

# Institutional Selection for Conformity: The Case of U.S. Catholic Priests

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*The declining dissent among Catholic clergy since the 1970s has consistently been attributed to cohort replacement, indicated by age differences, as a result of changes in Catholic religious culture, despite a recognition in recent sociology of religion of the importance of institutional agency. I test (1) whether changes in priest's beliefs and values are due to cultural trends (indicated by birth cohort) or institutional selection (indicated by ordination cohort); and (2) whether they are related to liberalism/conservatism generally or to specific conformity to Catholic moral positions. Data are from the 2002 Los Angeles Times priest survey (N = 1,854). Results are mixed: I find support for the thesis of institutional selection for conformity since 1969, but not before. Prior to the 1960s, clergy (and lay) Catholic dissent increased linearly by birth cohort; since 1969, institutional selection, not cultural change, accounts for declining clergy dissent (while lay dissent has continued to increase). Implications for understanding changes in the Catholic Church and for religious theory are discussed.*

*Key words:* Catholicism; clergy/ministers/religious professionals; orthodoxy; religious change; institutions; cultural change.

In recent decades, studies of Catholic priests have interpreted trends in belief and opinion among them in terms of cultural changes (in American, Catholic, or priestly culture) indicated by age-cohort-related changes (De Jong and Donovan 1988; Hoge et al. 1988, 1993, 1995; Hoge and Wenger 2003; Levesque and Siptroth 2005; Verdieck et al. 1988; Young and Schoenherr 1992). As with the growing tendency during this time to account for differences in the American population by reference to discrete birth cohorts—such as baby boom, baby bust, generation x, or millennial—sociologists of religion have explained differences among Catholics, including priests, by reference to birth cohorts related to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

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The explicit focus on birth cohorts and the corresponding emphasis on cultural change have tended to obscure the importance of institutional agency in shaping the collective character of Catholic priests. This article attempts in small part to amend that neglect by demonstrating the importance of institutional selection, as opposed to an exclusive focus on cultural trends, to account for pertinent changes in the composition of Catholic priests. In doing so, the findings may also contribute more generally to our understanding of the relation of institutional agency and personal participation as conceived by the rational choice or “supply side” model of religious participation.

Recent research on Catholic clergy has observed that younger priests today are more theologically orthodox than older priests.<sup>1</sup> In 2002, the *Los Angeles Times*, summarizing the findings of a national survey of Catholic priests, reported: “Clerics under age 41 expressed more allegiance to the Catholic hierarchy, less dissent against traditional church teachings, and more certainty about the sinfulness of homosexuality, abortion, artificial birth control, and other moral issues than did their elders, the poll found” (Watanabe 2002). Citing these findings as confirming those of their own 2001 survey, Hoge and Wenger (2003:61) compare the similar age differences they find among priests with those in three prior surveys. As they explain it, the age differences reflect two rather sharp shifts in priests’ views, from one model of the priesthood to a new one and then back again. “The first [shift] occurred at the time of Vatican II [a Catholic church council held 1962–1965]. . . . The young priests in 1970 were strongly in favor of the new model. The second shift, which began in the early 1980s, seems to be reversing the first” (Hoge and Wenger 2003:59). In conclusion, they announce: “The research is clear: a new type of priest has arrived” (Hoge and Wenger 2003:61).

This analysis relates changes in the views of priests to cultural trends, specifically developments in Catholic religious culture, that primarily affect age cohorts. The transient post–Vatican II shift to “a new model of priest as spiritual and social leader of the community” reflected “the council’s new theology of the church as the “people of God” (Hoge and Wenger 2003:59). The reverse shift of a decade later is harder to explain, but it is related to some level of rejection of the ideology of the first shift.

Hoge and Wenger have presented one of the more substantial analyses of this trend, but they are by no means alone in perceiving changes in Catholic priests as reflecting a relatively brief period of innovation followed quickly by

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<sup>1</sup>In this article, I use the term “theologically orthodox” or just “orthodox” to denote the propensity to hold personal views that adhere to the formal teaching or norms of a religious group, in this case, the Catholic Church. There are a number of alternative terms that are used more or less interchangeably to refer to the same or similar tendency: “conservative,” “traditional,” “faithful,” “assenting,” and (in the case of Catholics) “magisterially compliant.” All of these terms have their advantages and disadvantages. I use “orthodox” because it means most distinctly (and etymologically) “right opinion.” This generic use of “orthodox” does not imply any affinity or connection with any of the religious groups known as Orthodox Churches.

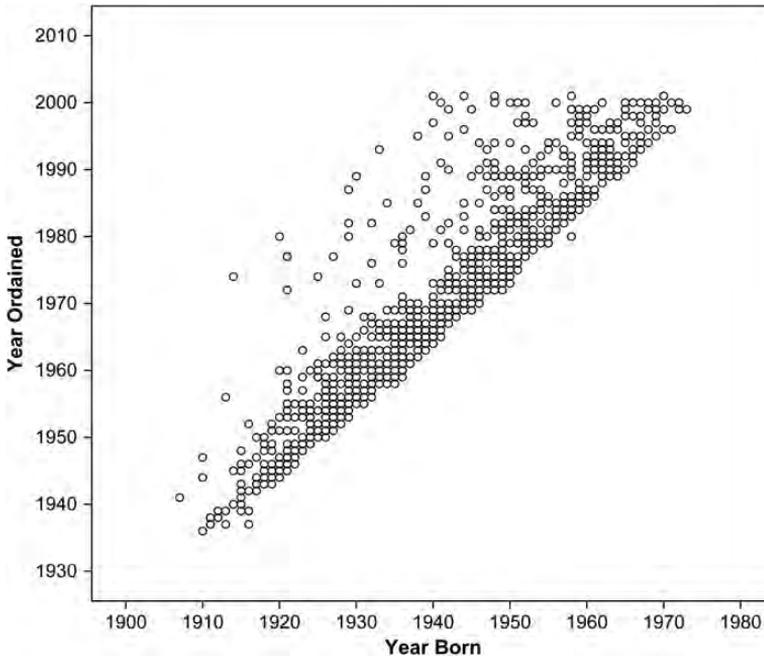
retrenchment in the aftermath of Vatican II (Greeley 2004). Likewise, their attribution of the changes to cultural forces, whether in Catholic religious culture or American culture at large, that directly affect priests' thinking, is nearly universal among social scientists. The trope of experimentation or change followed by conservative reaction, related to the passage through the population of the baby boom generation, is now the dominant understanding of the American religious experience beginning in the 1960s (Putnam and Campbell 2010). An analogous interpretation of trends and differences among Catholic priests may also be encouraged by the common practice of explaining age-related strata of opinion among Catholic laity with reference to birth cohorts oriented to Vatican II. For the past two decades, analyses of the opinions and perceptions of American Catholics have typically divided them into three generational groups: those born before 1940, or the "Pre-Vatican II" Catholics; the "Vatican II" generation, born 1941–1960; and the "Post-Vatican II" generation born since 1960. D'Antonio et al. (2007) have recently added a fourth generation: Millennials, born between 1979 and 1987.

