.

2 | INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

Studies under this heading address big future-oriented church events (Ebaugh, 1991; Greeley, 2004b; Seidler & Meyer, 1989; Wilde, 2007), structural and cultural changes in parishes (Adler et al., 2019; Bruce, 2017; Castelli & Gremillion, 1987; Gray et al., 2011; Wittberg, 2012; Zech et al., 2017) and moral coherence/fragmentation (Davidson et al., 1997; Konieczny, 2013; Konieczny et al., 2016).

Melissa Wilde's work on the voting patterns of bishops at Vatican II, a global ecumenical council aimed at "updating" the church in relation to the modern world, advances our knowledge of religious governance by arguing, bringing in a basic insight of social movement theory and research, that better organized actors are better placed to bring about change. For example, progressive bishops from Latin America were able to mobilize more effectively for reform than their more traditionalist Western European episcopal counterparts as well as Vatican bureaucrats because they put in place a well-organized group to represent and advance their collective interests. Drawing on archival records of bishops' votes held in Vatican repositories, Wilde also shows that bishops' key concerns at the council were shaped by their national setting which made some more concerned than others about their legitimacy within it, especially the majority/minority status of the local church and its degree of religious diversity (Wilde, 2007).

While Wilde's work focused on a rare international church event, research in this category typically focuses on parishes, the basic organizing unit of the church, usually employing a mix of survey, ethnographic and interview data (e.g., Bruce, 2017). Several studies provide an updated picture of parishes (e.g., Adler et al., 2019; Zech et al., 2017) from earlier research in the 1980s (e.g., Castelli & Gremillion, 1987; Welch & Leege, 1988) and basically view parishes as organizational structures nested within a changing social world, both in the narrow sense of a specific local setting and in the broad sense of an historic faith (Adler et al., 2019).

The main vectors of change in parish life have been demographic churning¹ (i.e., (im)migration) and pastoral leadership churning brought on by declines in clergy and religious, increasing lay leadership roles and growth in the permanent diaconate (Adler et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2011; Hoge, 1987), leading to important institutional changes. For example, because of priest shortages nowadays clustered parishes co-organize ministries in areas such as religious formation and sacramental preparation (Gray et al., 2011). Sociologists have attempted to spotlight these changes more and make a case for studying parishes, located in the mid-range space between ordinary devotees and religious authorities, as a lens through which Catholicism itself, as well as broader social changes of interest to sociologists in general can be better understood (Adler et al., 2019).

One example of this is recent work on the phenomenon of personal parishes serving mainly ethnic-based/devotional-based preferences (e.g., Hispanic parishes/traditional Latin Mass parishes) as opposed to traditional geographic needs, highlighting how elite-driven structural change responds to niche groups within the "big tent" of an increasingly pluralistic laity, but at the potential cost of greater fracturing in the wider church (Bruce, 2017).

Other churning in parishes is driven by ideological diversity within Catholicism, especially relating to conflicts around contested issues such as gender roles and family practices. Based on ethnographic data gathered in a conservative and progressive Catholic parish in a midwestern US city, Mary Ellen Konieczny shows how diverging "liberal" and "conservative" viewpoints that emerged after Vatican II continue to influence how ordinary church-going Catholics think about marriage and family, as well as broader social issues. These liberal and conservative divides, which often articulate with liturgical approaches in parishes, are buttressed by parishes' emotionally charged ways of thinking or schemas (e.g., church as "family," church as "community") that underwrite different Catholic identities (Konieczny, 2013).

Aside from Wilde's study which investigates religious authority dynamics at Vatican II itself, the literature under this heading (which has a strong US bias) shows that compared to 20 or 30 years ago Catholicism is responding to various demands from "below," including social diversity brought on by immigration and demographic growth, struggles over emotionally charged moral issues, and a laity more committed to exercising their own moral decision-making. Research on this topic has a strong parish focus, a key site of innovation and conservation in the

church, While parish studies date back to the 1950s in the US case (Adler et al., 2019; Cavendish, 2007; Fichter, 1951), nowadays sociologists are less interested in catch-all geographical parishes than in new kinds of voluntarist parishes, how parishes act as carriers of different varieties of Catholic doctrine and practice, and how parishes are adapting to changes in their external social worlds.

