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"WHO WE ARE" AND "HOW WE DO THINGS HERE": LOCAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF MISSION AND IDENTITY

Martha immediately took me back to her kitchen and fixed me a cup of coffee. It was late August 1991, and I had spent the spring and summer doing research on Oak Park and its two neighboring villages, River Forest and Forest Park. I had been reading both local papers, spending time at the libraries and the historical society office, and I had a list of local restaurants where the managers did not mind if I spent hours when they were not busy, drinking coffee and taking up table space with my notes. The ice cream shop on Chicago Avenue had become a favorite. I had interviewed community leaders and informants, including one reporter on the local paper who grew up in Oak Park and spent most of one summer afternoon in the bagel shop at the center of town, chain-smoking and telling me about the community's history and politics.

I had just begun interviewing members of Martha's church, Hope Episcopal, the first congregation out of twenty-three in which I would conduct interviews. I would find out that many of the people I interviewed preferred talking in the kitchen, and this was particularly true of women like Martha.[1] In her sixties, Martha is a retired widow who has lived in Oak Park for over thirty years. She has been both a homemaker and a professional woman, and for many years an active member and leader in Hope Episcopal Church. She is thin and tall, and her straight dark hair, bobbed short, has a little gray. She is energetic and friendly. Once I was settled with a cup of coffee, she took a seat next to me at the kitchen table and asked me all about my research and my plans for the future. She seemed to be both practical and fun, and I found myself liking her more and more as we talked, relaxing in the big, sunny kitchen.

Her church had been going through a difficult time, and as the interview unfolded, she told me about it, growing more serious as she went along. Eventually, I would get eight different versions of this conflict from the people I interviewed in this church, although most agreed on a few basics. The conflict began after the new pastor came a couple of years ago. Several incidents would be mentioned in different combinations: conflicts over a moveable altar, over how a

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funeral was conducted, over ministry to AIDS-stricken members, over finances, over administrative procedures.

Martha told me easily, clearly, about the course of events. She could talk in some detail about who was on which side, but she was unable to say why there had been no resolution, why the conflict kept cropping up again. She said, "We don't have the tools, we don't have the skills, to deal with conflict constructively." But this struck me as odd; if any group would have the skills to handle conflict, it should be this congregation full of highly educated people in business, management, the professions, people with what sociologists call "human capital," who might well have had specific training in management, even in mediation, that ought to help resolve things here.[2]

When I asked Martha if she could tell me what the cause of the conflict was, she paused. Then she told me about a meeting she had gone to several weeks ago, the annual evaluation meeting for the rector.[3] She has gone to the church for many years and thought she knew the place very well. But as several people got up to talk about the church and the problems it had been having, she had a sudden and upsetting realization, thinking to herself, "I wasn't going to the same church they were."

At the time, I was not sure quite what she meant. But as I talked to more people in this church, I would come to understand that, while the trouble began when the new pastor came, it was essentially a fight between two groups of lay leaders and core members. One group seemed to take for granted that their church is primarily about having a place to worship, about long-term friendships and family-like attachments, about people who know you and your family and could be counted on for help in times of crisis. Most of these people valued a traditional approach to doctrine and ritual practice. Many of them would tell me that the new pastor was himself the problem, saying with disapproval that his style did not fit with the congregation, that he would sometimes be uncaring and flippant, telling jokes during the sermon, and saying radical things just to provoke a reaction. These members were particularly upset about the moveable altar and the last-minute changes to the format of the funeral service. Many were long-term members, but there were quite a few newcomers in this group, as well.

For others, including Martha, the church is primarily about providing leadership in the community, about interpreting doctrine and ritual tradition in light of contemporary social reality and current members' needs, about taking a stand on issues like AIDS and gay and lesbian rights. For this group, the church is about service and witnessing to the community about the virtue of tolerance and the importance of diversity. This group was intrigued when the pastor experimented with the moveable altar, and they enjoyed the challenging and thought-provoking things that he said. They liked his jokes. Some of these people were long-term members, but many were newcomers, having joined in the last two to three years.