Whether or not the differences are attributed to these specific cohorts, this area of research commonly assumes that age differences alone account for the changes in Catholic priests' theological attitudes. Most studies that deal with the topic, including every study cited so far in this article, do acknowledge that changes in the clergy may be related to ordination class, but then proceed to analyze the changes with reference to birth or age, not ordination class. Young and Schoenherr (1992), for example, engage in a complex dispute with Hoge and Shields (Hoge et al. 1988) over whether the changing theological attitudes of priests are due primarily to aging or to cohort replacement, since age-related changes can be interpreted either way. Neither party in the debate addresses the possibility that ordination class may have an independent effect.

Birth year and ordination year are, of course, highly associated, to the point that many analysts understandably take them as indicators of the same dimension, taking birth year to be a practical proxy for ordination year. Indeed, as we shall see below, to distinguish their separate effects requires some complicated statistical models. But empirical correlation, even when strong, does not necessarily reduce one factor to another; and in the case of birth year and ordination year, the distributions, while highly correlated, are visibly different. Figure 1 shows the related scatterplot. The change in scatter between birth year and ordination year shows clearly that these two measures of the priest population, while strongly associated, are nevertheless distinct and separate concepts.

The focus on age to the neglect of ordination effects to explain trends among Catholic priests is problematic for two related reasons. First, such an account treats institutional selection effects on changes in the priest population over time as nonexistent. Priests are treated as a naturally occurring group, like the U.S. population in general, which changes over time solely due to birth cohorts reflected in age differences. Second, in assessing trends, such an analysis ignores the formal tenets and positions of the Catholic Church in favor of secondary

FIGURE 1. Scatterplot of Ordination by Birth U.S. Catholic Priests 2002. *Source: L.A. Times Priest Survey 2002.*



theological views or theories that priests may hold. Both reasons, in different ways, suggest a failure to sufficiently consider the institutional or “supply” side of clergy trends, in an almost exclusive focus on personal qualities of priests or the “demand” side, which may affect the accuracy of measurement and interpretation of the ways Catholic priests have changed over the past several decades. As such, the adjudication of these concerns addresses one of the current central problematics of the sociology of religion: the importance of institutional agency, in contrast to personal religious disposition and choice, in affecting religious change. To what extent do the apparent cultural changes and changing views of Catholic priests reflect changing institutional demands rather than changing theologies?

This question is not merely of theoretical interest, but has important practical implications as well, because the number of Catholic priests has been in steep decline for several decades. Is this drop due to changing cultural norms and values, or due to changing institutional behavior? If the former, the decline of priests reflects a general social secularization, in the face of which changes in institutional arrangements and behavior on the part of the Church is likely to have little effect. The Church, on this outcome, can only accept and adjust to its reduced role in society. If the latter, the Church is more the master of its fate, and may be able to more directly induce change and growth in its own presbyterate. These alternatives, of course, are not mutually exclusive; both may be applicable to some extent.

Catholic clergy provide a particularly useful group for examining issues of institutional agency. The Catholic Church is a steeply hierarchical institution with a long history and elaborate bureaucracy; institutional factors are clearly important in the selection and formation of its clergy. Most elements of clergy selection, moreover, are highly formalized and exposed to scrutiny. Catholic clergy recruitment also exposes one of the strongest claims of the supply side/rational choice theory of religion, which is that strictness or high demands on the part of the religious group stimulates religious vitality and seriousness in the participant. Few religious participants in America are faced with higher demands than Catholic priests, who are required to practice celibacy, accept an extremely small wage, and serve at the sole direction of the bishop.

Finke and Stark, for example, examine the decline in numbers in Catholic religious orders since the late 1960s to test “propositions concerning why expensive or costly religious organizations engender higher commitment” (Stark and Finke 2000:171). Consistent with their theoretical commitments, they conclude that the cause has to do with individual social psychology: theological changes introduced by Vatican II reduced the cultural and psychic rewards of religious life to an extent that they no longer compensated for the high personal cost of committing oneself to celibate poverty.

Like Hoge and Wenger, Finke and Stark’s analysis ignores or excludes the fact that professing a religious vow involves a choice on the part of the institution as well as the individual. They base their conclusion, in fact, on changes in the total number of vowed religious, without disaggregating this into the numbers of entrants and exits. This makes it impossible to consider whether the religious institutions involved may have changed their selection processes in relevant ways; in other words, whether the organization’s commitment to individuals may have changed instead of or in addition to the individuals’ commitment to the organization.

Whether or not selection affects trends in clergy numbers as I have just suggested, or affects trends in clergy views in the ways that I will suggest below, such effects are emphatically not negligible. Becoming a Catholic priest, or what the Church calls “priestly formation,” involves an extensive process of education, examination, and personal development over a period of years, often as much as a decade. In order to be ordained, candidates must survive a gauntlet of evaluations, recommendations, and referrals.<sup>2</sup> Although firm data

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<sup>2</sup>Catholic Canon Law (Canon 250) stipulates “at least six full years” of philosophical and theological study for priests in formation (Canon Law Society of America 1983:85), only one of which normally concurs with undergraduate study; U.S. seminarians thus spend at least nine years in a college seminary, and often one or two more. Both the seminary and the candidate’s ordaining bishop engage in annual (or more frequent) assessments of four specific areas of formation: intellectual, pastoral, spiritual, and human. Candidates also undergo assessment of psychological and social functioning. For full details, see the Program of Priestly Formation of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (Committee on Priestly Life and Formation 2006).

on seminarians by year of training are not available, a rough comparison of the number of seminarians and ordinations over time indicates that a substantial proportion of those who enter the formation process do not end up being ordained.<sup>3</sup> Because any institutional de-selection that may occur in this process is decisive and focused, any factors that systematically affect the probability of such direct rejection will likely have a stronger effect than general or mediated changes in the culture of the candidates presenting themselves for ordination.

These considerations lead to my first hypothesis: *trends associated with ordination will be more powerful than those associated with birth in explaining changes in orthodoxy among Catholic priests.* This hypothesis assesses the relative strength of institutional and cultural agency directly. The time of birth exposes a priest candidate to the broad cultural forces that operate on generational cohorts and lead to changing social trends. With regard to ordination, birth operates as a kind of random selection. Ordination, on the other hand, involves highly focused selection processes that screen candidates in or out according to institutional culture and instrumental goals.

Emphasizing institutional agency is not intended to minimize in any way the importance of self-selection for both entering and persisting in the ordination process, nor to imply that institutional decisions are necessarily formal and explicit. The culture and character of ordination candidates and institutional decision-making no doubt interact in complex ways in shaping and restricting the character of Catholic priests.

A related concern with strong institutional implications is whether strictness, that is, making high demands on institutional participation, is related to doctrinal orthodoxy. Studies of Protestant growth and decline have generally denied that there is any necessary relationship—that liberal Protestant denominations could also be sociologically strict—but there is a strong empirical association between strictness and doctrinal conservatism (Hoge and Roozen 1979; Iannaccone 1994; Kelley 1996). Almost all fundamentalist Protestant groups are also strict, while almost no liberal Protestant groups are. Whether or not it is a general property of religious groups, in the Catholic case, it is very likely that there is an association between strictness and doctrinal orthodoxy. The place of Catholicism among the various expressions of Christianity suggests this: to the same extent that Protestant Christianity tends toward innovation

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<sup>3</sup>The Catholic Church does not report the numbers of seminarians who fail to persist to ordination, but the Official Catholic Directory does report aggregate numbers of graduate seminarians and of ordinations. From 1970 to 2010, the number of graduate seminarians (those in the last four or five years of training) ranged from six to 12 times, and averaged over eight times, the number of priests ordained in any given year, and was, in all years, greater than the total ordinations for the five subsequent years; indicating that a sizable proportion of graduate seminarians were not subsequently ordained. Undergraduate seminarians defect at an even greater rate, though because of the extended time the data are far more variable.

and reform, Catholic Christianity tends toward stasis and retrenchment. For reasons already stated, moreover, such an association is also more likely for clergy than for laity. Strictness expresses that a religion is serious in its formal norms; and the formal norms of the Catholic Church (as distinct from the views of actual Catholics) are both explicit and conservative regarding most moral and theological issues. To the extent that institutional forces recruit or select for priests, then, they are likely to do so on the basis of more or less conformity to formal norms, i.e., orthodoxy.

