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0521594448 - Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life

Penny Edgell Becker

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CONGREGATIONS IN CONFLICT

There are more than 300,000 religious congregations in the United States; these communities have more members and generate more participation than any other set of voluntary organizations in American society. This picture of dynamism belies recent, prevailing scholarship that perceives a decline in traditional religious authority, in Americans' commitment to organized religion, and in religious institutions' level of public engagement. Penny Edgell Becker, in this pioneering comparative study of local congregations, argues that the case for decline – in community, in commitment, in public engagement – does not stand up to closer scrutiny.

Congregations in Conflict: Cultural Models of Local Religious Life examines the nature of American congregations as institutions, looking in particular at how they deal with conflict within their ranks, to gain insight into religious culture, or the moral order of local religious life. In detailed and well documented case studies of conflict in twenty-three congregations – including Protestant churches, Catholic parishes, and Jewish synagogues – Becker examines such factors as organizational processes, the extent and types of ties between church members, their shared understandings about mission and identity, and level of public commitment. From these factors, the author develops four models of local religious cultures, each of which emphasizes different aspects of the mission imperatives that broadly characterize American religion – to reproduce a historic faith, to provide a caring community of believers, and to witness. Contrary to many academic accounts of general trends in American religion, at the local level Becker finds vital “public religion”: congregations that provide caring and support for members, service to the local community, and important arenas for moral debate and public activism.

Penny Edgell Becker is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Cornell University. She is co-editor of *Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader* (1997), is a contributing author of *Sacred Companies: Organized Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organization* (1997), and has published in the journals *Religion and American Culture* and *Social Problems*.

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PENNY EDGELL BECKER

Cornell University



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*To my parents, June and Tom Edgell, and my husband, David Edgell Becker,
for all that matters*

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Penny Becker
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