"Who We Are" and "How We Do Things Here"

These two groups were not cleanly divided by length of membership, although more of the newcomers liked the pastor than did not. Ideology was not the divide between them; in interviews, they all self-identified as liberal or moderate and had similar views about ideologically salient issues like abortion and the role of homosexuals in the church. The new pastor has been more sympathetic with the views of the second group, and his arrival triggered a series of conflicts, opportunities for people to articulate, and thus to define and sharpen, their different underlying assumptions about "who we are" and "how we do things here."

Martha told me that she thought that part of the problem was a kind of Episcopalian rigidity that made compromise difficult. But fieldwork in twenty-two other congregations belonging to fifteen different denominations (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish), as well as general experience in community organizations, convinced me that what was going on in Martha's church is not unique to Episcopalians. Faced with conflict that seemed to grow more acrimonious with no end in sight, many members, including those not so strongly committed to either group, would decide to leave, some attending other Episcopalian churches in the area.[4] Eventually, this conflict would reduce the Sunday attendance at Hope Episcopal from about 250 to under 100, and in 1995, when I followed up, the church, with a new pastor, was only just beginning to recover its attendance, along with some sense of optimism about the future.

From Conflict to Local Culture

In the process of understanding the patterns of conflict in the congregations in and around Oak Park, my interview with Martha was something to which I kept returning. There are various ways to interpret conflict, and as I learned more about Hope Episcopal, I kept trying to fit Martha's story, and the stories the other members told, into these preexisting interpretive frameworks, to see which one was the best fit. Was this really a conflict over ideas and symbols – the moveable altar, the proper way to conduct a service? Or was it really about power, perhaps a struggle between the pastor and the lay members over authority and control? Or was it at heart a fight between old-timers and newcomers and the accompanying generational transition in congregational leadership? All of these frameworks captured some partial truth about the conflict at Hope Episcopal, but each one left important things out, too.

The situation became even more complicated when I went beyond Hope Episcopal to consider conflicts in the twenty-three different congregations I had studied. Two Catholic parishes, two synagogues, and nineteen Protestant congregations from a wide range of denominations, these congrega-

tions were chosen to achieve some scope for comparison along dimensions identified in previous studies as relevant for conflict – size, polity type, and a liberal or conservative religious orientation. "Small" congregations are roughly 150 members or less, with an administrative structure revolving around the pastor and a small group of lay leaders, while large congregations have more than 150 members and a more formal administrative structure with more boards and committees (Rothauge 1990). I divide polity into "congregational" and "hierarchical," with the latter containing both presbyterian and episcopal polities as described by Moberg (1962). Congregations were labeled "liberal" or "conservative" depending on how the pastor and the majority of the lay people I spoke to (roughly ten per congregation) characterized the congregation's religious orientation (see Table 4 in Chapter 2). Over eighteen months, from late 1991 to early 1993, I conducted over 230 interviews plus participant-observation of services and the review of congregational documents like sermons, annual reports, newsletters, minutes of meetings, bulletins, and histories. Chapter 2 and Appendix A contain a much longer discussion of why size, polity, and religious orientation were the relevant dimensions and how the congregations were chosen and the fieldwork conducted.

How to make sense of conflicts in such a diverse group of congregations? In going through interviews and fieldnotes, I found that I kept returning to Martha's description of the rector's evaluation meeting, running up against someone for whom Hope Episcopal was "a different church." As May (1980) points out in her excellent study of divorce in the United States at the turn of the century, conflict can be the result of a violation of shared expectations, or conflict can result from the clash of two fundamentally different sets of expectations for behavior. The former is *within-frame* conflict and can be resolved by routine kinds of processes that enforce compliance with agreed-upon expectations. The latter is *between-frame* conflict, which is more difficult to resolve because the divergent expectations include different ideas about appropriate decision-making processes.[5] Between-frame conflicts in small groups are often fundamentally about identity, an attempt to forge an answer to the questions, "Who are we?" and "How do we do things here?"[6]