Several studies of Catholic priests have confirmed that this association exists, in a negative sense, for priests who resign or seminarians who drop out. Schoenherr found in several studies (Schoenherr and Greeley 1974; Schoenherr and Sorensen 1982; Schoenherr and Vilarino 1979) that Catholic priests who endorse traditional, in contrast to more modern, beliefs and values about the Church and the priesthood are much less likely to resign from the priesthood, and that resignation decision factors are similar to those involved in the decision to be ordained in the first place. Likewise, Cryns (1970:241) found that "priests and prospective priests who leave their vocational roles are less dogmatic than those who persevere in such roles." He suggests, moreover, that this difference is due to institutional selection processes.

My second hypothesis, accordingly, is that *formal orthodoxy will be more powerful than liberalism/conservatism generally, or other theological issues, in explaining changes in theological views among Catholic priests.* On many moral issues, the formal teaching of the Catholic Church anchors one end of a spectrum of opinion among American Catholics that more or less dissent from it in a theologically liberal direction. For example, according to the General Social Survey, less than one in 10 Catholics agree with Catholic teaching that elective abortion should always be prohibited, with a range of opinion among the remainder regarding the seriousness of circumstances that justify an abortion. About half of Catholics believe that abortion may be permissible under certain circumstances, such as in cases of rape or incest, if the child is likely to be deformed or impaired, or if the mother is not reasonably able to support another child; and four in 10 support the legal right to an abortion for any reason whatever (Sullins 1999). A Catholic may hold a relatively conservative position within the range of opinion, yet not fully agree with Catholic teaching. The second hypothesis proposes that it is not priests' general position on the conservative-to-liberal range of moral/theological opinion, but their specific conformity (or not) to Catholic teaching, that most strongly predicts changes in their collective views. This hypothesis reflects institutional agency indirectly, since if institutional selection effects are stronger, we would expect formal orthodoxy to be a better predictor of changes in the composition of priests, whereas if priests' views reflect only cultural change, we would expect general trends toward liberalism or conservatism to be a better predictor.

## DATA AND MEASURES

Data for this study were derived from a national random-sample survey of Roman Catholic priests administered in 2002 by the *Los Angeles Times* (Roper Center Data set USLAT2002-471,  $N = 1,854$ ). This survey drew a sample of priests stratified by regional priest population, resulting in data that represented the national distribution of priests more closely than do most priest surveys, which oversample larger dioceses. Sample characteristics and survey findings are generally comparable to other priest surveys. Table 1 shows pertinent demographic comparisons to a 2001 survey ( $N = 1,274$ ) administered by Dean Hoge for the National Federation of Priest Councils (Hoge and Wenger 2003) and to the actual distribution of priests by region, as reported in the *Official Catholic Directory* (Kenedy and Sons Annual). Most of the questions on the 2002 survey replicated those of a 1993 survey by the same research team, producing data that were similar or documented plausible trends from the earlier survey. A full description of the methodology and critique of the data is provided in the survey team's accompanying methodological report (Roper Center 2002) and in Andrew Greeley's book *Priests: A Calling in Crisis* (Greeley 2004), which is based on this survey.

The *L.A. Times* survey invited priests to respond to nine questions regarding specific moral behaviors Catholic doctrine holds to be sinful: the use of artificial birth control, elective abortion, the use of condoms to prevent disease, masturbation, premarital sex, suicide, human cloning, research using fetal stem cells, and homosexual practice. For each issue, respondents were asked to indicate whether they believed the behavior was "always, often, seldom or never a sin." Each question began with the words "Do you think it is always, often, seldom or never a sin": and ended with one of the following nine phrases: "for married couples to use artificial methods of birth control?"; "for a woman to get an abortion?"; "for unmarried people to have sexual relations?"; "to use cloning—that is, copying DNA cells—in medical research that could

TABLE 1 Sample Characteristics

Item	L.A. Times 2002	Hoge and Wenger 2001
Mean age	61.5	60.5
Percent diocesan priests	67.9	66.9
Years ordained	32.7	31.3
Census region		
East	36	38
Midwest	13	17
South	35	30
West	16	15

result in a cure for diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's or cancer?"; "to use stem cells of fetuses for medical research?"; "to engage in homosexual behavior?"; "to use condoms as a protection against AIDS?"; "to take one's own life if one is suffering from a debilitating disease?"; and "to masturbate?." This unusual level of detail resulted in data that were particularly useful for the present study.

Two scales were constructed from these items to form, with one additional measure, the indicators used for hypothesis testing. The first scale reports the overall average response on all nine items, providing a direct measure of the moral liberalism of each respondent. The *L.A. Times* survey also asked each priest, "Would you describe your views on most matters having to do with religious beliefs and moral doctrines as: very liberal, somewhat liberal, middle-of-the-road, somewhat conservative, or very conservative?." This measure provided an alternative, self-assessed measure of moral liberalism; this

TABLE 2 Descriptive Statistics for Variables Analyzed

Variable	Range	Mean (s.d.)		
		Overall	Ordinations <1970	Ordinations ≥1970
Premarital sex <sup>a</sup>	1-4	1.55 (0.707)	1.52 (0.722)	1.58 (0.687)
Abortion	1-4	1.31 (0.599)	1.32 (0.640)	1.29 (0.544)
Artificial birth control	1-4	2.22 (0.980)	2.16 (1.001)	2.30 (0.949)
Human cloning	1-4	1.85 (10.029)	1.85 (1.052)	1.86 (1.002)
Fetal stem cell research	1-4	1.61 (0.925)	1.68 (1.001)	1.53 (0.817)
Condoms for AIDS protection	1-4	2.40 (1.212)	2.31 (1.209)	2.51 (1.208)
Homosexual sex	1-4	1.72 (0.891)	1.62 (0.862)	1.85 (0.912)
Suicide	1-4	1.60 (0.888)	1.61 (0.923)	1.59 (0.843)
Masturbation	1-4	2.29 (1.076)	2.19 (1.06)	2.41 (1.085)
Objective liberalism scale (average of nine moral items above)	1-4	1.85 (0.724)	1.81 (0.759)	1.89 (0.678)
Doctrinal conformity scale ("1" responses among nine moral items above)	0-9	4.52 (3.23)	4.79 (3.36)	4.20 (3.03)
Subjective liberalism (self-categorization)	1-5	2.99 (0.888)	2.98 (0.937)	3.00 (0.891)

<sup>a</sup>On the nine moral items respondent was asked whether the behavior is a sin. Responses coded: Always, 1; Often, 2; Seldom, 3; Never, 4. Response categories for subjective liberalism are: Very Liberal, 1; Somewhat Liberal, 2; Moderate, 3; Somewhat Conservative, 4; Very Conservative, 5.

was termed “Subjective Liberalism” in contrast to the “Objective Liberalism” measured by the average response scale. A second scale was constructed from the nine moral items as an additive scale summing the number of times the respondent answered “Always a sin.” This scale measured, not the general liberalism, but the specific conformity of each respondent’s views to Catholic doctrine.

