Catholics, Race, and the American City

On March 21, 1997 a thirteen-year old African American boy, Lenard Clark, was beaten and almost killed in the Armour Square/Bridgeport district on Chicago’s South Side. His alleged assailants are three young white men from the neighborhood near White Sox Park. Two of the attackers are current students of De La Salle Institute, the third was a recent graduate of the Catholic high school. Several weeks earlier a racial incident occurred during a basketball game between Thornton High School, an overwhelmingly black suburban school, and Brother Rice High School, a largely white Catholic high school located in Oak Lawn just to the southwest of the city. In another incident, an African American man stabbed a white woman outside of the predominantly black Holy Angels Catholic church on the city’s South Side. The obviously deranged assailant had been ordered by God to kill all white people. Within a few days of these Chicago incidents a racial clash occurred in the Gray’s Ferry neighborhood of Philadelphia, once again involving African Americans and whites from a predominantly Catholic neighborhood. The old story of racial clashes in working-class and lower middle-class neighborhoods seemed to be playing itself out again in the nation’s inner cities. White Catholics and African Americans once again were at each other’s throats.

This clash between white ethnic Catholics and urban blacks is the topic of John McGreevy’s *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*. McGreevy traces the interaction between white ethnic Catholic neighborhoods and African Americans across the old Northern urban industrial belt during the era after World War One and up to the end of the 1960s. The book particularly focuses on Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, New York, and Philadelphia. The author attempts to recreate the world shaped by the largely immigrant church and then traces changes in the American Catholic Church and the neighborhoods in which it predominated in the years after the Second World War. McGreevy sees the creation of two Catholic peoples: one liberal and progressive, the other parochial and traditional in outlook. His study covers a very painful time in the development of American Catholicism and in the history of the American city. From the African-American Great Migration through the postwar suburban boom and the race riots of the 1960s, the Catholic Church struggled to deal with the quickly changing American culture. Catholics, both lay and clerical, also had to deal with the impact of the Second Vatican Council and a rapidly evolving American Church. Add to these events the Civil Rights Movement, and a very intense and complicated era emerges. It’s impact on the contemporary American culture has yet to be analyzed.

McGreevy begins by explaining the development of the Roman Catholic parish system and the importance of the parish and its ubiquitous parochial school during the period of mass European immigration. The author points out that the parish defined community for Catholics as they entered the industrial American city mostly from rural European villages. He further explains that what we today call ethnicity was often regarded in racial terms in
the nineteenth century. Catholics reacted to the diversity of the American immigrant experience by creating national or ethnic parishes which dotted the industrial urban landscape. While various ethnic Catholics might live close to each other, they often attended different parishes and created separate social and educational institutions. The legacy of this was a sense of separateness not only from main stream America, but from each other. Another result was the similar treatment of African Americans. If the Poles and the Irish wanted their own parishes, so would Blacks. In this peculiar way, Catholicism could reinforce traditional American racial segregation patterns while seemingly being true to the Church's own policies. The creation of separate African American parishes was a wide spread practice not only in the South, but in the urban North. In the first third of the twentieth century, this seemed to be a rational response.

The inherent contradictions between the Roman concept of a universal church and the realities of the ethnic divisions in the United States quickly brought tensions and eventually changes. McGreevy does a service by tracing the development of the Federated Colored Catholics (FCC) and the impact of two Jesuit priests, Rev. John LeFarge and Rev. William Markoe, on Catholic racialism. LaFarge in particular contributed to the evolution of the Catholic interracialist movement. LaFarge and other intellectuals promoted a universalist ideology in order to disentangle the problems of race, nation, and the state. For LaFarge, a convert to Catholicism himself, the segregation of Catholic African Americans from white Catholics seemed an obvious obstacle to Catholic universalism. The lay black Catholic leader, Thomas Turner, disagreed. Turner called for racial pride and independence. Turner claimed that the Markoe and LaFarge were attempting to destroy African-American leadership in the Catholic Church by promoting interracialism. By 1933 the Jesuits ousted Turner from the FCC leadership and renamed the organization's newsletter, The Interracial Review.

The struggle for control of the FCC led to the first significant break in Catholic racial thought. LaFarge helped start the Catholic Interracial Council movement that over time would have a great impact on race relations within the Catholic Church. In addition Pope Pius XI called LaFarge to work on the never issued encyclical HUMANI GENERIS UNITAS (On the Unity of the Human Race). Pius XI died before the encyclical could be released. This encyclical is important because it points to the impact of the World War Two experience in transforming Catholic social thought. It also ties into the earlier encyclical issued by Pius XI in 1931, QUADRAGESIMO ANNO, which encouraged Catholics to work for a more just society. Racial liberals in the American Catholic Church began to see their cause as one with the Roman Pontiff's.

In the United States, the Catholic Church faced a racially divided culture unlike any it knew in Europe. For the American Catholic working class, Roman universalism or the intellectual debates of LaFarge and others meant little on the streets of urban America. Cities like Chicago, Boston, Detroit, and Brooklyn remained racially and ethnically divided. Race, ethnicity, and class were overwhelming realities along the narrow streets, crowded tenements, and filthy alleys of these industrial urban centers. White Catholic ethnics might live together, but they worshiped separately and sent their children to separate ethnic parochial schools. Thirty-six Catholic parishes circled the Union Stock Yards on Chicago's South Side.