When I realized this, I began to think of conflicts like the one at Hope Episcopal, and several of the other congregations, as identity conflicts. Doing so enabled me to integrate the insights from various perspectives on conflict. Identity conflicts involve both power and symbols; they can be understood as conflicts over the power to symbolize different under-

standings of the congregation's identity and to institutionalize these understandings in very concrete ways, including the liturgy, the programs, the ways of making decisions, and the norms of interaction that, taken together, form the overall tenor of congregational life. This is why they are initiated by those with the most commitment to the congregation – the pastor and the most involved lay leaders. There was no need to choose between an explanation of conflict based on symbols and one based on power or a struggle for control, because both were caught up in actual conflict events as they unfolded in these congregations.

But not all of the conflicts I encountered were as severe as the one at Hope Episcopal. In most congregations, the conflicts were less intractable; they involved smaller groups of people, they did not cause the same kind of widespread emotional upheaval, and they were more routinely resolved. How could those smaller conflicts be related to identity? Martha's story, I realized, is about two groups of people whose different visions of mission and identity for the church include very different ideas about religious authority and member commitment. Most other explanations for conflict look at factors like the size of the group and its formal structure to explain variations in authority and commitment, which are in turn linked to variations in group processes like conflict and decision making.[7] Martha's story, along with similar ones that kept emerging from interviews with other members, led me to realize that, instead of using underlying variables like size and organizational structure as a proxy for authority and commitment, as previous studies have tended to do, I could study local culture as an expression of the locally negotiated understandings about appropriate styles of authority and commitment (cf. Coser 1956). If different local understandings of mission and identity explain why severe conflicts take the form that they do, then perhaps, I began to think, those local understandings also hold the key to interpreting the regularities and patterns in more normal or within-frame conflicts.[8]

Throughout the course of the fieldwork, then, the interpretive focus changed, and this became a comparative study of local religious cultures and how they are constitutive of but also constituted by organizational structures, like size and polity, and practices, like conflict and decision making. This change is a move away from thinking about a set of underlying variables that have a uniform effect on the organizations within a social space and toward specifying a limited set of organizational types, shaped by historical and institutional factors, within which the relationships between things like size, polity, authority, and decision making may

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be differently structured.[9] It is also a shift away from a methodology of "freezing" social process and making the analytical choice to designate conflict as an outcome toward looking at both the processes by which conflicts are made and the effects that conflicts in turn have on local identity and local practices. This shift was greatly influenced by my reading of Giddens (1984) on the importance of studying the processes by which actors in specific contexts reproduce or change social structure through their interactions.

This change in focus allowed me to better carry out some of my initial goals, including the goal of generating a better understanding of conflict in local religious organizations, especially the kind of serious conflict that Martha described in her church. A better understanding, I thought, should improve on existing studies in very specific ways. It should go beyond a laundry list of the possible causes of conflict. It should emphasize organizations and organizational processes over latent or potential conflicts in individual attitudes. It ought to analyze a congregation's whole pattern of conflict, including what issues people fight over, how they frame those issues, typical processes by which conflict plays out and is resolved, how serious or divisive conflicts are, and what effect they have on the congregation in the long run.[10]

Chapter 2 describes in more detail why the three factors identified in previous studies – size, polity, and cultural orientation – did not allow me to develop that better explanation of conflict that I had been seeking. While having some effect on the kinds of issues that caused conflict and the frequency of conflict, they did not allow me to explain why some issues are understood differently in different congregations, or why and where different kinds of moral arguments are used. They did not allow me to understand differences in conflict processes, including the role of the pastor, typical kinds of decision-routines, or favored kinds of solutions. They did not help me to understand why four of the twenty-three congregations exhibited a particularly severe set of conflicts that resulted, in three cases, in the exit of a large group of members.