Together these, three diverse measures of the priests’ moral views permit a nuanced view of their opinions on issues that are central to Catholic moral teaching. To simplify interpretation, in the analysis to follow doctrinal conformity and subjective conservatism are coded so that liberalism or doctrinal dissent is consistently high on all measures. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and response ranges of all the variables and scales used in the article.

Secondary analyses in this study also make use of the following data sets: The General Social Surveys 1972–2000 (Smith et al. 2010), and the Survey of American Catholic Priests in 1985 (Hoge 1985), 1993 (Hoge 1993), and 2001 (Hoge and Wenger 2001).

## ANALYSIS

The first hypothesis assesses institutional agency directly by proposing that ordination is more strongly associated than is birth with trends in belief and opinion. Table 3 presents partial correlation results to test this hypothesis. The first two rows show the aggregate measures indicating conformity to Catholic doctrine and general liberalism, respectively, on the nine moral issues measured on the survey. The last line shows the respondents’ self-classification of their own views from religiously conservative to religiously liberal. The analysis to test this hypothesis confirmed and specified the fundamental effect of the 1960s or Vatican II on changes in Catholic priests. Over the full range of the data, none of the opinion or belief measures had any significant correlation with either birth or ordination cohort; however, consistent with past research, I found that this masked two strongly contrasting trends which peaked in the ordination classes of the late 1960s, just after the second Vatican Council. When ordinations before or during the 1960s and those occurring since that time are examined separately, all three belief measures are strongly correlated with both birth and ordination cohorts. Empirically, the tipping point by year of ordination was 1969. In any event, substantial trends in beliefs or moral opinions are visible when ordination classes are divided into those coming before 1970 and those occurring in 1970 or later. These trends themselves will be discussed more fully below; our concern here is whether they are associated more strongly with birth or ordination cohort.

On this question, all three belief measures are consistent. For ordination classes initiated before or during Vatican II, that is, through the 1960s, changes in beliefs are associated more strongly with birth cohort; following

TABLE 3 Correlations of Liberalism and Dissent with Birth and Ordination Cohort, Comparing Catholic Priests Ordained before and after Vatican II

	Ordinations before 1970				Ordinations 1970 and after			
	Birth cohort	Ordination cohort	Birth, controlling for ordination	Ordination, controlling for birth	Birth cohort	Ordination cohort	Birth, controlling for ordination	Ordination, controlling for birth
Doctrinal dissent	0.29***	0.26***	0.14***	—	-0.18***	-0.29***	—	-0.23***
Objective liberalism	0.25***	0.21***	0.15***	—	-0.19***	-0.29***	—	-0.21***
Subjective liberalism	0.23***	0.23***	—	—	-0.16***	-0.22***	—	-0.16***

\*\*\*All reported correlations are significant at .001; —, no significant correlation.

Vatican II, that is, beginning in the 1970s, changes in beliefs are associated more strongly with ordination. All three measures have a higher correlation with birth than with ordination before Vatican II, and a higher correlation with ordination than with birth after Vatican II. (The differences between correlations in table 3 are all significant at .001, except for the pre-1970 difference between the correlation of subjective liberalism with birth cohort, at 0.234, and ordination cohort, at 0.229, which is statistically significant at .01.) Moreover before Vatican II, the partial correlation of doctrinal dissent and objective liberalism with birth, controlling for ordination class, is highly significant; but when birth cohort is controlled, ordination class no longer has any significant relationship with either belief measure. After Vatican II, it is the opposite: all the belief measures are significantly correlated with ordination class when birth cohort is controlled, but have no correlation with birth cohort when ordination class is controlled. For the period prior to Vatican II, the apparent correlation of belief trends with ordination class, then, is spurious; the proper association is with birth cohort. After Vatican II, or beginning in 1970, the apparent correlation with birth cohort is spurious; the correct relation is with ordination class. Our conclusion regarding hypothesis 1, then, is mixed; it is accurate for the more recent period since 1970, but it must be rejected for priests ordained earlier.

My second hypothesis proposed that dissent from formal orthodoxy rather than general liberalism will better explain changing views among Catholic priests. Table 3 includes a measure of dissent, providing a rough comparison of the relative strength of liberalism and dissent. Dissent is slightly less strongly associated with birth, controlling for ordination, in the earlier period and slightly more strongly associated with ordination, controlling for birth, in the more recent period, but these differences are very weak. Overall, what can be observed in this table is that dissent and liberalism have very similar correlations with birth and ordination. Not surprisingly, the correlation between dissent and liberalism is very high, above 0.9 in both periods.

Table 4 presents pertinent multiple regression results to test directly the strength of dissent versus liberalism in predicting year of ordination. Since the previous analysis, shown in table 3, discovered that both time trends on these measures reversed from the period before 1970 to the period 1970 and after, and that the first hypothesis does not hold in the prior period, the testing models are presented for each of these periods separately. Like the correlations of table 3, it can be observed that the sign of the regression coefficient for each measure is of opposite magnitude prior to and following 1970. If the data were not split in this way, the relation of each measure with ordination year would be V-shaped, a point I will explore further in the graphical analysis below. Due to intercorrelation, multivariate models of the three scalar measures (dissent and the two liberalism scales) were not possible, but diagnostics revealed no significant coefficient inflation in the bivariate models shown (models 1 and 2), nor in models 3 and 4 which involved all nine moral issue items. All the

TABLE 4 Regression Models Showing Standardized Coefficients Predicting Year of Ordination: LAT 2002 (N = 1,854)

Independent variables	Zero order		Model 1: dissent vs. objective liberalism		Model 2: dissent vs. subjective liberalism		Model 3: dissent by item		Model 4: objective liberalism by item	
	<1970	1970+	<1970	1970+	<1970	1970+	<1970	1970+	<1970	1970+
Doctrinal dissent	0.26***	-0.29***	0.42***	-0.18*	0.16***	-0.19***				
Objective liberalism	0.21***	-0.29***	0.17*	n.s.						
Subjective liberalism	0.23***	-0.22***			0.11**	-0.11**				
Abortion	n.s.	-0.10**					n.s.	n.s.	0.16***	n.s.
Birth control	0.29***	-0.33***					0.11*	-0.19***	0.17**	-.25***
Suicide	0.08**	-0.17***					n.s.	n.s.	0.10*	n.s.
Premarital sex	0.18***	-0.20***					n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Homosexual sex	0.19***	-0.20***					0.15**	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Masturbation	0.31***	-0.26***					0.14**	n.s.	0.28***	n.s.
Condoms for AIDS	0.25***	-0.27***					n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Stem cell research	0.07*	-0.16***					n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Human cloning	0.16***	-0.17***					n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

\*\*\*Significant at .001; \*\*significant at .01; \*significant at .05; n.s., not significant.

coefficients shown have a measured tolerance value below 0.2 and/or a variance inflation factor above 5, values which are twice as strict as the conventional indicators of unacceptably inflated coefficients. Multiple/partial correlations of the scalar measures also resulted in very similar coefficients. Intercorrelation, moreover, does not affect the statistical significance of the model coefficients, which are sufficient basis by themselves to test the hypothesis.