Apart from demographic, leadership and ideological churning, institutional change within the church is also driven by technological change. In this regard, students of Catholicism would do well to pay more attention to bringing Catholicism into dialogue with other disciplinary subfields that often talk past one another. Although previous studies bring Catholicism into contact with subfields such as the sociology of social movements (e.g., Coleman, 2013; Pogorelc, 2011; Summers Effler, 2010), there is scope for greater intra-discipline contact with others such as the sociology of digital technology. Although some Catholic-specific studies of this topic exist (e.g., MacMillen, 2011), we still know relatively little about how Catholics engage, interpret and respond to such things as prayer apps, online Masses and pilgrimages, social media and other online spaces as bolstering (or eroding) influences on their subjective faith in local parishes.

Relatedly, there is considerable scope for further research on how digital technologies influence other areas of Catholic institutional life, such as pastoral ministry. To take one example, the ongoing global pandemic has prompted Catholic parishes in some countries to celebrate online Masses and other sacramental rituals, changes which may well have long-run post-pandemic impacts on everyday parish life, including institutional resources and influence.

Of course, future work on institutional innovation would also benefit from greater study of parishes in settings apart from the dominant UK and US cases (e.g., Bruce, 2017; Hornsby-Smith, 1989), as well as how moral polarization is experienced in parishes and beyond in diverse national contexts.

Even Vatican II itself warrants greater attention from sociologists: although the dynamics of Vatican II have been well studied, we know much less about how this important event was lived through afterwards—"long Vatican II"—in local contexts in different world regions. In this regard, parish studies rightly draw sociological attention away from Catholic leaders (Adler et al., 2019), but a decentralized sociology of Catholicism could be developed more by taking the lead from other disciplines such as history and religious studies (e.g., Sprows Cummings et al., 2018) in privileging the (arch)diocese more as a level of analysis in research on institutional innovation, especially in less well studied world regions such as Africa and Asia (e.g., Vaidyanathan, 2018).

3 | CHURCH-SOCIETY INTERACTIONS

Within this category, studies have examined post-secularity, church-state connections and religious claims making in political life (e.g., Adler, 2015; Conway, 2014a; Dillon, 1996, 2018; Mooney, 2006; Wood, 2016, 2019), changes authorized by Vatican II. José Casanova's work is a key reference point in this area, showcasing diverse expressions of Catholicism across different contexts, as well as within singular cases (Casanova, 1994). Although not focused solely on this religious tradition, Casanova analyses the Catholic cases of Brazil, Poland and Spain to advance an argument about the continuing public voice of religion in the modern world, amidst declining belief and practice at an individual level and the differentiation of religion from other social institutions. Supporting this three-thirds theory, Casanova shows how in each setting Catholic leaders speak out in pastoral letters and public statements on faith and morals as well as socio-political issues, exercising prophetic ministry on behalf of Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Similarly, recent work applies German philosopher Jurgen Habermas's concept of post-secularity, whereby secularization is understood as a basic feature of modern societies even as religious bodies continue to exert a strong public voice about pressing social issues, to the Catholic case (Dillon, 2018). This concept also stresses the mutually correcting possibilities of the secular and religious worlds, each taking the other to task. Based on US survey data and an analysis of the discourses and actions of the Francis papacy, Dillon argues that the church will

remain relevant in the modern world to the extent that it successfully straddles secular/religious, traditional/modern and inclusivist/exclusivist divisions. This is well expressed in Pope Francis's regular communication of Catholic teachings in a way that ordinary people can understand (Dillon, 2018).

How do Catholicism's public interactions play out at the local-level far removed from the centralized world of the Vatican? David Yamane's work investigates religious politics by focusing on the role of state-level episcopal assemblies in the US. This research shows how bishops balance exclusivist and inclusivist outlooks by appealing to secular and religious legitimations in their political claims making, depending on the moral issue at play. As institutional entities, bishops' assemblies employ lay secular professionals to carry out their day-to-day work while retaining episcopal oversight. By combining this "agency structure" with an "authority structure," bishops' assemblies engage in effective political activism in legislative arenas from a faith-based perspective. This means that religion has "two faces," so to speak, in contemporary society: religious institutions are exerting less influence over other secular institutions while at the same time engaging in new ways with the secular world (Yamane, 2005), but without liquidating their legitimacy (Braunstein, 2017). Similarly, Catholic social welfare organizations downplay explicitly religious idioms in front-line services to meet state-driven secular expectations, even as they make high-level appeals to religious ideas in public claims making (Bruce, 2006).

