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What We Can Learn From the History of Assimilation about the Prospects for Reducing Religious Cleavages in Western Europe

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Plenum: Transnationale Vergesellschaftung – Religion – Migration

The point of departure for this paper is the mid-20th-century American experience of incorporating Catholics and Jews into the mainstream of a society that previously had defined its core identity in terms of post-Reformation Christianity. The paper proposes a theory to account for this large-scale boundary change and applies it in turn to the contemporary incorporation dilemmas in Western Europe. A key condition in the theory is "non-zero-sum mobility", a situation that occurs when many members of disadvantaged minority can ascend socially without appearing to threaten the position of established groups. Non-zero-sum mobility may arise in the near future because of the retirement of large, socioeconomically advantaged, post-World War II birth cohorts, which are overwhelmingly composed of members of European majority populations. The policy implications of this situation are sketched.