The results of the hypothesis tests presented in models 1 and 2 are clear. Doctrinal dissent is a far stronger predictor, with more robust statistical significance, of year of ordination than either objective or subjective liberalism. The coefficient for dissent is 2.5 times as large as that for objective liberalism for ordinations prior to 1970; since 1970 dissent is a much weaker predictor, but liberalism is not significant at all. Dissent is also a stronger predictor than subjective liberalism in both periods; unlike objective liberalism, the self-assessed measure of liberalism may include a dimension of dissent.

Models 3 and 4 expose the relative importance of the nine underlying measures from which both the dissent and objective liberalism scales were constructed. Model 4 predicts ordination year by the average liberalism of each independent variable; in model 3, each variable is expressed as a function of its conformity to formal Catholic teaching. Strictly speaking, these models are not necessary to test the hypothesis, but they provide valuable insight regarding the issues involved which qualify the hypothesis somewhat. Before Vatican II, that is, in the earlier period, the ordination trend was associated with growing liberalism and dissent on contraception and masturbation, as well as liberalism (but not greater dissent) on abortion and dissent (but not greater liberalism) on homosexuality. Strikingly, after 1969, the only significant issue for the ordination trend is birth control, on which there is a sharp turn away from ordaining dissenting or liberal candidates. These findings will be discussed further below. At the moment I note that, for ordinations beginning in 1970, growing conservatism on birth control is by itself just as strong a predictor of ordination as is declining doctrinal dissent overall; and while liberalism in general is not associated with ordination since 1970, declining liberalism on birth control is a stronger predictor of ordination than declining dissent.

On purely statistical grounds, one could reasonably object to the analyses presented above due to the possible conflation of aging and cohort effects. On the basis of the observed values alone, it is not possible to determine from cross-sectional data as used here whether observed population trends in opinion by age are due to changes within cohorts as they age (aging effect) or due to the replacement of older cohorts by younger ones with different views (cohort effect). In this case, the conservative trend since 1970 may not be due to the entry of more conservative priests into the clergy population, as my analyses assume, but due to priests growing more liberal in opinion as they age.

While statistically possible, however, several substantive considerations render the latter alternative very unlikely. First and foremost, the question

whether aging or cohort replacement account for changes in Catholic priests' theological views has been carefully examined using longitudinal data and has found that aging effects are negligible. Hoge et al. (1988), using a 1985 replication of 1970 data comprising a random sample of Catholic priests, compared the distribution of priests' views by age projected to 1985 from the 1970 data, on the assumption of no aging effect, with the actual 1985 sample estimates, and found that there was no significant difference overall. These comparisons, they concluded, "tell us that most of the attitude shift is due to the cohort effect, that is, old priests die and young priests grow older while carrying their attitudes largely unchanged" (Hoge et al. 1988:273). Significantly, the only exception from this pattern was that "the youngest priests in 1985 had more conservative attitudes than their age-counterparts in 1970" (Hoge et al. 1988:272). Here they compare the youngest cohorts from two distinct surveys drawn from the same population 15 years apart; there is no possibility of confounding due to an aging effect; and find essentially the same trend that I have analyzed above. The finding that aging effects are negligibly small is reiterated in further comparisons of later replications of the 1970 survey done in 1992 and again in 2001. These longitudinal comparisons fail to find any significant aging effect in priests' theological attitudes on most measures, providing a strong basis in evidence for interpreting the changes over time in priests' views as due to cohort replacement, as almost all subsequent analysts of priests' changing theological views (reviewed in the Introduction section) have done and as I have done in this article.

Note, further, that the argument of this article does not require such a strong assumption, i.e., that aging effects are negligible or insignificant, but only the assumption that cohort effects are not insignificant, net of any background aging effects that may occur. The nature of the trends observed also lend plausibility to the perception that the changes analyzed are due at least in part to cohort replacement rather than aging. Aging effects are almost always monotonic and change gradually over generations, but as already noted, the trend observed in priests' views is not linear, but split or curvilinear in relation to events in the 1960s. If this was due entirely to aging, it would require us to believe that the aging effect uncharacteristically reversed, and rather dramatically. Moreover, the argument presented above turns, not simply on changes among priests, but on a comparison of priests and lay Catholic males in successive cohorts. An aging explanation would be faced with the additional difficulty of explaining why priests' aging reversed while that of the population from which priests are drawn did not. It is certainly not impossible that the aging patterns of priest cohorts suddenly reversed about 1970, while those of lay Catholic males continued as they had before; but such a convoluted explanation seems less plausible than attributing them, at least in part, to the presence of a simple differential cohort selection effect among those Catholic males who became priests.

## DISCUSSION

In sum, both hypotheses—testing institutional agency and selection for orthodoxy—were supported for Catholic clergy recruitment since 1969, but not before then. Prior to and through the 1960s, priests were growing successively more liberal, a function of age or birth cohort, not ordination. Since 1969, priests have grown successively more conservative as a function of ordination, not birth.

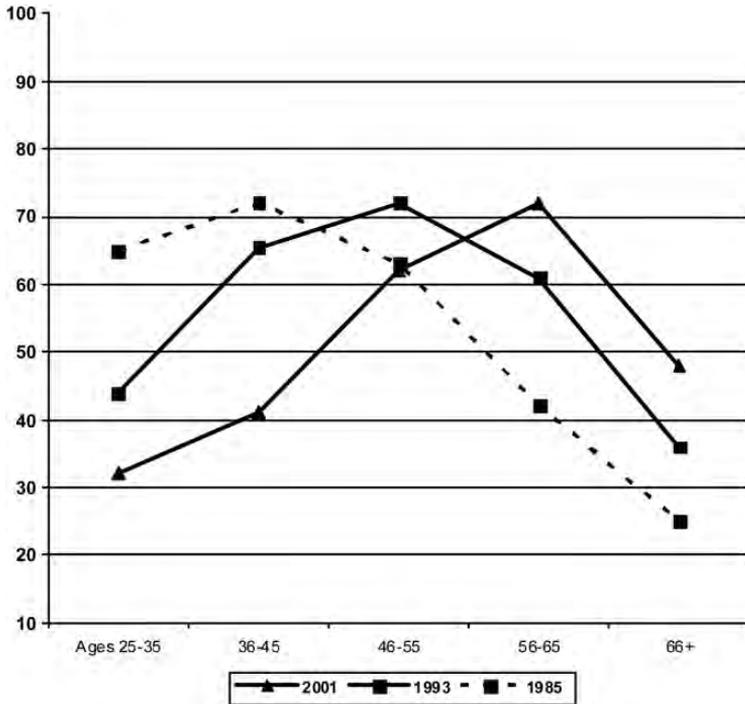
In light of these findings, the pervasive assumption that age differences, not selection, account for recent or current observed trends among the clergy appears somewhat misleading. An extended example may illustrate why the difference is important for understanding the changing orthodoxy and character of priests more clearly. Consider the Hoge and Wenger book cited above, the central thesis of which is that younger priests are adopting a different model of priesthood than did their elders, as expressed in the title *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood*. They base this conclusion on three variables which, they claim, “depict the most dramatic age trends over the years 1970 to 2001” (Hoge and Wenger 2003:53): agreement that ordination makes a priest ontologically different from a layperson, approval of optional celibacy, and approval of re-ordaining priests who had resigned from active ministry to get married.<sup>4</sup> These variables do depict dramatic trends, but they are not age trends: confirming the findings above, none of them are significantly related to age when controlling for ordination cohort, but all three are significantly related to ordination when controlling for age, or birth cohort.