Yet, the church is a multivocal container for a variety of voices (Wood, 2016) that extends beyond the Pope, bishops or state-level agencies. For example, in the US case a complex power struggle often exists between religious orders and congregations and the ecclesiastical hierarchy over the proper direction of its political stances (Burns, 1994), the relative autonomy of the former often providing leverage for more progressive activism (e.g., Braunstein, 2017) even if it does not rise to the level of more radical versions found in other parts of the global church such as Latin America (Burns, 1994; see also Shortell, 2001).

The literature under this heading shows that Catholicism is a "public religion" (Casanova, 1994), whose symbolic weight varies across societies. It is adaptable to the secular world (Bruce, 2006) and tends to gain greater traction when its moral activism does not always appeal in denomination-specific terms (e.g., Béraud & Portier, 2015; Braunstein, 2017; Conway, 2014a; Dillon, 1996). Here, the church is less the parish than national Catholic leaders, state-level bishops' organizations, social welfare organizations, individual Catholic bishops or religious orders and congregations.

Future work in the church-society interactions category could also benefit from paying more attention to what post-secular Catholicism, or other models of church-state interactions, looks like in non-US settings especially in the world regions of Africa and Asia, the interactions between discursive engagements and institutional resources in diverse settings, and how the discursive and institutional aspects of Catholicism are similar to or different from those of other religious traditions in varying cross-cultural contexts and historical periods (e.g., Altinordu, 2010).

Research falling into this first category rightly focuses on the discursive practices of elite religious actors in church-state interactions. However, secular-religious interactions can also take place through civil society groups. In this regard, Catholicism comprises a fascinating range of lay groups, movements and associations, reflecting quite varied organizational models, that contribute to its internal diversity. Past research investigates several of these including Catholic Action (e.g., Poggi, 1967), Catholic Worker (e.g., Spickard, 2005; Summers Effler, 2010; Yukich, 2010), Charismatic Renewal (e.g., Althoff & Thorsen, 2018; Bord & Faulkner, 1983; Lawson, 1999; Neitz, 1987), *Comunione e Liberazione* (Communion and Liberation) (e.g., Davis & Robinson, 2012) and *Opus Dei* (e.g., Casanova, 1982, 1983; Estruch, 1995), but this work is now quite dated or focuses on a single national setting or world region, and thus invites further research. There are also relatively few comparisons between different lay-led movements across different historical periods within single cases (e.g., Irby, 2019; Pogorelc, 2011).

As it engages with a secular world characterized by plurality, the church sees itself as a carrier of memory (Pace, 2007; see also Hervieu-Léger, 1994, 2000) that is respectful of political norms (Wood, 2016) as it puts forward its values for others in society to hear rather than insisting on them (Joas, 2015; Pace, 2007), even as its own institutional resources and influence, at least in many advanced Western societies, are waning.

4 | INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES AND INFLUENCE

Past research falling into this category has examined issues as varied as lay activism (Bruce, 2011; D'Antonio & Pogorelc, 2007; Nepstad, 2019a), institutional elites (Bruce, 2017; Fichter et al., 2019; Luft, 2020; Nepstad, 2019b), sexual scandal (Blasi & Oviedo, 2020; Conway, 2014b; Keenan, 2012), personnel shortages (Fishman & Jones, 2007; Fishman et al., 2015; Schoenherr, 2002; Stark & Finke, 2000), intergenerational retention (Hoge et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2014), attitudes and beliefs/practices (Baggett, 2009; Bruce, 2018; Loveland, 2008), conversions (Ellis, 2017; Hoge, 1981; Manglos, 2010; Yamane, 2014; Yamane et al., 2006), marriage annulments (Wilde, 2001), institutional vibrancy (Diotallevi, 2002; Finke & Wittberg, 2000; Kowalewski, 1993; Stark, 1992; Sun, 2019) and giving (Starks & Smith, 2013).

Increasingly, mention of Catholicism in the public domain is framed negatively, in terms of scandal, mostly related to clerical child sex abuse and leadership deficits in responding to it (Blasi & Oviedo, 2020; Conway, 2014b). Most studies focus on a single country case (e.g., Bruce, 2011; D'Antonio & Pogorelc, 2007), and comparative work is rare (e.g., Conway, 2014b). Bruce's study, which draws on social movement theory, investigates lay activism in the US church, a key flashpoint of the scandals, as a case study of intrainstitutional mobilization (Bruce, 2011). Focusing on the Boston-based Voice of the Faithful (see also D'Antonio & Pogorelc, 2007), she shows how this group, treading the often fine line between criticism and commitment, successfully mobilized to demand greater accountability from the church leadership, even as it fell short of bringing about hoped-for levels of organizational change. Michele Dillon's earlier research also examines lay activism, in relation to gender and sexuality, finding that intra-institutional change efforts by more liberal-leaning Catholics often involve appeals to Catholic doctrine itself as much as secular notions (Dillon, 1999).

