Chapter 5

What Is Right? What Is Caring?

Moral Logics in Local Religious Life[1]

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What does it mean to be Jewish in a largely Gentile community? The members of a Conservative synagogue in Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago, found themselves discussing this very question when their leaders helped to organize a homeless shelter in which they hoped the synagogue would participate. Opposition to the shelter among the synagogue's neighbors and village officials was vocal, and included, by some reports, openly anti-Semitic remarks directed at synagogue members supporting the shelter. Concerns about anti-Semitism moved some congregants to question the wisdom of participating in a project that was running up against community objections. Several members feared becoming the target of discriminatory comments and hard feelings. Some felt that their welcome in the community was tenuous, and that "making trouble" was not a good idea.

Raising these concerns in public meetings, those who opposed getting involved in the shelter found that many members, particularly younger ones, rejected the idea that the congregation should back down just because the shelter was unpopular. These members also contended that one reason some opposed the homeless shelter was because they feared that their beautiful, well-kept building would be damaged by the overnight guests. Shelter supporters rejected fear—of anti-Semitism, of the homeless—as a legitimate basis for withdrawing. More generally, they insisted that this decision had to be made on moral grounds, not out of apprehension or inconvenience. As the rabbi told me, shelter supporters finally forced the rest of the membership to confront the issue

on their terms. As he put it, they successfully forced people not to ask, "Is this the easy thing to do?" but rather to inquire, "Is this the right thing to do?" The latter is a moral question (cf. Tipton 1982).

After heated public meetings and private conversations, the congregation voted to participate in the shelter project. Through this debate, members rejected an interpretation of Jewish identity as marginal and the accompanying expectation that the congregation would remain apart from community affairs. Instead they advanced a self-image that stressed their history of marginality as grounds for ministering to another marginal group, the homeless. The conflict was never about whether being Jewish was a marginal identity in this particular suburban Chicago community. Rather, it centered on the implications of this identity for practice, programs, resource allocation, and a more general stance toward community involvement.

This Conservative synagogue's conflict over the homeless shelter did more than reveal a shared understanding of the marginal nature of Judaism in mainstream suburban America and divergent interpretations about what this recognition implies for participation in local community life. The conflict became the locus for constructing a new public consensus among the congregants. It provided an occasion for interpreting their identity as a rationale for engaging in compassionate outreach, for changing the overall direction of the congregation's involvement with the community. The final resolution stressed compassion, inclusion, and connection.

During conversations with me, congregants noted that questions of meaning and identity had long received considerable public attention and conscious reflection. This synagogue is not afraid of heated debate. As Rachel, a clinical psychologist and a board member, reported

> "This is a culture here which is not shy about conflict. It is part of Jewish culture in general, not just this synagogue. You confront, you question, you ask, you look for a better way." So sometimes people yell, and feelings are hurt, and apologies are forthcoming, and it's patched up and you move on.[2]

Thus conflicts in this congregation often become public arenas for negotiating boundaries and identity. In this case, the boundary between the temple and the "outside" was well demarcated and consensual. What was being contested was what action to take given the congregants' shared understanding of this boundary.

In contrast, conflicts over the role of the non-Jewish spouse in intermarried couples within congregational life raised precisely the question of the location and meaning of the congregation's boundaries. These conflicts were not about how to relate to the outside but about how much—or which parts—of the outside to incorporate into full membership. This Conservative congregation and a Reform congregation up the street both confronted the issue of intermarriage and the role of the spouse in temple life. The Conservative temple decided that the non-Jewish spouse was welcome to participate in any congregational activity but could not sit on the board. The Reform temple initially allowed the non-Jewish spouse a seat on the board, but the decision proved to be an unstable solution because some members continually worried that non-Jews might make the synagogue's important decisions. These dissenters repeatedly raised the issue for further discussion. At the time of my fieldwork, the Reform synagogue was working out a policy to grandfather in the non-Jewish spouses already on the board, but to prohibit any more from being elected. Satisfied with the solution, the synagogue later sent congregants to conferences to share their model for handling this issue and distributed copies of their written policy upon request.

The conflicts about the implications of Jewish identity in these congregations evolved from an awareness of anti-Semitism in society at large and in this community in particular. Anti-Semitism is one among a constellation of issues that are particularly troublesome for mainstream American religion. Charles Glock (1993) has argued that issues of race and ethnicity, gender roles, sexuality, and sexual morality have become the primary arenas of conflict for churches in the United States throughout this century.[3] Subject to rapid social change in the larger society, these issues have posed particular problems of adaptation for religious organizations. Perceived from the start as moral issues, Glock argues, these topics have been difficult for religious leaders to ignore. According to him, tensions over gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity reflect the reactions of national religious organizations to ongoing modernization, and, in particular, to the increasing universalism and liberalism of public life. He concludes that liberal, accommodating churches have fared badly, losing members and resources, while conservative churches, which have resisted accommodation on these issues, have thrived and grown.