Insisting that they are age trends obscures the more likely association with ordination. Figure 2 replicates Hoge and Wenger’s chart illustrating the age trend by views on optional celibacy (Hoge and Wenger 2003:57). The progression of a liberal peak progressing through successive survey years is clearly visible. To show the trend more clearly, figure 3 reconfigures figure 2 to standardize the age differences across survey year, in essence taking the three surveys as successive samples of the same birth cohort. We can see that there is a similar trend by birth cohort in all three surveys, but there is still a good deal of variability in the outcomes for each cohort. All the cohorts but the oldest priests were more approving of optional celibacy on the 1985 survey (the 1985 results are statistically different at .05 than those for the 1993 and 2001 surveys, whose results are not statistically different from each other), suggesting (inaccurately) that there may have been a general shift in opinion within

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<sup>4</sup>Hoge and Wenger include a fourth variable (p. 55), agreement that the idea that the priest is a “man set apart” is a barrier to Christian community; however, this variable is not useful for their analysis, and thus not for mine. The visible differences in age for this variable are much smaller than for the other three variables, and it is not significantly related to either age or ordination when the other is controlled.

FIGURE 2. "Celibacy Should Be a Matter of Personal Choice for Diocesan Priests." Percent Who Agree Strongly or Somewhat by Age in Survey Year. Adapted from Hoge and Wenger (2003:57).

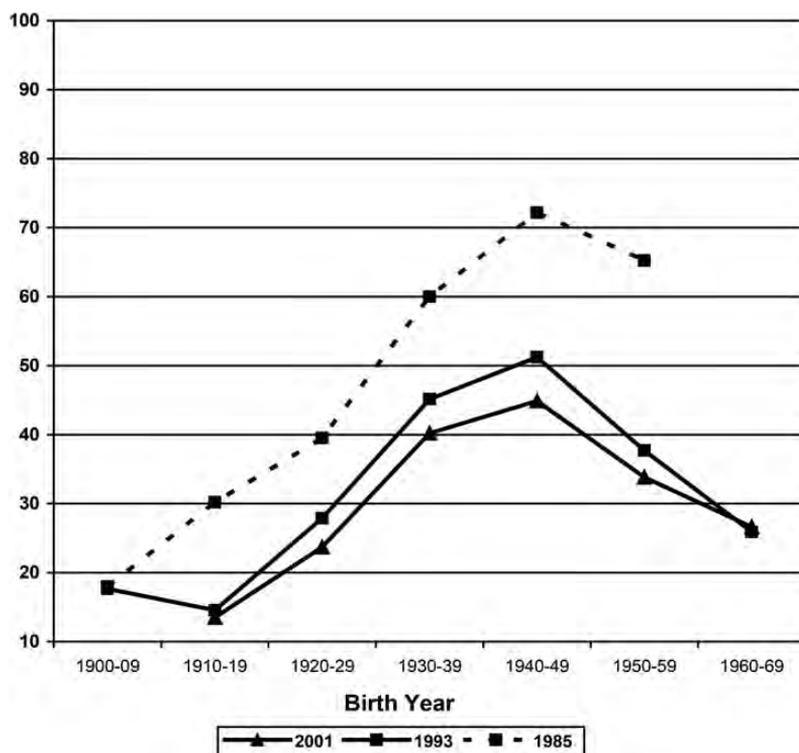


cohorts as some priests changed their minds on the issue from 1985 to 2001 or that there is some consistent bias or error that affects the 1985 results.

Since age is strongly related to ordination, of course, descriptive trends based on age will not be wholly misleading. As Hoge et al. (1988:273) observe, though, this is becoming less the case as older men have increasingly been ordained since the 1970s, widening the age range of ordination classes. Perceiving the descriptive trends as a function of ordination, however, as in figure 4, brings them into sharp focus. Within sampling variability, the results for each ordination cohort presented in this figure are the same on all three surveys. The trend toward and then away from approval of optional celibacy is seen to be much steeper when observed by ordination class (in figure 4) than by birth cohort (in figure 3), which mingles respondents from different ordination classes. As is visible in figure 3, though less clearly, the rise in approval of optional celibacy began at least with men ordained in the 1930s or 1940s, long before Vatican II, though it did peak at the time of the Council. The rise in approval, moreover, was steeper prior to the 1960s than the drop in approval has been since then.

These trends also appear to have some unusual characteristics, when perceived as a function of age, which are clarified when they are properly

FIGURE 3. “Celibacy Should Be a Matter of Personal Choice for Diocesan Priests” Percent Who Agree Strongly or Somewhat by Year of Birth (age cohort). Source: Hoge et al. (1985, 1993) and Hoge and Wenger (2001).

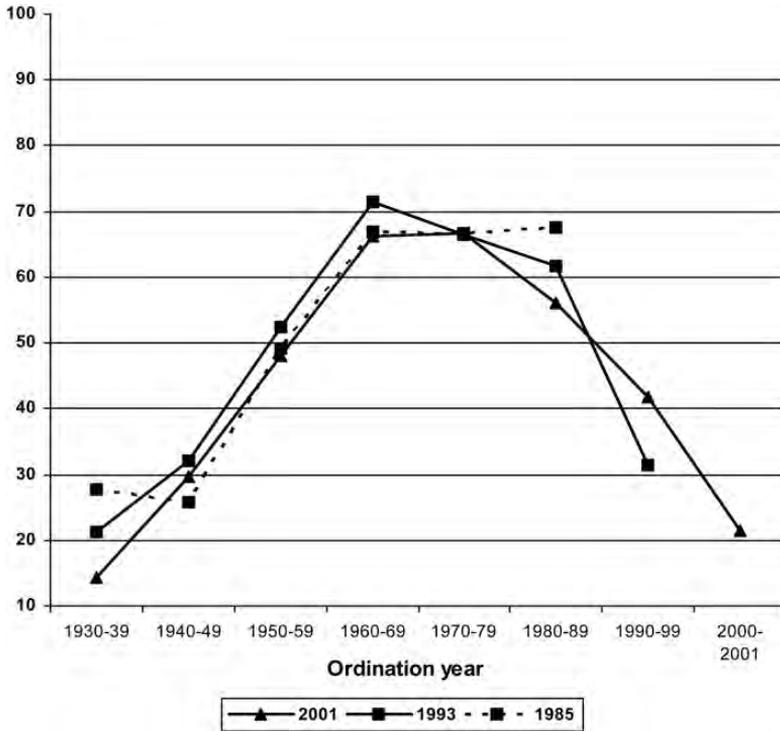


interpreted as related to ordination. Hoge and Wenger comment that the age differences among priests are “gigantic . . . , greater than we find in most sociological surveys” (Hoge and Wenger 2003:58). They are indeed substantially greater than the kind of difference brought about by most social or cultural trends; but fully compatible with the influence of institutional selection, which can, of course, produce very large differences in a short time. When viewed as a function of age, the trend toward conservatism seems to be accelerating; Hoge and Wenger comment that it showed “great *acceleration of change*” in the years just prior to 2001 (Hoge and Wenger 2003:58 emphasis theirs).