Sociologists have proposed explanations to account for Catholic sex abuse. Marie Keenan's argument rests on the concept of "perfect celibate clerical masculinity" (Keenan, 2012, p. xxx), whereby the church's disciplinary rule of celibacy contributed to individual and organizational dysfunctions that facilitated abuse of children within the church. At the individual level, Keenan's narratives of offending clergy bring forth their difficulty of incorporating celibacy into their everyday lives. This was heightened by an institutional church which in its teachings and formation processes valorized commitment to celibacy without adequately preparing its personnel for living out their ministry under this demanding disciplinary rule (Keenan, 2012).

This celibacy rule is also linked to the growing priest shortage problem in the Western church, partially exacerbated by scandal. Thus, it is not surprising that sociologists have turned their attention to better understanding trend lines in male recruitment and retention (e.g., Conway, 2016; Fishman & Jones, 2007; Hoge, 2011; Schoenherr, 2002; Schoenherr & Young, 1993; Stark & Finke, 2000), as well as the views and experiences of male personnel (e.g., Gautier et al., 2012; Hoge, 2002, 2011; Sullins, 2013).

Previous studies also investigate the numerically more prominent female workforce (e.g., Ebaugh, 1993; Finke, 1997; Johnson et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2014; Wittberg, 1994, 2000), but with relatively few studies employing a cross-national approach (e.g., Ebaugh et al., 1996) or considering non-US cases (e.g., Bezjak, 2012). Perhaps reflecting the gendered segmentation of the church's workforce, studies investigating both male and female religious and clergy together (e.g., Blasi & Zimmerman, 2004) are relatively uncommon.

Research has also investigated the emergence of new post-Vatican II personnel categories such as permanent deacons and married convert priests (e.g., Sullins, 2016; Wallace, 2003) as well as female ministries (e.g., Ecklund, 2006; Wallace, 1991, 1992), and the feminist or agentic influences they came under in the US (e.g., Wallace, 1991, 1992) and elsewhere (e.g., Gervais, 2012; Trzebiatowska, 2013).

Explanations for growth/decline in the church's workforce focus on a number of causal factors, including secular opportunity, critical events, personnel demands, regime changes and obligatory celibacy (Conway, 2016; Ebaugh, 1993; Finke, 1997; Fishman & Jones, 2007; Schoenherr, 2002).

Against the background of these and other changes and their possible impact on Catholic retention, the religiosity of young adult Catholics has attracted considerable attention from sociologists, regarding the US case

(e.g., Hoge et al., 2001; Smith et al., 2014) and elsewhere (e.g., Bullivant, 2018; Fulton et al., 2000; Manglos, 2010). However, research on pious young Catholics, as in religious studies (e.g., Dugan, 2019), is lacking. Based on survey and interview data, Christian Smith and colleagues investigated the religious/spiritual lives of young adult US Catholics in the 18–23-year-old age category amidst significant socio-historic changes—including growing education, economic insecurity and changes in personal behaviors—and highlight the importance of parental religious socialization in prolonging Catholic values in the next generation (Smith et al., 2014).

The religiosity of ordinary Catholics (mostly in the US and UK contexts) has also attracted attention from scholars (e.g., Baggett, 2009; D'Antonio et al., 2001, 2007, 2013; Hornsby-Smith, 1987), employing both quantitative and mixed-method approaches. Even so, relatively little attention has been given to meaning-making in the sacraments of reconciliation (e.g., Beste, 2011), baptism (e.g., Alfani et al., 2012), first communion (e.g., Kaczmarek-Day, 2018) and confirmation, especially in international comparative terms. Relatedly, although Marian devotion occupies a central place in the Catholic tradition sociologists, apart from rare exceptions (e.g., Hynes, 2008), have paid relatively little attention to it, leaving work on this and its plural relations with Catholic authorities mainly to anthropologists, historians and religious studies scholars.

Most studies find a growing values gap between church elites and ordinary devotees, especially regarding human sexuality (D'Antonio et al., 2001, 2007, 2013; Hout & Greeley, 1987; Hout, 2016). This may be heightened in the case of marginal groups within Catholicism, such as gay/lesbian Catholics (Dillon, 1999; Loseke & Cavendish, 2001; Wedow et al., 2017).

