Commitments and non-commitments: The social radicalism of U.S. Catholic bishops

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As Simmel argued, identity (whether individual or collective identity) emerges from the intersection of multiple group affiliations and becomes more distinctive as the number and pattern of such affiliations becomes increasingly complex. U.S. Catholic bishops are a particularly worthwhile case through which to study the intersection of multiple group affiliations, for two reasons. First, as Catholic historians have noted, American Catholic identity – especially at the episcopal level – has involved a continual attempt to reconcile participation in American society and affiliation with an international church dominated by Europeans. Second, in recent years, the bishops’ patterns of accommodation and dissent, within both U.S. society and the Catholic church, have so drastically changed. Most especially, bishops’ recent criticism of U.S. government policies have baffled many observers, because the bishops had historically been patriotic and politically quiescent, usually eager to avoid any appearance of violating church-state boundaries. How do we explain these changes?

In examining how U.S. Catholic bishops have historically reconciled their place in American society with their affiliation with the Roman Catholic church, I extend Simmel’s argument by demonstrating that the construction of ideology – the central component of collective identity – is typically a political process involving a negotiation of multiple group affiliations. My goal here, then, is to contribute to our understanding of the political dynamics of ideology by developing two interesting and overlooked aspects of this process of negotiating a distinctive political identity.

More specifically, one of my two central theoretical points is that we can predict a group’s dominant ideological commitments by identifying the social structures (or, we might say, affiliations) in which it is most
powerful. But that is not the whole story. I also argue that non-commitments are as important a component of an ideology as are commitments.

Successful negotiators will avoid conflicts that they cannot win, using the diplomatic strategy of non-commitment when faced with apparently irreconcilable demands. Simmel noted that conflict between groups forces a clear definition of boundaries between the groups and thus strengthens collective identity. However, non-commitment may also build a distinctive identity by building a new pattern of (reconciled) affiliations that otherwise seems impossible.

A central feature of the history of American Catholicism has been the attempt to reconcile loyalty to Rome with an American identity. (Identities with the Vatican and with the United States do not exhaust the bishops' group affiliations, but these are, by far, the dominant affiliations, and are sufficient to demonstrate the argument here.) Until recent decades, the most difficult dilemma was the fact that Roman doctrine on church-state relations opposed religious toleration and pluralism, but that doctrine was precisely the source of anti-Catholic sentiments in the United States. American bishops had never participated in the political arrangements of church establishment and so had no commitment to such Roman doctrine. They did participate in a wider, American separation of church and state, an arrangement beneficial to their minority church. But to avoid the Scylla of rebuke from Rome for disavowing doctrine and the Charybdis of accusations of anti-Americanism that Roman church-state doctrine invited, they made non-commitment a central part of their identity. That is, through most of their history American bishops generally avoided issues that could ignite conflict over church-state relations, either within the church or within U.S. society. Except on a few issues they felt central to the church's mission (such as funding of parochial schools), before about twenty-five years ago American bishops avoided controversy over American political and social issues.

However, reflecting the fact that, as bishops, they were much more powerful within the church than within American society, bishops were generally very loyal, orthodox Catholics. Indeed, their traditional, pious devotion to Rome and to a religion many Americans found strange was an aspect of their partial isolation within U.S. society. It was only on church-state issues that they attempted to avoid commitment to Roman doctrine. But this was a crucial "non-commitment" essential to understanding their recent social radicalism.