This perceived acceleration is a statistical artifact of the fact that age at ordination has risen by about a decade since the 1960s,<sup>5</sup> which makes the rise

<sup>5</sup>Through the early 1960s, the large majority of priests were ordained from the minor seminary system as they attained the canonical minimum age of 25. Contemporaneous news reports by Catholic News Service place the age at ordination at 27.2 in 1966 and 31.8 in 1986. Average age of the year 2001 ordinands was 36.2, according to survey data from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA).

FIGURE 4. "Celibacy Should Be a Matter of Personal Choice for Diocesan Priests" Percent Who Agree Strongly or Somewhat by Year of Ordination (Ordination Class). Source: Hoge et al. (1985, 1993) and Hoge and Wenger (2001).



in orthodoxy by ordination year, which as we have seen is monotonic, appear inflated in recent years when viewed as a function of age. The deeper problem, of course, is that an interpretation based on age-related cultural change will miss entirely the changing character of institutional selection. Put overly simply, the most direct and consequential change observed may not be the priests' vision of the Church, but the Church's vision of its priests.

The initially unanticipated background finding that the Catholic Church underwent a fundamental change in its mode of clergy acquisition in or about the year 1969 also prompts questions whether the corresponding cultural trends affected Catholics generally, and whether the laity also changed following the 1960s in step with priests. Were all Catholics growing more liberal during the first half of the twentieth century, or just priests? And have Catholics generally become more conservative since then, or just priests? I was able to examine these questions using data from the combined General Social Surveys 1972–2008 and both the 1993 and 2002 *L.A. Times* priests surveys. Both sets of surveys had comparable questions on three issues pertinent to Catholic moral thought: premarital sex, homosexual sex, and suicide. All three issues show a

similar pattern. Figure 5 shows, for reference, the findings for priests and Catholic laity on premarital sex by birth cohort through most of the twentieth century. Both priests and lay Catholics born from the 1910s through the 1950s grew successively more approving of premarital sex; this probably reflects the differential influence by age of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Since that time, however, the lines diverge dramatically; Catholic laypersons born since 1960 have continued to grow successively more liberal on this issue, but Catholic priests have grown emphatically less accepting of premarital sex. Since the 1950s (by birth cohort), it appears that other factors have moved Catholic priests counter to the cultural trend toward liberalism, which has continued to affect Catholic laity.

Figure 2 shows the results of a more precise analysis of the same data which indicates, in line with the findings above, that priests began to diverge from the laity in a conservative direction in the early 1970s and that prior to that they were both subject to the same or similar cultural trend toward liberalism. Figure 6 presents combined data from all three comparative issues, and tracks opinions by priest ordination cohort, not year. The comparison group is not all laypersons, but only Catholic males of roughly the same age as priests ordained in each year, on average. As closely as possible, in other words, priests ordained in each year are compared with their contemporaries who were eligible but did not become priests. In addition to the actual trend, the pertinent linear regression lines are also shown. Prior to 1970 men who became priests, though

FIGURE 5. Approval of Premarital Sex. Comparing Catholic Priests and Laity 1915–1979. *Source:* General Social Surveys 1972–2008 and *L.A. Times Priest Surveys* 1993 and 2002. Shown is standardized value, three-year moving average for Catholic priests (solid line) and Catholic laypersons (dotted line).

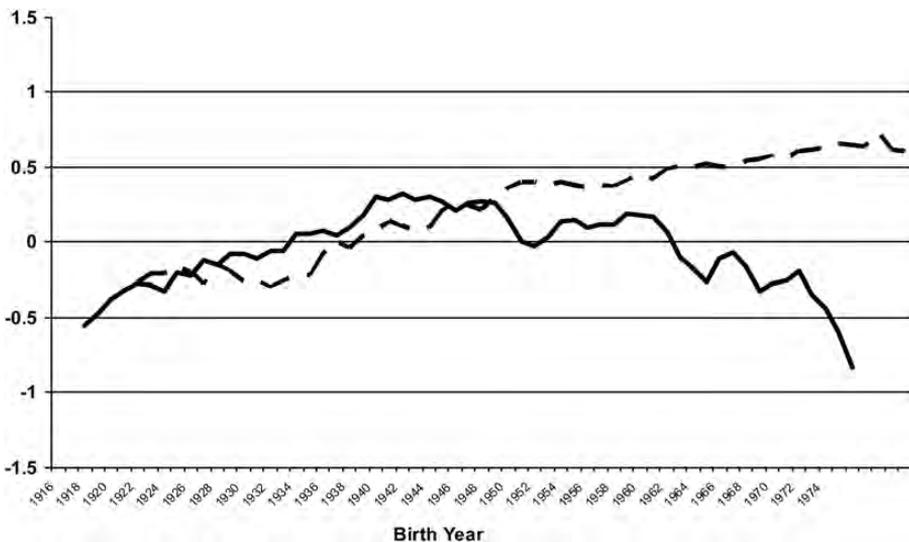
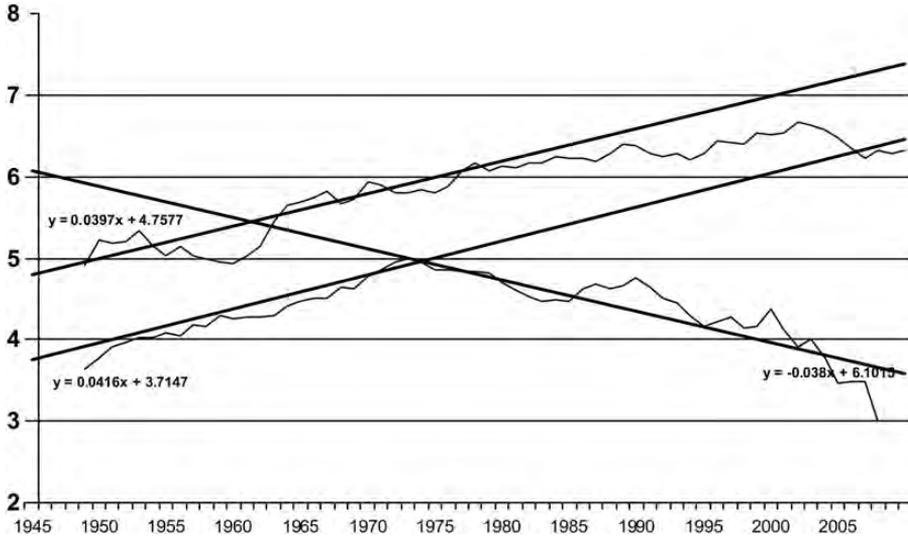


FIGURE 6. Trends in Selected Moral Views 1915–1979. Comparing Catholic Priests to All Catholic Men of Similar Age. *Source:* General Social Surveys 1972–2008 and *L.A. Times* Priest Surveys 1993 and 2002. Shown are combined views on premarital sex, suicide, and abortion, smoothed by five-year moving average. Horizontal axis reports age 30 cohort.



consistently less liberal than their Catholic lay contemporaries, grew successively more liberal by ordination class at virtually the same rate that their contemporaries did. The slope of both change lines is the same to two decimal points. Starting in about 1970 priest ordination classes began to grow successively more conservative, while their lay contemporaries have continued to grow more liberal at about the same rate.