In addition to changing the way in which I approached the original goals of the study, this change in focus also raised some entirely new issues, as I became interested in understanding more about these local religious cultures than just their relationship to conflict. I became interested in the content of the religious cultures themselves. There are over 300,000 congregations in the United States that provide members with a place of worship and fellowship.[11] Which ones foster the habits of caring and civic

tolerance that Putnam and others find to be necessary for vital demo-cratic communities?[12] Which ones foster a more publicly engaged form of religion, and which ones are more privatized? Conflict, initially the sole focus, became a window into these larger questions of the shared and diver-gent expectations about legitimate goals and ways of doing things, or what might be called the moral order of local religious life.[13]

This is a particularly important set of questions in the sociology of reli-gion right now, because one influential branch of recent scholarship has developed a dominant narrative of religious change in the United States over the last forty to fifty years. While various terms have been used – pri-vatization, voluntarism, increasing individualism – several scholars have concluded that the civic capacity of American religion has declined in the last half of this century. They point variously to more individualism in religious discourse, to more switching among congregations over the indi-vidual member's life-course, to the declining legitimacy of pastoral author-ity, and to declining denominational loyalty. They interpret these trends as an indication that American religion has become less publicly engaged and that the very basis for any commitment to organized religion is being eroded. There has been very little comparative study of congregations, however, to assess whether trends in individual religiosity as reported in surveys or perceived changes in religious authority by denominational leaders have actually resulted in congregations that are less engaged in their local communities or in local religious cultures that are more priva-tized and inwardly focused.

This book is structured around a central argument: that congregations develop distinct cultures that comprise local understandings of identity and mission and that can be understood analytically as bundles of core tasks and legitimate ways of doing things. The primary thesis is that these local religious cultures are not completely idiosyncratic, but that they come in patterns shaped by the larger institutional environment that limits their range of variation. I call these patterns *congregational models*. In twenty-three congregations, I did not find twenty-three different congre-gational models; rather, I found four basic types: *house of worship*, *family*, *community*, and *leader* models. A few congregations, like Martha's, had two well-defined groups of people who operated from the assumptions of dif-ferent models; in most congregations, however, a single dominant model structured the public culture.

The secondary thesis is that the narrative of religious decline and increasing individualism has missed something important by failing to

look seriously at local religious cultures. The four congregational models
I found in this community do, in various ways, stress tolerance and foster
caring relationships. They promote engagement with local civic life,
ranging from compassionate outreach to the poor to activism on social and
political issues. This suggests that an analysis of changes in religious dis-
course and individual religiosity needs to be supplemented by an analysis
of the organizations and the institutional forms that shape religious par-
ticipation, if we want to develop a better understanding of how social
changes affect the relationship between religion and public life in the
United States at the level of the local community.

In addition, I want to suggest that an institutional approach is useful
in studying local culture, or the culture of individual groups and organi-
zations. Congregational models are a specific example, within the institu-
tional field of American religion, of a more general phenomenon, what
Paul DiMaggio (1991) has called the *institutional model* of the group or
organization. Rooted in an understanding of local culture as a negotiated
order built up over time and through interaction, this analysis neverthe-
less brings a different lens – an institutional lens – to bear on the study
of local culture, something that has previously been examined through a
lens that foregrounds particular, idiosyncratic detail.[14]

Local Culture Through an Institutional Lens

In any field there are usually one or two paradigmatic studies that set the
terms for the development of future work. A paradigmatic study of local
culture that has influenced anthropology, history, sociology, and cultural
studies is Clifford Geertz's (1973) description of the Balinese cockfight.
Geertz describes the cockfight as a complicated social drama, a ritualized
performance where every man knows and re-creates his place in the taken-
for-granted order of Balinese society. And he evokes it beautifully. When
you read Geertz's description, you can almost picture yourself there, strain-
ing with the others to get a view of the fifty-foot ring, seeing the fight-
ing roosters tear each other apart – and running away when the authorities
break it up.