Critiques of the accommodation thesis of denominational growth and decline abound, and my purpose here is not to engage that debate. Whether

Glock's analysis of the relations between these social issues and changes in national religious organizations is correct in its particulars, his observation that gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity are central issues in American religion was substantiated in my study of local religious life. In the 23 congregations I studied, nearly one out of three conflicts (21 out of 65) reflects one of these hot button issues. Even when these social issues are not the subject of overt conflict, they often figure prominently in people's discussions of "potential conflict" or "troubling issues," or as factors that influenced how people felt about conflicts over other issues, like music or liturgy.

However useful for understanding denominational dynamics, Glock's concepts—accommodation and resistance—and the accompanying culture wars thesis do not sufficiently explain the impact of these issues on congregational life (see Hunter 1991, 1994, cf. Ammerman 1994). At the local level, these issues are not, primarily, arenas for ideological battles between those who are more liberal/progressive and those who are more conservative/orthodox. At the local level, these represent issues of inclusion and exclusion, of boundaries and identity, of who is and who is not part of the moral community. Certainly, some differences emerge in which particular issues trouble liberals and conservatives. Yet marked similarities characterize how liberals and conservatives negotiate the meaning of social issues that arise in congregational life. Liberal and conservative congregations alike tended to frame these issues as "moral" conflicts, or conflicts over "What is the right thing to do here?" They tended to resolve these conflicts by open and participatory processes, to favor compromise, and to stress that solutions needed to be "compassionate" or "caring."

A more useful analytical approach for understanding how the issues that Glock highlights affect local religious communities considers their role in provoking conflicts over how to reconcile different moral logics that crosscut, rather than reinforce, a liberal/conservative divide. Specifically, most conflicts over issues of social inclusion are struggles over when to apply a moral logic of caring and when to apply a moral logic of authoritative religious judgment or truth seeking.[4] These conflicts are triggered when a member transgresses an agreed upon boundary or calls for the renegotiation of the boundary itself.[5] The particular issues that trigger conflict are influenced by the content of a church's belief and so differ between liberal and conservative congregations and between Jewish and non-Jewish congregations in this community. But the similarities in the processes by which conflict plays itself out once it has begun indicate a crosscutting correspondence in moral logic within these congregations. This moral logic determines which issues of social inclusion are interpreted as moral and affirms that the right decision balances the moral imperatives of truth seeking and compassion.

Conflict, then, can provide a good window on the ongoing construction and negotiation of moral order, the shared and divergent expectations about the community's boundaries, and the moral obligations of membership.[6] Elaine Tyler May's (1980) study of divorce in late Victorian and post-Victorian America supports this view of conflict. May discusses what conflict reveals about moral expectations of family life. According to May, the claims and arguments that divorcing parties made during the late Victorian era reveal a basic consensus on the goals of marriage and the expected behaviors and temperaments of husbands and wives. Couples divorced when these shared expectations were violated. In a later period of rapidly changing economic arrangements and diversification of gender roles, May finds that the rhetoric of divorce reveals divergent expectations of what marriage should be like and what husbands' and wives' roles ought to be within it in post-Victorian society.

In small face-to-face groups like congregations, rhetorics of conflict reveal more than established moral expectations; they also participate in the ongoing production of moral order among people who have decided, in essence, not to "divorce" or exit when they are dissatisfied, but to stay and work things out (cf. Becker et al. 1993). In conflict, divergent expectations are revealed, shared expectations are discovered and articulated, and the implications for specific decisions are negotiated.

Conflict in Context

Understanding the links between the public discourse surrounding conflict and the moral expectations of participants in local congregations became the goal of my ethnographic study of congregations in Oak Park, Illinois. For 18 months from 1991 to 1993, I collected information on 23 congregations in and around Oak Park, a collar suburb nine miles from the center of Chicago. I interviewed more than 230 people, reviewed congregational histories and other documents, and observed worship services and other meetings.[7] Focusing on conflict and its role in making and remaking moral order in local religious communities, I asked people to tell me about all of the conflicts their congregation had experienced in approximately the past five years.

My research resulted in information on 65 conflicts that had become public and that were serious enough to be remembered by at least two people. It also yielded a list of issues that were privately labeled as conflicts or potential conflicts but which never made it into the arena of public discourse or overt conflict. This latter group of potential conflicts will also be included in my discussion, because they reveal gaps or inconsistencies between private discourse and the moral logic of public argumentation. No doubt my inventory is somewhat incomplete. Although people proved far more willing to talk about even serious conflicts than I had anticipated, some more sensitive issues or details were likely omitted, either from the congregation's own public discourse or from private talk with me. And the details of earlier and less serious conflicts may also have slipped from memory.

The time, place, and particulars of Oak Park shape this account of conflict. This village and the two to the west of it, River Forest and Forest Park, are dominated by middle- to upper middle-class professional couples with children, who make up the largest demographic group and provide leadership in many community institutions, including churches and synagogues. Oak Park and Forest Park are racially mixed and have progressive, tolerant reputations, while River Forest, more white and affluent, has a reputation as comparatively conservative.