On the mixed methods side, Baggett's research investigates the beliefs and practices of ordinary adherents in the US context and finds that there is no simple understanding of "being Catholic" among devotees, especially as they seek to negotiate the binary categories of tradition and modernity in their everyday faith journeys. Based on 300 in-depth interviews and surveys with engaged Catholic informants drawn from five select diverse parishes in a California (arch)diocese, Baggett's study found varying views/opinions regarding key tenets of Catholicism, including relations with their religious superiors (Baggett, 2009).

One aspect of Catholics' religiosity that has received more attention in recent times, though not much beyond Western contexts, is the phenomenon of "cultural Catholics," a residual category who have given up regular practice, rejected the church's teachings or embraced a secular lifestyle but still self-identify as Catholic when asked about their religious identification in social surveys (Bruce, 2018; Demerath, 2003).

This "gene pool" of Catholics for whom Catholicism is a kind of forcefield is likely to continue to grow, a sign of the church's weakness on the one hand and strength on the other. It is a weakness because it indicates a sort of shallow identification with the church. At the same time, it is a strength as it shows Catholicism's relatively wide reach beyond more committed devotees. More generally, such studies and others (e.g., Cipriani, 2009; Hout, 2016; Starks, 2013) bring out the internal plurality among Catholic adherents.

This Catholic "stickiness" may be partially explained by studies of conversions, the subject of research in the US (e.g., Yamane, 2014; Yamane et al., 2006), as well as African contexts (e.g., Manglos, 2010). Converts from rather to Catholicism have also attracted sociological attention (e.g., Perl, 2005).

Yamane investigates the RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) program in the US, which prepares adults who want to join the church, focusing on the "how" and "why" questions of the conversion process. Regarding the "why" question, Yamane argues that pre-existing social ties play a significant role, such as having a partner or spouse who is Catholic, but also that individual conversion decisions are shaped by broader culturally available perspectives emphasizing familism or the quest to find one's home in family life, especially amidst the strong countervailing pull of opposing forces in today's society. As regards the "how" question, Yamane emphasizes the role of ritual involvements whereby converts learn to become Catholics through ongoing participation in the faith's ritual life, as well as increasing their knowledge of the tradition's sacraments (Yamane, 2014).

Moving to the macro-level, one of the noteworthy aspects of Catholicism is the existence of a "Catholic effect," whereby majority-Catholic countries seem to enjoy a vibrancy not as evident in other religious traditions. Diotallevi brings attention to internal competition in the Italian case to help explain the relative vibrancy of this

Catholic-majority country that existing secularization and religious market perspectives cannot account for. For example, religious order personnel compete with another and with the diocesan system for recruits among the Catholic laity. Similarly, a diversity of lay associations compete with another and with parishes for volunteer members, financial resources, and more. Even so, these different competitors still respect, and may even be supported by, the church's centralized authority structure (Diotallevi, 2002).

In line with the notion that competition spurs religiosity, other research from a religious economy perspective argues that Catholic-majority societies conform to the "lazy" monolith syndrome, except in cases where religion and national identity have historically been tight (e.g., Ireland, Québec). Conversely, where Catholicism is a minority group and competes with other religions it tends to be more vibrant (Stark, 1992; Stark & McCann, 1993).

Studying internal variation within the Catholic case (e.g., Diotallevi, 1999; Martin, 1988) is important as it demonstrates how regionalized historical inheritances of Catholicism may impact such things as religious commitment (e.g., Diotallevi, 1999), even if sociologists have paid less attention than political scientists have to its impact on non-religious outcomes such as political behavior (e.g., Haffert, 2020). More generally, without focused attention to subnational effects, sociologists run the risk of making overly generalized claims about the influence of Catholic culture and identity. The tempering of such claims may also be prompted by comparing aspects of Catholicism with secular world parallels, as political scientists have usefully done (e.g., Katzenstein, 1998; Warner, 2019).

Likewise, female and male religious orders and congregations have acted as sources of vibrancy in the church over the years, even at a global level (Banchoff & Casanova, 2016), by responding to emerging needs as well as by developing new or refreshing old devotional practices, while still operating within Catholicism's "big tent" (Bendyna, 2006; Finke & Wittberg, 2000).

Studies that fall into the institutional resources and influence category all examine, in one way or another, new challenges and demands on Catholicism that were not there to the same extent a generation ago, such as demands for elite accountability, disconnection between lay people and church authorities, and the declining ability of this religious group to reproduce itself. Research under this theme investigates the church at different levels of analysis, from the individual and institutional to the societal. These studies suggest that Catholic retention and the church's capacity to meet future challenges is gradually being eroded, especially in the advanced Western world.

