



Crabgrass Catholicism: How Suburbanization Transformed Faith and Politics in Postwar America

Stephen M. Koeth. Chicago Univ, \$30 trade paper (336p) ISBN 978-0-226-84220-2

Koeth, an assistant history professor at Notre Dame, debuts with a scrupulous study of the profound changes Catholicism underwent during the midcentury suburban boom. Replacing the structure of the 19th-century “immigrant church” proved daunting, as suburbs rapidly expanded across unwieldy, unwalkable distances, stretching the church’s financial and human resources and diminishing the sense of community cultivated in urban congregations. With suburban churches overcrowded and increasingly inaccessible, the epicenter of religious life shifted to private spaces, as older parish associations that aimed to cultivate “communal spirituality” gave way to home-based “apostolates” led by laypeople. Absent the tightly knit immigrant communities that had anchored city life, suburbia also became a crucible where ethnic divisions between Catholics broke down, a development that ended up reinforcing racial barriers that were already compounded by

suburban segregation. Against this backdrop, the author incisively reappraises broader shifts in U.S. Catholicism—arguing, for example, that the dissolution of the Catholic “Democratic monolith” stemmed not only from racial backlash and antiabortion sentiment but from economic pressures driven by the shift to suburban life, which spurred Catholic tax “revolts” as “inflation and tax increases... cut into the savings and income of working-class whites.” Thoroughly researched and well analyzed, this is a smart look at a volatile period in American religious history. (*Aug.*)