In Oak Park and River Forest, nearly half the voters went Democratic in the 1992 presidential election, and half, Republican. The area's Pentecostal and fundamentalist churches are filled on Sunday morning, as are the United Methodist and Unitarian congregations. If the culture wars thesis worked anywhere, one might expect it would be applicable here. In fact, some evidence of culture wars exists. For example, Oak Park has an active gay and lesbian community, and, recently, a village ordinance to grant benefits to partners in same-sex unions passed but not without open opposition from more conservative churches and individuals. However, village leaders in all three suburbs identified problems that cut across the liberal-conservative divide. Communities that have avoided the white flight experienced by other Chicago collar suburbs, they nevertheless have some racial tensions. Communities that have remained economically viable, they still worry about their ability to compete with far-flung suburban malls for retailers and to maintain an adequate tax base.

Oak Park and its surrounding communities provide a good place to study the use of moral rhetoric and the public negotiation of religious identity and boundaries. These congregations, when confronted with

issues of social inclusion, begin public conversations about "What are the obligations of moral community?" and "What are the boundaries of moral community?" (cf. Nippert-Eng 1996). I do not claim that Oak Park, or the three-village area of Oak Park, River Forest, and Forest Park, is somehow typical or a microcosm of American religion. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Oak Park is unusual in that it is a community where issues of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender have received public attention and debate and where there are well-defined groups of liberals and conservatives. Plenty of professionals and activists reside here, the ones who, according to Hunter, create and spread the culture war. If conflicts over issues of social inclusion are not well explained by the culture wars thesis in this community, then this thesis needs rethinking. This study suggests that the rethinking involves keeping the categories of liberal and conservative, while also taking into account those moral divisions that cut across, rather than reinforcing, a liberal/conservative divide.

Locating and Interpreting Moral Conflicts

To say that roughly a third of the conflicts involve issues of race, gender, or sexuality implies a broad and even distribution of concern over these issues. But conflicts about social inclusion were not evenly distributed among these congregations. Rather, they only emerged in those congregations that embraced, as part of their mission, providing members a public forum for debating deeply felt social, political, and religious issues. Out of 23 congregations, 12 contain all of the conflicts addressed in this chapter. These 12 congregations, to some extent, foster the kind of atmosphere that Rachel described in her Conservative temple, an atmosphere that embraced conflict, seeing it not only as inevitable, but as a constructive and important element of religious seriousness. Some congregations, which view their primary mission as worship or providing a close and familylike fellowship for members, did not engage in public conflict over these social issues at all. In fact, they actively avoided it.[8]

Figure 1 identifies the conflicts. Figure 2 describes the potential conflicts—tensions that were mentioned to me privately as narrow escapes, controversial issues, or problems waiting to happen. Figure 2 includes conflicts in which issues of social inclusion became a complicating factor but were not considered its primary focus. The latter are included in the table as potential conflicts.

Figure 1—Conflicts

Conflict Issue	Where Located	Number of Conflicts
Adultery or premarital affair—congregational members	Plymouth Brethren, Assemblies of God, Missouri Synod Lutheran	4
Ordination/Woman preaching	Independent Baptist, Episcopal, Catholic	3
Inclusive language	United (Presbyterian/UCC), Congregational	2
Survival of Sisterhood (women's organization)	Conservative Jewish	1
Adopt an official statement of openness towards lesbians/gay men	United (Presbyterian/UCC), Congregational	2
Minister to AIDS patients	Episcopal	1
Intermarriage—Jewish/non-Jewish	Reform Jewish	1
	Total:	**14**

As these figures demonstrate, the most common conflicts centered on women's roles, the participation of homosexual persons, and violations of traditional heterosexual morality in conservative Protestant churches. In the two synagogues, the only conflict generated internally was intermarriage. Anti-Semitism complicated at least one synagogue's relationship with the larger community, a complication that also caused internal strife. Race also influenced several of the conflicts that respondents were willing to discuss.

The figures also highlight differences among conflicts. Liberal Protestant congregations had all the conflicts over inclusive language and about policies regarding lesbians and gay men, while conservative Protestant congregations had all the conflicts over violations of traditional

Figure 2—Potential Conflicts or Conflicts where Issues of Social Inclusion were Contributing or Complicating Factors

Potential Conflict Issues or Complicating Factors	Where Located	Total Number
Form a "small group" for lesbians/gay males	Lutheran (USA), UCC	2
Woman preaching	Episcopal	1
Anti-Semitism (in conflict over homeless shelter)	Conservative Jewish	1
Intermarriage—Jewish/non-Jewish	Conservative Jewish	1
Race in conflicts over:		
parish school and admitting poor black community children	Missouri Synod Lutheran	1
music/worship style	Independent Baptist	1
woman preaching	Catholic	1*
	Total:	7

* Note that this conflict is also counted in Figure 1, so is not added to the total here.

heterosexual morality. Conflicts over women's roles occurred in both liberal and conservative congregations, as did conflicts over race and intermarriage. This pattern shows that the categories liberal and conservative are useful in understanding some shared moral expectations in local congregations. Conservative Protestant churches are the only ones in which the discovery of adultery or premarital sexual relations by members is cause for public comment, concern, or debate. This locus of conflict underscores expectations that heterosexual marriage is not only the norm but is also a public institution with public moral implications. Though conflicts over gender and race reveal that liberal and conservative churches are ambivalent about these issues, inclusive language is primarily a liberal Protestant strategy for incorporating feminist critiques of dominant religious practices, and tensions over this issue do not appear in other congregations.