These findings strongly confirm the well-known fact that the Catholic Church experienced fundamental changes in the 1960s, while at the same time suggesting some alterations to the standard account of those changes. Before the 1960s, that account suggests, the Church was a proscriptive institution, resistant to cultural encroachment, that liberalized and opened up to the modern world more fully following Vatican II. But, at least as regards clergy formation, these data suggest something of an opposite picture. Prior to and through the 1960s, the character of Catholic leadership was moving in a direction of convergence with cultural norms. Catholic priests were not exactly congruent with majoritarian American views, but they were growing closer to them. There is no evidence that Church formation processes resisted or limited this cultural encroachment; priests reflected the same cultural forces that affected religious change among all Catholics. As the laity, so the priests were steadily growing more liberal, in the direction of the American mainstream. During the same era, the largely Catholic immigrant groups which made up

much of the Church were becoming assimilated into American society, and Catholics were rapidly moving from the working class into the professional middle class. Since the 1960s, Catholic laypersons have continued to liberalize, on the whole, in response to the same cultural forces; but the Church has begun to assert institutional effort to select and form increasingly conservative priests. The assimilating force of culture during that time has been countered by the institutional activities of recruitment and screening.

Another alteration to the standard account may involve what caused the 1960s changes. If Vatican II is the precipitating event, why is the tipping point 1969 and not earlier in the decade? It is possible that, since ordination preparation normally involves several years, a Vatican II influence on ordinands may well have had a lagged effect on ordination classes for several years after the 1965 close of the council. In addition, it may have taken several years for the implications of the Council to work their way into the decision-making process of U.S. dioceses. Other results of Vatican II that involved deliberative processes, such as the new liturgical rites, did not appear until 1970.

What is more likely is that what precipitated the turn toward selecting priests for orthodoxy was not Vatican II at all. For many analysts of those times, most prominently Andrew Greeley, the turning event that precipitated fundamental change in American Catholicism was not Vatican II but the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which reaffirmed for Catholics the immorality of using artificial contraception. This teaching, which many American Catholics had believed would be softened, was received as a rejection of the openness to change that had been signaled by Vatican II. In the face of the sexual revolution of those times, the prohibition on birth control was almost universally rejected by the laity and led to deep division among the clergy. The 1969 tipping point may suggest that this tension, which led laypersons and many priests to reject the Church's authority or leave it altogether, at the same time led bishops to reassert the importance of selection for orthodoxy in ordination processes. Combined with my finding that views on birth control alone explain the variation in moral opinion by ordination as well or better than aggregate views on all nine moral issues examined, these results provide strong empirical support for such an interpretation.

These findings also emphasize that the changes in Catholic priests both before and after 1969 were not sudden events, but gradual processes that occurred over decades. Catholic priests did not suddenly become very liberal in the 1960s or very conservative in the 1990s. Both figures 1 and 2 show clearly that increased dissent among Catholic priests was not caused by Vatican II, but preceded that council by decades. Extending back in time the trend shown in those figures (not shown) reveals that ordination cohorts had been growing more successively more dissenting since the 1930s. The decline in dissent observed since 1969 has not been quite so monotonic, but is clearly not a sudden or recent occurrence. Analyses of priest changes by age tend to misplace the times of strongest growth in conservatism for technical reasons, since

none has taken into account the corresponding changes among laypersons, who have not increased in liberalism since the 1960s as much as they did before then, and the fact that the age at ordination has risen about a decade since the 1960s. A comparison of ordinands and lay contemporaries (not shown) shows that the times of fastest growth in priest conservatism were in the late 1970s and late 1990s. During the 1980s, when age-based analyses see priest conservatism as growing rapidly, there was actually very little rise in conservatism among newly ordained priests.

This picture has implications for understanding not only the Catholic Church's present relationship to American culture, but also its relationship to its own members, as the Church's leadership grows increasingly at odds with both. As Catholic priests have turned more counter-cultural, they have also become increasingly differentiated from the Catholic laity. Regardless of the view of authority or self-understanding, in such a situation priests are much less representative of the laity and more representative of the church's ideal norms and hierarchy. They in fact increasingly contradict the laity, necessarily taking on a less pastoral and more prophetic role.

## CONCLUSION

Catholic priests, like any clerical caste, inhabit a mediating space between the divine and the people. Clergy (to borrow a classic formulation) must be able both to comfort and to challenge their people. On the one hand, they must share enough cultural similarity with their people to be able to relate to them; on the other hand, they must be different enough from them to be able to challenge them with the word of God. Before 1969, the Catholic Church emphasized the former in selecting or forming its clergy, since then it has increasingly emphasized the latter.

This conclusion is reasonably suggested but certainly not compelled by the analyses presented in this article. As between culture and institution, the findings of this article have shown clearly that the effect of institutional factors is not negligible, at minimum, and has grown relative to cultural factors.

But just as the common assumption that cultural factors alone accounted for the changing character of Catholic priests was shown to be spurious, it may well be that further consideration of other factors, not measurable by the means used here, may limit or exclude the effect of both culture and institution. The association of demography and doctrinal conformity that renders plausible the other conclusions of this article regarding cultural and institutional effects plausible must also render them tentative. Further research that examined specific institutional mechanisms, or comparative accounts of priests and priest candidates who failed to persist, could confirm or refute the conclusions suggested here.

In terms of the apportionment of supply and demand in the transactions of the “religious economy,” the findings of this article suggest that clergy are not an expression of participant demand but of institutional supply. The intensely personal and voluntary character of a call to ministry should not obscure this fact, since ministerial certification also requires a decision on the part of the church. Indeed, the certification of clergy is one of the central components of the identity of a religious group. In Catholic parlance, the diocesan bishop is the “ordinary,” literally “gate-keeper,” by virtue of his essential role in screening or admitting new candidates to the priesthood. In any religious group, the person or group or process that selects and legitimates new clergy holds the power to define, in important respects, the nature and limits of the religion as practiced.

A church can, therefore, and does express strictness not only through direct institutional demands such as rigorous behavioral rules or expectations for financial support but also through being restrictive about who becomes clergy. Future study might explore whether more strict churches select more strictly for orthodoxy—as appears to have happened with Catholic priests in this study—or may limit who is eligible for the ministry more narrowly. Strictness may also be expressed, as Niebuhr proposed long ago, in the relative distance of the clergy from the laity in terms of spiritual status or authority. Clergy in weak churches are more likely to represent the laity; in strict churches, they are more likely to contradict them.

A final question prompted by these findings: Is the Catholic Church growing more sectarian? Most church-sect theorists, including Troeltsch, have placed the Catholic Church squarely in the category of “church,” i.e., groups which accommodate culture and in which members enter by birth, not conversion or choice. The 1969 turn toward selecting for more orthodox clergy, however, moves the Church decisively toward resisting the influence of American secular culture. This may betoken a reversal or reaction to the accommodationist impulses that culminated a decade earlier in the election of the first American Catholic president, whose Catholic identity was largely nominal and secondary to his political commitments. It may also simply respond to the emergence, often noted, of a voluntaristic sensibility among Catholics, in line with the general movement of American Catholicism toward a more Protestant self-understanding following Vatican II. Cryns, following Gamson (1968:118), points out that voluntary organizations “are apt to attract as members those individuals who are most congenial to the organization’s objectives and underlying ideology and who, by virtue of their high conformity-potential and organizational fit, offer few problems of internal control” (Cryns 1970:241). Whether the turn toward orthodoxy was strategic, an effort to shore up dissipating institutional allegiance, or something more fundamental, remains to be seen or clarified by further research.

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