In American sociology, the book *With the Boys*, Gary Alan Fine's (1987)
study of how Little League teams build a unique social identity through
the members' interactions, kept local culture on the intellectual agenda of
cultural and organizational analysis for a new generation of scholars. In
contrast to the cockfight, Little League may seem tame; no blood and

feathers here. But the reader of Fine's study gets the same sense of watch-ing as the members come to define themselves and be understood by others as a certain kind of team. They do this not only through the sport itself, but through all of the behind-the-scenes interactions that build up common understandings of "who we are" and "how we do things here" – local culture.

Local culture has often been studied this way.[15] In effect, anthropolo-gists and sociologists have answered the question, "why study local cul-ture?" by examining it as the *locus of social processes through which common understandings of group or organizational identity are built up and maintained over time*. These accounts are by definition descriptive, and the plausibility of the account is often judged by aesthetic criteria. Is the description "thick," or rich or elegant or compelling?[16] Is there internal consistency? Fine captures the emphasis on the particular and the idiosyncratic that are the hallmarks of this approach when he coins the term "idioculture," defin-ing it as

> a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer, and that serve as the basis for further interaction. . . . This approach stresses the localized nature of culture, implying that it . . . can be a particularistic development of any group (1987:125).

There have been more studies that document the extent of such unique-ness than ones that specify its limits.

Surely the members of the Little League teams that Fine studied were free to come up with their own local culture that was negotiated, idio-syncratic, and particular. But how far could they go in defining their own identity? Their understanding of their own team might incorporate a range of attitudes toward winning and losing. But if they decided that baseball itself were not worth playing, how long would they remain a Little League team? Can one imagine a Little League team in which members understand their *primary objective* to be making money, housing the homeless, kayaking, or robbing liquor stores, instead of playing baseball?

The twenty-three congregations I studied all have strong idiocultures. These are comprised in part of narratives about formative events, leaders, and founding families. But they also have more unexpected elements. For example, when I asked the pastor of one UCC[17] church about what brings his congregation together, he laughed, and then he told me about their

"donut program." They make and sell donuts at the weekly farmers' market. Everyone I talked to in this congregation spoke about "our donuts." Sometimes they smiled or even laughed, but they mentioned this spontaneously and spoke of it as something special. No other congregation does anything like this, they repeatedly told me. Besides, getting up in the middle of the night to make donuts and then stand in the cold morning air to sell them breeds a certain camaraderie.

Donuts are a part of this church's idioculture. In other congregations, the idioculture includes stained glass windows designed by an important artist or stories of the heyday in the 1950s when the Sunday School had over 1,000 people. Two congregations had stories of near-death, when the congregation almost shut its doors due to lack of members, and resurrection, to a present with several hundred members and an impressive annual budget. In short, each of these twenty-three congregations exhibits the richness and variety that one would expect in the culture of living communities, and the idea of idioculture is a useful one to employ in understanding some things about them.

It is no wonder, then, that the emerging field of congregational studies has concentrated on this idiosyncratic approach to local religious culture. Local congregations are places where individuals come together to form, interpret, and enact their religious commitments. The congregations where people find what they need to meet a variety of needs, and that people join for a variety of reasons, are not simple aggregations of individual preferences; nor are they straightforward reproductions of larger religious traditions. In congregations individual commitments and larger traditions are combined in ongoing, creative ways. A large and growing body of work develops this view, showing congregations to be crucibles where individual ideas, beliefs, and commitments interact with religious traditions, changing both and forming robust local cultures.[18] Fine (1984) gives this view of organizational culture the label "negotiated order," a term that evokes both the regularities of group life and the processes that reproduce it.

But if the idea of idioculture is helpful in understanding some things about congregations or other organizations, I argue that it is only partial. There are other things we might want to know about the culture of a group or organization that are not captured well by the emphasis on rich idiosyncrasy that has developed in the typical approach to local cultures. The emphasis on the particular and the idiosyncratic provides only one analytical lens through which to view local culture. Like any lens, it captures