Competing Moral Imperatives and Conflicts over Inclusion

Competing moral imperatives naturally arise in systems of religious ideas and symbols that are abstract, multivalent, and polysemous. More specifically, local congregations that decide to engage in public religion in some form combine within their mission potentially contradictory moral logics. They incorporate the communal logic of caring for members and preserving important particular relationships as well as the potentially exclusionary logic of designating some positions as true (or right, or authoritative) and others as false (or wrong, or illegitimate). Below I examine how these moral imperatives play out in different groups of conflicts.

Violating Sexual Norms

Conflicts over heterosexual morality include strife over premarital and extramarital sex in the conservative Protestant churches. Since these issues are similar and the responses to them have several common characteristics, I consider the various conflicts as a group. No disagreement existed over whether the behavior in question—premarital sex, extramarital sex—was right. No one in the conservative Protestant churches argued that this behavior was acceptable. In fact, in some ways, these incidents, reported by respondents as conflicts, are unlike most other conflicts reported, because no sides advocated different solutions. Everyone agreed that this behavior was wrong.

Nonetheless, these incidents were conflicts simply because congregants characterized them as such. First, the congregants perceived these incidents as problems that required solutions. Viewed as disruptions in the normal, day-to-day decision making of the congregation, for which there existed no convenient, routine solutions, these incidents were characterized negatively. People described them as "problems," not "opportunities" or "challenges." Second, congregants, especially church leaders, were called upon to respond to these situations. Ignoring the situation was not acceptable when a teenager became pregnant (by the son of a deacon) at the Assemblies of God church; when the elders at the Plymouth Brethren congregation discovered two different affairs among members (one involving a married woman, one between single members); or when the pastor of the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church was asked to perform a marriage ceremony for a member's son who had been living with his fiancée for more than a year.

Congregants framed these predicaments as conflict because when they sought the correct solution, they realized that two potentially contradictory moral imperatives applied to the situation. The first imperative required an authoritative interpretation of religious values that govern sexual behavior. This mandate was revealed in the proof-texting[9] and the congregational rhetoric of "following what the Bible says." In each of these conflicts, the congregations agreed that traditional, biblical ideas about heterosexual morality had to be upheld, and some public statement had to be made to that effect.

The second moral imperative addresses the congregation's need to be loving and compassionate. This obligation grows from the rhetoric of "loving the sinner, but condemning the sin." It also stems from the idea that judgment involves responsibility for helping the sinner to repent and remain part of the community. Providing support and encouragement that would allow the person to stay in fellowship while changing the immoral behavior was central in respondents' discussions of these conflicts. For example, the pastor at the Missouri Synod Lutheran church told me that he tried to do the right thing and be understanding too when he offered to marry the young couple who had been living together. If the man would just move out and stay out for six months before the wedding and if the couple would undergo premarital counseling, then he would conduct the ceremony. These strategies attempted to change the offending behavior while maintaining close ties to the couple and encouraging their continued commitment to the church.

Most members rejected judgmental, rigid rhetorics and sanctioned those who used them. For example, the pastor of the Assemblies of God church told me about the need to "lovingly rebuke" one of the deacons, who kept bringing up the subject of the teen pregnancy long after the young woman and her boyfriend had publicly apologized to the congregation and announced their forthcoming marriage. Several church members privately characterized this deacon, who thought that both individuals should have left the congregation, as a troublemaker precisely because he was judgmental, would not forgive, and seemed bent on driving the young couple away rather than encouraging them to stay.

The pastor's reaction illustrates the difficult position of official leaders in conflicts over sexual norms. Pastors and elders were judged by how well they balanced the competing moral imperatives. In this Assemblies of God church, the apology before the congregation and the agreement to marry satisfied the requirement of upholding the authoritative view of appropriate sexual activity; an insistence that the congre-

gation be forgiving and treat the young couple well satisfied the requirement to be compassionate.

This dynamic operated in the other congregations, as a quote by a member of the Plymouth Brethren church suggests. She judged the leadership by their treatment of two members of the congregation, one of them married, who were discovered in an adulterous affair. My fieldnotes from this conversation read:

> Before the elders handled it, people were a little concerned. Would they do a good job, would they handle it well? They were close to the couple . . . but they held a congregational meeting and were loving and compassionate [pause]. Afterward, there was no qualm or question, people felt they had done a good job, were "pleased with their discretion and their compassion."

In these conservative Protestant churches, respondents claim that both moral logics—follow the authoritative teaching, do what is caring—emanate from their religious beliefs. Specifically, these approaches reflect the rhetorics of judgment and forgiveness, both of which are seen as requirements of religious community. Moreover, these conflicts articulate and institutionalize an agreement that the right thing to do involves both living the congregation's religious values and forgiving violators of moral expectations when they have demonstrated their willingness to change.