World War II brought a good deal of change to this Catholic urban world. The struggle against Nazi racism proved a turning point for Catholicism. American Catholic racial concepts were transformed under the twin barrels of the anti-Fascist crusade and wartime assimilation. Working-class Catholics might riot against public housing or integration, but Catholic liberals now held the high ground in a changing Church and in the larger American society.

On city streets, however, the reality of the racial divide remained as real as ever. Years of neglect also had their impact. Working-class neighborhoods all over the country faced physical decline. Catholics responded largely with Alinsky inspired organizations. Neighborhoods in transition represented a problem to the Church which had invested heavily in the inner city. On the other hand, many assimilated Catholics looked to the suburbs for homes. The "Church Triumphant" now faced an uneasy future. McGreevy does a good job detailing the problems and contradictions of the Church's response to change in the inner city.

The heart of Parish Boundaries is the conflict over race between liberal Catholics and the traditional Catholic working class. The author points to Vatican II and the Civil Rights Movement as two forces that hit the American Catholic Church like a thunderbolt. McGreevy shows the emergence of two Churches in the 1960s: one communal and traditional, the other liberal, individualistic, and progressive. The author ties liturgical changes in the ritual of the Roman Catholic Church to racial issues and concerns. In the eyes of many reformers, the old
Latin liturgy represented a backward looking Catholic Church with little interest in social justice. Many saw the old Mass as too representative of European and elitist traditions. The 1960s proved to be a turbulent time for American Catholicism.

McGreevy’s book is heavily documented and well written. It illuminates a very important time in post-1945 urban history. Parish Boundaries is a good counterweight to Alan Ehrenhalt’s romantic communitarian study of the 1950s, The Lost City. Ehrenhalt’s ahistorical book celebrates the very closed neighborhoods that McGreevy explores. While there is much to be said for the ideology of communitarianism, it is obvious that there is also a dark side to an intense sense of community. The African Americans in this book, as well as Chicago’s Lenard Clark, can testify to that.

Nevertheless Parish Boundaries has its shortcomings. History is often written by the victors, and one does get the feeling that the traditional parochial system that supported the Catholic Church for such a long time certainly should be listed among the losers in this book. The urban Catholic world familiar to most working class people came under strong attack in the 1960s. Some of the attacks which were downright silly are not given close scrutiny by McGreevy. Included in these were assaults on the parochial schools as tools of the middle class and on the parish because of its connection to residential communities. The radical chic of some priests and nuns was seen as a betrayal by Catholics who had been raised to trust religious leaders.

The old parochial system has largely disappeared from urban America today. The traditions and rituals celebrated in ethnic communities were portrayed by their enemies as evil, imperial, and even racist. It is hard to see how the singing of folk songs at a Mass often devoid of ritual tradition could be more valid than the old liturgies. It is also difficult to see how the new liturgy could do away with Catholic racism. If recent history is evidence, it certainly has not.

The communal Catholics who are the losers in this book felt attacked on all sides in the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement enjoyed much support from these Northern Democrats until the urban riots of the mid-1960s. Even afterwards, polls showed Catholics as more likely to accept African Americans in their neighborhoods. The Viet Nam War, a crucial even not even mentioned in Parish Boundaries, also impacted heavily on white Catholic neighborhoods. The war had a bearing on Catholic attitudes concerning race, and towards Catholic liberals and radicals opposed to intervention in Southeast Asia. After 1968, many white ethnics felt they were fighting the war alone and being denigrated for what they saw as their duty. Called racist war mongers by some of the clergy they had supported through their loyalty to the Church, it is no wonder that working-class Catholics turned their backs on much of the so-called Progressive Movement. Their neighborhoods under attack, many decided to leave for the suburbs and simply become Americans. While white Catholics have remained in the American city in large numbers, today that too is changing. In Chicago, over sixty-five percent of all Polish Americans lived in the suburbs by 1990. White Catholics and African Americans still clash on the streets of Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York, and this after thirty years of change in the institutional and ritual Church.

There is little mention of crime or the fear of crime in this book. There is little mention of the fact that Catholics saw their neighborhoods knocked down and plowed over for the dreams of Robert Moses and his contemporaries. In St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish in Chicago alone, over four hundred families were moved out of the parish because of the construction of the Kennedy Expressway. Is it a wonder they left for the suburbs? Why should they stay? In fact, if they had stayed they would just have been branded racist traditionalists. It was easier to pack up for Niles, Illinois and points west.

McGreevy does not do a good job with the issue of social class. The author does not adequately explore the impact of class on racial attitudes. The work of Ira Katznelson in City Trenches goes much further in explaining many of these “Catholic” attitudes from a Marxist perspective.

Racism is an American problem. As Catholics left the immigrant ghetto and became more American, they became more racist. Everything in their new society told immigrants that African Americans were looked down upon in the United States. In 1919, Poles and other Eastern Europeans did not participate in large numbers in the race riot that shook Chicago. Ten years later they would understand very well what the proper American attitude was toward their fellow black Chicagoans.

Parish Boundaries is a good first step in understanding the issues surrounding the Catholic community and race in the urban American North after World War II. McGreevy does a good job in tracing the intellectual roots of the interracial movement among some Catholics. It is however, only a first step. McGreevy’s book is written largely from an Irish American perspective. Poles and
others are quoted, but mostly as bigoted pastors or racist working class rioters. A more intense look at the difference in the ethnic experience needs to be made in order to appreciate the real diversity of the Catholic and American experience with race.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=988

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.