Where might the study of institutional resources and influence go in the years ahead? While research under this theme covers a diverse range of topics, here I center the church's institutional power and authority.

Although prior research on Catholic elites in historical and contemporary perspective exists (e.g., Bruce, 2017; Luft, 2020; Nepstad, 2019b; Vaidyanathan, 2019), relatively little work investigates the internal workings of the top decision-making actors in the church, especially in cross-national perspective.

Fichter and colleagues's recent work provides a useful template for how such "inside the church" research should proceed. Based on an analysis of the US bishops, they provide a picture of the church from an ecclesiastical perspective, showing the difficulties and upsides bishops face in their day-to-day episcopal ministry (Fichter et al., 2019). Interestingly, contemporary bishops are not averse to participating in interview- or survey-driven social scientific research, with archival research having rich possibilities for more historically oriented approaches (e.g., Luft, 2020; Wilde, 2007).

An instructive example of behind-the-scenes research also comes from the application of social network analysis (SNA) to the study of Catholic authorities, especially regarding the phenomenon of sexual abuse (e.g., Bullivant & Sadewo, 2020). While open to the criticism of lacking specificity about the mechanisms through which networks influence cultural processes, this approach to ecclesiastical politics could nonetheless be extended to other national hierarchies, especially in non-Western contexts.

Reaching even further above national ecclesiastical affairs, sociologists could investigate the Vatican bureaucracy more. Here the Vatican's rich archives would be a beneficial starting point, which, with rare exceptions (e.g., Wilde, 2007), have scarcely been touched by sociologists. These include repositories relating to the college of cardinals, papal court, roman curia, apostolic nunciatures, and more (Blouin, 1998). To take one example, drilling

down into nunciature archives could provide a fascinating insight into church-society interactions (the second guiding theme of this article) and how the Vatican seeks to influence church affairs in different national contexts. Because these archives include materials regarding different countries and world regions, they provide fascinating but as yet largely unrealized opportunities for international comparative research.

What of Catholicism cast in broader international terms, beyond the prominent US case?

5 | THE CHURCH AS INTERNATIONAL ACTOR

Under the final theme, research has investigated a broad range of issues such as professional workers (Vaidyanathan, 2019), state violence (Morello, 2015), prophetic ministry (Casanova, 1993; Dobbelaere & Pérez-Agote, 2015), apostasy (Bullivant, 2019; Hout, 2016), civil society mobilization (Palacios, 2007), fertility patterns (Berman et al., 2012) and beliefs/practices (Conway & Spruyt, 2018). Several studies using large-scale social surveys investigate multiple countries within a single world region, though not necessarily investigating Catholics per se (e.g., Coutinho, 2016; Davie, 2000; Dobbelaere & Voyé, 1991; Pollack, 2008; Pollack & Rosta, 2017; Voas & Doebler, 2011; Zrinščak, 2011)), but cross-regional comparisons (e.g., Conway & Spruyt, 2018) are much less common. Most studies are single-case ones of the many national variants of Catholicism (e.g., Coleman, 1978; Ganiel, 2016; Zubrzycki, 2006) or compare two societies (e.g., Bullivant, 2019; Palacios, 2007; Vaidyanathan, 2019). Studies of Catholicism in non-Western Asian settings are relatively uncommon, with research on the female workforce in China (e.g., Leung & Wittberg, 2004), Chinese Catholics (e.g., Liu & Leung, 2002; Madsen, 1998; Sun, 2019; Wang, 2006) and corporate Catholic professionals in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and India being exceptions (e.g., Vaidyanathan, 2019).

Here, I highlight three select contexts (Argentina, China and Québec) that go beyond the US-heavy focus of past research, studies that involve comparison between two big societies, and studies that compare three societies.

A large social science literature exists about Catholicism in Latin America (e.g., Casanova, 1994; Chesnut, 2007; Mackin, 2010; Morello et al., 2017; Smith, 1991; Smith & Prokopy, 1999), including from a sociological perspective. Gustavo Morello's work investigates the multiplicity of meanings of Catholicism in one Latin American society, Argentina, during that country's "Dirty War" in the 1970s. Taking a up-close look at the single case of responses to the 1976 kidnapping of Catholic personnel by government forces, Morello identifies different Catholic types – "committed," "institutional" and "anti-secular" – in terms of their responses to political violence in general, each rooted in different models of "proper" church-society interactions (Morello, 2015).