Redrawing the Boundaries

The second group of conflicts involves controversies over how to include previously excluded groups or persons into full participation and membership in congregational life. This group includes two conflicts over inclusive language; two over becoming "open and affirming" of lesbians and gay men; one over how to minister to two men diagnosed with AIDS; one over the role of intermarried couples in the life of a Reform synagogue; one over the continuing role of the Sisterhood in a Conservative synagogue; and three conflicts over women speaking from the pulpit (in an Episcopalian, a Catholic, and an independent Baptist congregation).

These conflicts differ from the first group in several ways. First of all, they are all conflicts in the sense of having at least two competing groups with two different preferred solutions. In this sense, they are more than

just problems to solve; they are disagreements. In fact, in one case, the conflict resembles more a fight with great emotion, an inability to compromise, and a conclusion prompted by the exit of one group of members.

Like the first group of conflicts over sexual norms, these conflicts represent moral dilemmas for members and leaders. Early in the debates, congregants rejected nonmoral ways of framing the issues. For example, at the Conservative synagogue one group suggested disbanding the Sisterhood. It was inefficient, they said, taking time and resources away from other organizations. The Sisterhood had lost most of its members and it no longer fit with most women's lives and work schedules; it should just be dropped. Many members of the synagogue roundly rejected this assessment as a crass and inappropriate argument regarding an organization that still gave meaning to some members and provided an important outlet for older women to socialize and engage in service to the temple.

Unlike the previous group of conflicts, in these there is no underlying agreement about what is the right thing to do. "What is right" is hotly debated. In most of these conflicts, both sides couch the dispute about what is right in religious terms. In an Episcopal church, for example, members invoked a religious framework to debate how to respond to two members with HIV-AIDS. One man was well loved, but the other was identified by several people as a difficult personality. Additionally, the difficult man led a flamboyant life style that disturbed many members, especially older ones. When each man became debilitated by AIDS-related complications, he was placed on the church's home communion list along with other ill or older house-bound members of the church.

A conflict ensued when an older member wrote a letter to the vestry condemning homosexuality and sexual irresponsibility, based on certain biblical passages. This letter sought to define the central issue at stake as homosexuality. According to the letter writer, these men should not be on the home communion list; it was tantamount to a congregational endorsement of their life style, which this man viewed as sinful. Congregants informed me that the letter writer was also upset because he felt that his own wife, who had died from cancer, had not received as much attention from the congregation as were the men dying of AIDS. This neglect, they told me with some display of guilt, had led to hurt feelings that surfaced in the present conflict.

The man's letter prompted public discussions in several venues, including the vestry, Sunday sermons, small group classes, and private,

informal discussions among members. In these discussions, the letter and its arguments were rejected in favor of a frame that made AIDS the central issue. This way of framing the issue focused on Christ's compassion for the sick. Those who spoke about this told stories of Jesus healing the sick from the Gospels. In the end, the illness frame prevailed. The congregation rallied around these two men as they had previously for other terminally ill members.

The pastor and a majority of lay leaders successfully employed the frame of ministering to the ill as Christ had done, of embodying Christ's ministry in contemporary times. This approach had several consequences. First, it channeled the activity of the congregation into existing organizational routines. Being placed on the home communion list along with other house-bound congregants is normal when the issue at hand is illness, not sin. When one man was hospitalized, church people cleaned his house before his mother arrived from out of town. When they discovered that she could not drive, church members drove her to the hospital to visit her son. These were common congregational activities in caring for ill members and their families.

Framing the issue in this manner also allowed the congregation to depoliticize and contain the conflict. The letter to the vestry did not lead to a sustained discussion of whether or not AIDS is related to sin—whether the sin was homosexuality or a specific irresponsible life style. Attempts to use the deaths of these two men to institute an AIDS education program in the parish succeeded, but the effort to include detailed discussion of homosexual life styles in the program was entirely unsuccessful. Rather, AIDS was treated as an "illness like any other," as it had been constructed in the initial congregational negotiation prompted by the letter. The pastor and lay leaders labored to make the question of sin irrelevant from the start, and they succeeded in quickly foreclosing any debate about it.

This conflict occurred in a congregation with an open gay and lesbian presence, a group of members who are self-conscious and are perceived by others as a gay subgroup. The congregation has tried to avoid the internal politicization of homosexuality. Thus the illness framing of this issue kept a potentially divisive conflict from escalating. In the end, most every one felt good about the congregation's response, although the man who initially wrote the letter to the vestry stopped attending church for a long time.

In this conflict, both frames—condemning sin and ministering to the ill—were based in religious language and imagery. Like the first group,

this second group of conflicts focused on how to apply multiple or contradictory religious and moral imperatives to actual situations. The two churches in conflict over whether to ratify an official statement affirming openness to lesbian and gay members experienced this tension. One side argued that "doing what is right" involves rejecting homophobia, while another faction contended that "doing what is caring" involves not making the local congregation into a political forum, excluding those from fellowship who do not agree on an essentially political issue.

