

## Book Review

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Review of *Catholics in America: A Social Portrait* by Lisa A. Keister, 2024. New York, NY: Oxford University Press

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Scholars of Catholicism supply us with a steady stream of literature taking a deep dive into a particular facet of American Catholic life. Similarly, there are those who prefer a more comparative approach, looking at the overlaps and divergences among different faith groups. Lisa Keister’s *Catholics in America* combines these approaches, yielding a comparative yet Catholic-centric volume. The result is a big picture look at Catholicism in the United States, especially as it is contextualized within the greater landscape of some of America’s largest religious groups.

Keister’s book successfully provides a long-needed examination of American Catholics as they are situated within the broader American social fabric. Her narrative is primarily driven by quantitative analysis—waves of the General Social Survey (1972–2021) and Panel Study of Income Dynamics (1997–2021)—supplemented by occasional analyses of the American Voices Project—a quantitative and qualitative data source. The book is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the basic demography of American Catholics, such as fertility rates and education levels. The second part explores their beliefs and attitudes on religion, politics, and other social issues. She makes this an easy read for practitioners by explaining any technical verbiage in accessible language.

There are several unique contributions that *Catholics in America* makes to the field. First, to repeat, this is about Catholics and yet we get to understand Catholics in light of their similarities and differences with other religious groups. Throughout the book, Keister reports the data for white Catholics, Latino Catholics, white mainline Protestants, white conservative Protestants, Latino Protestants and those not affiliated with any religious tradition (i.e., “nones”). The extensive number of topics allows readers to see the areas of similarity between white Catholics and white mainline Protestants (which many are familiar with), but also where they depart. We also learn where white Catholics and Latino Catholics have their similarities and differences. Similarly, readers can better understand the points of overlap and departure for Latino Catholics and Latino Protestants.

Which brings me to the next contribution: There is simply not enough social science research on Latino Catholics. In pulling out her six groups, Keister


illuminates so much. She shows the areas in which religion tends to matter more for Latino Catholics as far as an attitude, belief or social experience as well as the areas in which ethnicity makes a bigger difference. She also has some helpful data on migration generation (e.g., first-generation American) among Latino Catholics in the second chapter, which we simply don't have enough of in the sociological literature. Denominational offices trying to better serve Hispanic populations—whether Protestant or Catholic—would learn much from this book.

One of Keister's main research areas is economics and inequality. This is a huge gap in the Catholic literature. This book does an amazing job in filling this gap. Keister explores income and wealth in both objective measures and subjective measures (e.g., how well people feel they can make ends meet). She also explores attitudes surrounding social and economic policies and the SES (and other characteristics) of those who join or leave Catholicism. She highlights some of the findings that could have the greatest financial impact on the future of Catholicism. These are sorely-needed findings and Keister really delivers here.

A space for improvement would be some of the places Keister discusses Catholic teachings. The vast majority of the time, the book cited official Catholic sources and was accurate. There were a handful of times that did not contain citations and these were inaccurate and were more reflective of popular (albeit incorrect) belief of what Catholicism teaches. For instance, she writes that legally divorced or separated Catholics cannot participate fully in church life, including receiving communion (51, they absolutely may; it is only when they begin to be romantically involved with another person that this changes). She continues on to say that the divorced who remarry are excommunicated (this was universally rescinded and ended by Pope Paul VI in 1977). I would recommend Gerald Bednar's *Mercy and the Rule of Law* (Liturgical Press 2021) for a thorough treatment of divorce, remarriage, and communion in the Catholic Church, both historically and contemporarily. Still, I recognize that official teaching is not Keister's area; by and large she did a very fine job informing unaware readers of Catholic teaching on a variety of topics and this should not be missed.

I highly recommend Lisa Keister's *Catholics in America*. This is a much needed book that fills several gaps in the Catholic social science literature. Readers who are very familiar with Catholic demography, beliefs and practices, will still gain much in seeing the ways Catholics fit into the wider American religious landscape. This book would make a great text for a methods or American religion course. It is an excellent primer for ministers in interdenominational contexts (e.g., hospital chaplains) who want to better understand Catholics, how they are similar to and different from believers in other traditions and the similarities and differences in the ways Hispanic and white Catholics are informed (or not) by their faith.

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