Madsen also employs ethnographic observation to analyze the lives of ordinary Chinese Catholics, in their underground/official and rural/urban versions, in a religiously pluralized country evolving from authoritarian rule toward a consumer-oriented society. He develops a mainly negative argument about the church's contribution to developing a vibrant civil society owing to a mix of cultural and historical legacies, including a repressive state as well as the church's own lack of a socially involved tradition. Even so, the church's potentialities regarding civil society activism are also acknowledged, especially in light of more recent Vatican II-inspired renewal and the example of neighboring national churches in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Madsen, 1998).

By contrast, in the case of Québec the church historically played a very significant civil society role until the 1960s, when this expansive influence reduced quite significantly and rapidly (Christiano, 2007; Martin, 1988; Nault & Meunier, 2017). It may well be that in this locale the church sowed the seeds of its own decline through its involvements in lay organizational activity stretching back long before the 1960s, which taught a new Québec generation to be less passively reliant on their former Catholic superiors (Christiano, 2007). Even so, more recent research suggests that regarding its treatment of religious minorities Québec's Catholic past has not been completely liquidated (Zubrzycki, 2013).

Two-country studies allow for direct paired comparison of cases. Based on participant observation and over 200 interviews with cosmopolitan "knowledge workers" in the global, quickly expanding cities of Bangalore and

Dubai, Vaidyanathan's work investigates how these elite professional workers manage conflicting demands of work and religion, finding that workers hold together opposing and mutually influencing "mercenary" and "missionary" worldviews about self and others in their everyday lives, representing the quest for power/status on the one hand and interior spirituality/belonging on the other. Vaidyanathan develops a cultural sociology of these moral "types," focusing on such things as narrative scripts and habituation, to explain their persistence (Vaidyanathan, 2019).

Another two-country study investigates Catholic apostasy, Catholics who were Catholic before but are not anymore, in the British and US contexts, while also bringing in some initial reflection on other national contexts (Bullivant, 2019). This work presents "broad" trend lines for apostasy in these two settings based on social surveys alongside a "deep" qualitative portrait from small-scale studies of what this category look like in practice. In this account, Catholicism since the 1960s faces more competitors than ever before, in terms of other religions and none (plausibility), leisure activities to do (networks) and models of the "good life" (credibility). Ultimately, this study settles on a causal role for Vatican II in the Catholic apostasy story, while also acknowledging its co-occurrence with a broad range of other socio-cultural forces including urbanization, educational expansion, consumer culture, and more (Bullivant, 2019).

A third example of a two-country study is Palacios's comparative study of Mexico and the US, which investigates how Catholic social teaching, as reflected in Papal writings and Vatican II documents, are differently understood and implemented in different national settings. Based on an ethnographic case study of a distressed urban parish in each national setting as well as interviews with lay and clerical personnel, Palacios shows that the local specificities of these shared teachings vary *between* national churches, according to wider contextual factors such as the civil society and political opportunity structure, as well as church histories (Palacios, 2007).

Extending this cross-national comparative study to three societies in two world regional contexts, Mooney's work examines the interactions between how migrants interpret their adaptation experiences in light of their faith lives and how religious institutions help migrants integrate into society. Based on a multi-site study of Haitian Catholics in Montreal (Canada), Paris (France) and Miami (US) and drawing on interview, observational and census data, this work makes a positive argument about the capacity of Catholicism to help immigrants adapt to living in a new society, though its social service involvements and religious rituals. It also shows that while religion as a meaning system is basically similar across the three locales, religion as an institutional bulwark varies across them, depending on varying church-state interactions (Mooney, 2009).

Overall, studies that fall into the church as international actor category expand our understanding of Catholicism beyond the dominant US case, and often serve as a corrective to the Western world-heavy focus of extant research. They typically involve direct comparison of cases, seeking to drill down into how national contexts influence the form Catholicism takes. Regarding studies that focus on a couple of countries, very often they spotlight Catholicism in large, populous countries, including the US. Yet, empirical gaps remain in this international focus. There are relatively few studies of Catholicism in African contexts (e.g., Conway, 2014a, 2014b; Manglos, 2010), one area where Catholicism is growing. While research in this category analyses the church at different levels, there is a dearth of international comparative research on the church in different world regions.