In another church, the inclusion of gay men and lesbians never became a public conflict, but might have if one member had pushed for a public discussion. This man, a member of a Lutheran church (ELCA) reported that he approached the pastor about forming a small fellowship group explicitly for lesbians and gay men. The pastor responded that their mission statement welcomed members regardless of sexual orientation, thus, addressing the justice issue. But, the pastor also pointed out that politicizing the issue by forming a small group might damage fellowship and was thus uncaring. Justice and fellowship need not logically be contradictory, but this pastor interpreted them as so in this case. This gay man told me that he had concluded that the pastor's response was, perhaps, right for this church. He also noted his regret that the congregation could not be a forum for activism on gay issues. However, he did not see any reasonable likelihood of that happening; he had not pursued the issue, and instead channeled his activism through denominational and community organizations other than this congregation.

The conflicts over inclusive language were also rooted in competing religious arguments. One religious argument highlighted what is right doctrinally, which in these liberal churches is understood as condemning injustices such as sexism. Another sought to preserve the beauty and tradition of some worship practices and rituals (the Lord's Prayer). Yet another consideration is the desire not to exclude those congregational members who value traditional practices, thereby potentially damaging fellowship. The conflict in the Catholic parish over a sister's practice of speaking from the pulpit raised these arguments on the same terms. One side wanted to preserve the tradition and follow the official church rules. The other side told me that their religious beliefs told them that sexism was a moral wrong and should be eradicated. The arguments about intermarriage in the two synagogues, discussed earlier, raised the same issues. Some argued that the spouse in the interfaith marriage should be included because that is the caring thing to do, while

others insisted that another religious and communal imperative required the Jewish basis of the leadership.

Though most moral arguments that arise in these conflicts have their roots in a religious rhetoric (justice and fellowship), a few do not. A conflict in an independent Baptist congregation over women's roles is one example. A woman was elected to the church council. The church then moved toward a two-board system: a board of elders, composed of men only, and an administrative board of deacons, which could contain women. This action prompted some younger professional women (and a few men) to argue against the church's teaching that restricts women's roles. The pastor wrote a position paper and led several adult Bible study classes on the topic. In the end, the church adopted the two-board system, and more women stepped into approved positions, such as serving on the board of deacons and leading prayers in the Sunday services.

Those who challenged the church's stance on women in leadership roles used rhetoric from their business and professional environment. As one woman explained to me, in that world, "the criterion is, 'Can you do the job?' If the answer is 'yes,' then restrictions are discriminatory." This group made the moral argument that restrictions on women's roles are sexist, and sexism is wrong. But in this case, she and others made no attempt to link a "sexism is wrong" argument to a larger biblical or religious frame. The pastor explicitly rejected this argument and claimed that the church must maintain the right to make its own judgments about appropriate gender roles, which are quite different from the secular world's. It may be sexist to deny women promotions in the secular world, but a gender-based division of labor in the church is not sexist, the pastor argued, it is biblical, and there is a difference.

This conflict over women's roles in the church underscores the pastor's rejection of a nonreligious framing as a legitimate part of the moral debate. Further, the pastor successfully used a religious framing to depoliticize and contain the conflict. At the end of the conflict, the minister made a public statement from the pulpit that this issue was one about which Christians could disagree in good conscience. He then recruited more women into approved positions, hiring a woman director of Christian education and inviting more women to pray and do readings on Sunday mornings. Even some women who had been most vocal in questioning the new policy told me that, although they disagreed with him on this issue, they liked and respected the pastor, and did not feel that he was trying to exclude them.

What We Speak of In Private

In general, these congregations reject the moral arguments that take a political or ideological stand rather than those that advocate the issue in religious terms. This rejection can prevent congregants from talking publicly about political factors that inform conflict. At one church, two or three people privately told me that the conflict over inclusive language started when a group of "radical lesbian feminists" wanted to change the God-images. These respondents privately resented that a few radical people could change the liturgy. When I asked them if they had talked about their concern in the open meetings, they were aghast. They told me quite definitely that they could not say that kind of thing in public. More generally, in the conflicts over the role or representation of women and homosexuals, respondents noted that the conflict began with the concerted action of a congregational subgroup, usually a group of professional women or gay men. But all reported that it was illegitimate to say in public, "Oh, it's just a small group making trouble." Even less legitimate to say, "Oh, it's just a group of gays (or radical feminists) making trouble."

Likewise, when an individual or a small group argued that sexism is wrong or homophobia is wrong, congregants might agree or they might not, but they often did not perceive a congregational issue if these assertions could not be tied to broader religious themes. In the case of liberal churches, this necessary connection usually was made through a call to live up to their social justice doctrine. But arguments like "We're gay, and we want equal representation," or "We're women, and we feel excluded by references to a male God" were not legitimate in and of themselves and needed further justification to avoid dismissal as merely political claims.

