5 Common-sense Reasoning and Theological Misunderstandings

Introduction

The intention in this chapter is to address some further sociological features of anti-Catholicism by identifying the common-sense reasoning processes involved with it. This complements the more macro-level analysis of the operation of anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland’s social structure in Part I by focusing on micro-level issues relating to identity, language and common-sense knowledge. While the focus is on the theological misunderstandings surrounding Catholicism and the distorted common-sense notions about what Catholics are supposed to believe, there is a sociological base to the distorted theological ideas on which anti-Catholicism is founded. Two issues are addressed in particular to demonstrate this claim. The common-sense ideas and reasoning processes which support the ‘cognitive map’ of anti-Catholicism help to create, amongst other things, distorted theological understandings; and the socio-linguistic features of the language used in theological debate, have more to do with representing different identities than differences in doctrine.

Common Sense and Anti-Catholicism

‘Common sense’ is a frequently used term in the vocabulary of sociologists, and although there is no agreed theoretical understanding of the term (see Brewer, 1984), it is understood widely to refer to a body of beliefs, maxims, ideas and types held by ordinary people in the street, constituting lay notions of social reality, rather than scientific ones. The normal contrast is between common-sense knowledge and science, with lay notions being seen as opposed to scientific ones, although common-sense notions can incorporate science by including lay interpretations of scientific ideas. This is exemplified, for example, by the lay understandings of the medical evidence about drinking and driving which distorts the scientific evidence about the negative effects of alcohol on driving ability. Anti-Catholicism involves common-sense knowledge about theology rather than science, for lying behind these distorted theological ideas about Catholicism is a body of common-sense knowledge which sustains and supports it, including common-sense ideas about theology and the place of Catholic doctrine and practice in relation to it. This common-sense knowledge
also includes a host of other maxims lying outside of theology, such as commonsense notions about Catholic politics and the Catholic Church’s alleged support for terrorism, ideas about Britain, the Irish Republic and Ulster, as well as judgements about Catholic attitudes, behaviour and life-style, amongst many other things.

It is recognised in sociology that common-sense maxims, types, ideas and beliefs are often vague and contradictory, but are extremely immutable and resistant to change, since common-sense knowledge is the primary realm of relevance through which people understand and interpret the world. Common-sense is believed by lay people to make sense, in that it supplies the categories, types, and interpretative processes necessary to understand the world. This suggests that ‘common sense’ is much more than a stock of ideas, for it is fundamentally a process of reasoning. It involves a reasoning process in which this stock of common-sense knowledge is routinely drawn on by lay people to construct their interpretations and understandings of their everyday world. If the stock of common-sense knowledge on which people draw in their reasoning process is shared within a group, in that the ideas, notions and maxims adhere to a group or collection of people, the common-sense knowledge will be socially transmitted amongst them, ensuring that they reason in similar ways and thus construct similar understandings of the social world. The phrase ‘cognitive map’ is a useful description of this process. A person’s ‘cognitive map’ includes their stock of common-sense ideas, which may be shared collectively with others, as well as their practical reasoning processes which utilise this common-sense knowledge to map or understand the world.

Anti-Catholicism highlights this process well. The modes of anti-Catholicism form discrete common-sense understandings of the social world, based on different, though related, common-sense maxims, ideas and notions. These common-sense ideas adhere to collections of people, who thus come to construct similar understandings, as exemplified within each mode of anti-Catholicism. The modes thus represent different, though related, stocks of common-sense knowledge, which are socially disseminated and transmitted and therefore readily available as a resource. Anti-Catholicism also involves a practical reasoning process in which anti-Catholics draw on their stock of socially available common-sense knowledge to understand the world, rather than formal theological knowledge which contradicts it. I begin by outlining what might be called ‘the cognitive map of anti-Catholicism’ by describing the common-sense reasoning process which supports the stocks of common-sense knowledge about Catholicism.

The Cognitive Map of Anti-Catholicism

Four features characterise the common-sense reasoning process that supports and sustains anti-Catholicism, which, in a remarkable piece of alliteration, can be called distortion, deletion, distance and denial. Distortion occurs when evidence is turned around, manipulated or even invented in order to fit a generalisation about Catholicism; deletion involves the removal of evidence from deliberation and consciousness when