Another research agenda relates to the work of global Catholic entities such as Caritas Internationalis. This operates as Catholicism's international human development program with a long-standing tradition (established in 1951) serving the poor and needy in different parts of the globe, often by partnering with secular non-governmental organizations. It channels money, staff and other resources into some of the world's most distressing situations. Although some studies of entities like this exist (e.g., Cherry, 2014; Coleman, 2013; Della Cava, 1993, 1997), more light could be shed on how Catholic aid organizations mobilize transnationally to provide a range of public goods and how these local contexts in turn influence global religious activism. Comparisons of Catholic transnationalism with that of other religious traditions are also badly needed (e.g., Della Cava, 2001; Menjívar, 1999), facilitating closer analysis of the impact of teachings and institutional structures across religious groups (Altinordu, 2013).

At the individual level of analysis, students of Catholicism would do well to pay more attention to the beliefs and practices of ordinary Catholics, especially in the world regions of Africa and Asia, notwithstanding the relative lack of a survey tradition and research infrastructure in these locales. In this regard, large-scale representative surveys such as the World Values Survey may have an under-appreciated potential. While not concerning Catholics per se, these surveys do include Catholics and thus allow us to better understand this distinct group in relation to other religious groups, especially in cross-national perspective. To date, we know much less about Catholicism in Uganda than we do in the US and much less about Catholicism in small countries like Slovakia than in big ones such as Germany. What is missed by investigating a large country and what can we stand to benefit by paying more attention to smaller ones? The inclusion of less studied settings would allow sociologists to make comparisons between societies that are not frequently compared and showcase the plurality within this religious tradition, as well as to bring in contexts often omitted from standard accounts of Catholic religiosity.

Similarly, more qualitative cross-regional comparisons of Catholics and other identity categories (e.g., Izienicki, 2017) could help sociologists better understand how different contexts influence diverse expressions of Catholic identity, especially marginal ones.

6 | CONCLUSION

This article has sought to provide a mapping of recent research in the sociology of Catholicism around the four key organizing themes of institutional change, church-society interactions, institutional resources and influence, and the church as international actor. Although sociologists are more accustomed to thinking in terms of the sociology of religion more broadly rather than the sociology of specific religious traditions (Conway & Spruyt, 2018), focusing on just the Catholic case is instructive as it helps to show how these general features and dynamics, which apply to virtually all religious groups, play out within a distinct religious tradition.

While I have treated the four themes guiding this snapshot review as discrete categories, in practice they often overlap, interact with or sometimes even undermine one another. For example, the church's institutional resources and influence frequently influence its interactions with society, as in the case of Communist Poland, where the church mobilized its institutional weight, especially through the charismatic personality of Pope John Paul II, to symbolically challenge an authoritarian political regime (Casanova, 1993; Demerath, 2003; Zubrzycki, 2006). It is also the case that church-society interactions can undermine institutional influence. Consider Argentina in the 1970s and early 1980s, where the church's prophetic activism was somewhat muted regarding the then military government and thereby contributed to the erosion of its public legitimacy (Demerath, 2003; Martin, 1988; Morello, 2015).

These salient themes also related to denomination-specific features of Catholicism including its high level of centralization with the Pope as its authoritative leader, its global reach and its doctrines/practices (Casanova, 1993, 1997; Demerath, 2003; Sun, 2019). For example, the centralizing tendencies of the church usually makes institutional change slow-moving, uncommon and resistant to challenge (Ellis, 2017; Wilde, 2007). Similarly, the church's doctrines/practices (especially since Vatican II) empowered greater church-society interactions (Wood, 2016; Yamane, 2005).

I have argued that the sociology of Catholicism could be advanced by paying both *more* and *less* attention to these denomination-specific features: more research could be carried out on decentralized or polycentric Catholicism, the centralized authority structure (including bishops, archbishops and cardinals as well as the Vatican bureaucracy) and the global presence of the church (at different levels of analysis). I have also argued for the de-centering (Bender et al., 2013) of the sociology of Catholicism, involving looking beyond the dominant US case more, by investigating Catholicism's diverse expressions elsewhere through international comparative research.

Foregrounding this global scope, the sociology of Catholicism could more strongly speak back to the discipline and beyond by spotlighting the significance of interesting topics such as community, inequality and identity and

long-term social processes that have long claimed the attention of sociologists, including secularization, globalization and modernization, as well as the role of cultural and historical legacies, in terms of how Catholicism shapes these dynamics as well as how it is shaped by their unfolding across time and space.

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ENDNOTE

¹ I use the term churning, commonly used in social scientific research (e.g., Smith et al, 2013), to denote changes, shifts or disruptions in established aspects of social life, in this case, parishes.

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