Local religious conflicts, therefore, are influenced in some degree by the religious repertoire developed by members of the larger religious community in other times and places. The women at the independent Baptist church had a difficult case to make in part because nothing like an inclusive language movement exists among fundamentalist congregations. Evangelical feminists are present, and some of the women in this congregation were familiar with evangelical feminist writings. But women in this congregation chose not to use the arguments of the evangelical feminists in the public discussions in their local church. Instead, they made their argument in secular terms. When questioned about this, one woman responded that they had thought this approach

would relate to a common experience (work outside the home) among congregants, whereas most rank-and-file Baptists were not familiar with evangelical feminism. Lacking a common religious rationale for gender equality, they chose a secular one but were unable to make a compelling case for its relevance in this arena. Ironically, the pastor, who wanted to restrict women's participation in leadership roles, referred explicitly and at length to the work of evangelical feminists, portraying this work accurately and fairly, although rejecting its claims.

In these congregations, linking matters of social inclusion to a religious framework makes them relevant to congregational life and makes it possible for members to translate private experience into legitimate claims for public attention and action. Correlating private experiences to political frameworks also enables congregants to claim public attention in many arenas; however, most members of the churches and synagogues in my study view political frames as irrelevant—or even dangerous—to the congregation. Hence in religious traditions whose leaders have not historically connected theology and social justice explicitly, public debate in local congregations almost always favors the status quo politically.

In more liberal congregations with histories of linking political and private concerns in a legitimate religious discourse, congregants have more latitude to raise issues. But, here, too, challenging such linkages on the bases of personal or political discomforts that cannot themselves be cast in religious terms is unacceptable. Congregants in a liberal congregation cannot publicly oppose a claim by a homosexual person just because of the person's homosexuality. On the other hand, members can always claim that the person's actions are creating an uncaring environment that excludes more traditional members and, by so doing, temper the radical political potential of experiential claims by insisting on compromise on all politically divisive issues.

The issues of gender, sexuality, and sexual behavior operate in this manner because these issues generate disagreement within the largely professional, middle-class group that comprises the majority of leaders and members in these congregations. Race and ethnicity are fundamentally different types of issues in the Oak Park community with its progressive reputation and community pride in its racial tolerance. Virtually no publicly legitimate way of talking about racial differences exists here; there are no rules for civil disagreement about racial matters.

In these congregations, no conflicts were understood as being about race, but, in private conversation, race entered into several of the conflicts. One example illustrates themes common to these conflicts. One Catholic congregation clashed over the role of a popular African American sister, who had been encouraged by the priest to take on leadership roles, including leading some liturgies. Some parishioners always found this troubling but said nothing until the arrival of a new pastor, who was far more conservative on women's roles in the church and who instructed the sister to curtail her public speaking and leadership in religious services. This exchange led to a highly charged and very emotional conflict that, at one point, featured a group of members picketing the church in support of the sister and in protest of the new pastor's policies.

This particular parish, a racially mixed group on the eastern edge of Oak Park, had merged several years previously with an all-black congregation on Chicago's West Side that closed down. The former pastor was white, and most of the sister's supporters were white Oak Park liberals. The new pastor is black. Nobody in this congregation mentioned race until I asked if it was an issue. The new pastor was the first to tell me that most of the black parishioners supported his decision. When I returned to talk with some of the white lay leaders, asking explicitly about race, I was informed that some black parishioners saw the protest of the pastor's decision as a racial matter and assumed that a white priest would have received more respect. However, they asserted race did not enter into the public discussion of this issue. Black lay leaders agreed that they heard a lot of private discussion among black parishioners about the issue of race. Many black congregants contended that a white pastor would have been more highly regarded, but, among black lay leaders, opinions varied. Regardless, these private understandings of the role that race played in the conflict received no public airing during this long conflict.

Though parishioners were publicly silent on how race entered and complicated conflicts, they voiced their affirmation of racial differences within congregational life. Two mixed-race congregations, the Catholic one just discussed and an independent Baptist one just up the street, embraced multiculturalism that included encouraging traditional black music forms such as gospel and jazz along with maintaining other musicial and liturgical traditions. Like the community as a whole, these congregations upheld tolerance and diversity as central to their self-images as progressive bodies. Additionally, congregations drew on their religious traditions to support their commitments. In the case of the Baptist church, tolerance and diversity were linked to the Baptist tradition of missionary work. The pastor told me, and several members echoed, that it would be racist to minister to blacks in the context of

African missionary work but not to welcome the blacks who live up the street. They also used the image of New Testament church as racially, ethnically, and economically diverse to justify a multicultural ministry here and now. Drawing on religious symbols and rationales that are not commonly associated with a comprehensive theology of social justice, to say the least, the congregation linked multiculturalism to a religious, not a political, rationale and made it morally acceptable within the congregational arena.

Implications

If some congregations become arenas for open debate about the boundaries of the moral community and the implications of membership, then the question arises: What kind of arenas are provided? What kinds of discussions can take place? With what consequences? First and foremost, these churches provide arenas where these social issues are understood primarily as moral matters, not political ones. That is, they are not about organized groups seeking their special interests in instrumental ways. They are about interpreting the requirements for living a faith in ongoing community.

As such, these congregations, liberal and conservative, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, are places where certain kinds of moral logics are institutionalized. The first is the logic of compassion or caring, a relational logic that keeps conflict, in most cases, from escalating into "winner take all" contests. This logic emphasizes dialogue and compromise. The second is the logic of religious authority, implementing the guidelines agreed upon in advance as originating from an authoritative text or person.

Overall, these approaches lead to an expressive moral style (cf. Tipton 1982, Becker et al. 1993). These communities engage in the process of interpreting together the implications of deeply held values. The source of these values varies, including personal experience, pastoral sermons, authoritative religious texts, and symbols sufficiently ambiguous so as to need reinterpreting in any given moment. The congregations agree that their church should uphold, interpret, and express moral views on social issues that members care about.

When possible, leaders sought compromise in these conflicts. When the pastor at the independent Baptist church resisted ordaining women or allowing them to preach, he included more women in administrative positions and featured women more prominently in Sunday services. In

one conflict over inclusive language, congregants compromised by changing part of the service to inclusive forms, while other parts, such as the doxology and the Lord's Prayer, kept their traditional language.

Even when compromise was not possible, the same rhetoric of balancing value judgments with caring appeared prominently. This approach can lead to what I call "exhaustive process"—exhaustive because it explores all possibilities, but also because it takes a real toll on members' time and energy. The inclusive language conflicts, and the conflicts over becoming open and affirming of lesbians and gay men, all took between one and two years, with open meetings, draft resolutions, and other time-consuming processes geared to generate maximum participation. The opportunity for expression is not only given lip service in these congregations, it is also structured into the decision-making process. The conflict over women's roles at the Baptist church took a similarly long time, although in the end the pastor was more willing to declare a resolution and move the congregation forward.

This view suggests that we should reject the idea that religious conflict is inherently absolutist or escalatory (Simmel 1971, Kurtz 1986). This very common view of the uniqueness of religious conflict conflates a truth seeking or authoritative moral logic with a religious logic more generally. This common fallacy informs Friedland and Alford's (1991) discussion, in which they say that truth seeking is the paradigmatic cultural logic of both science and religion. In its present institutional arrangement, American congregational religion is an institutional arena that simultaneously privileges a moral logic of religious authority and a moral logic of religious community, at least in congregations (cf. Warner 1994).

The culture wars thesis also subscribes to this absolutist and escalatory view of religious conflict, particularly in later versions (Hunter 1994). But this study suggests that this thesis needs to be modified, precisely because it misunderstands local conflict processes and does not recognize the multiplicity of religious moral logics in local congregations. Conflict in these congregations, even over the most divisive issues, has similarities to Ginsburg's (1989) discussion of abortion activists in Fargo, North Dakota. She found that local activists on both sides of the abortion debate were willing to engage in dialogue, refrain from demonizing one another, use a language of compassion as well as judgment, and seek compromise whenever possible. Local conflict over abortion only escalated and became intractable when national activists entered the arena and began to play off of one another for a national media audience.

Findings like Ginsburg's and those presented here lead to an important qualification of the culture wars thesis for the local level of religious, and perhaps political, life. In local arenas, liberals and conservatives certainly do have different moral expectations regarding which issues should make it to the table, but, once there, both groups favor compromise and dialogue, recognizing complex and competing moral imperatives. In order to understand moral conflict at the local level, we need categories of analysis that cut across liberal and conservative.

Conversely, it is possible that Hunter finds liberal/conservative ideology to be so important because of the level of analysis on which he concentrates. The warring tendencies that Hunter identifies may have nothing to do with the nature of the issues involved or a societywide, unbridgeable split between liberals and conservatives. Culture wars may not be inherent in the religious grounding of liberal and conservative world views. Hunter may have found an accelerating cycle of liberal/conservative conflict because of the particular features of the place that he examined, a national policy arena oriented to the mass media in which religious professionals and ideological experts battle for soundbites on CNN by emphasizing the outrageous and in which activists have no commitment to one another as part of ongoing, face-to-face moral communities. In local communities and community institutions, conflict generally means a complicated balancing of the equally compelling imperatives to do what is right and what is caring.

It is important to note that this expressive moral style that combines justice and caring has its own logic. It minimizes politics, and while that keeps the culture wars out, it also makes it difficult for some congregations to confront their most painful divisions honestly. Race, by far the most salient issue in private conversations with the people I interviewed, cannot be spoken of in any sustained way in most public discussions of congregational life, especially in the context of an ongoing conflict.

More generally, using conflict as a window into the moral order allows an understanding of what may be publicly and legitimately said, into public and shared moral expectations, but not into the private hearts of participants. Yet it is precisely in this construction of expectation, of what may legitimately and publicly be said and done, that culture exerts one of its more important shaping influences on social life (Caplow 1984). Ethnography is a method particularly suited to developing a better map of the cultural cleavages—the systems of shared and divergent moral expectations—that shape the public discourse and practices of local religious life.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1994 Association for the Sociology of Religion Annual Meeting in Los Angeles. Members of the Culture and Society Workshop at the University of Chicago gave helpful feedback on an early draft of this work, as did Nancy Eiesland. The Louisville Institute for the Study of Protestantism in American Culture provided funding. I thank the members of the churches and synagogues in and around Oak Park, Illinois, who shared their stories with me, an outsider.

2. All personal names are pseudonyms. This is an excerpt of my fieldnotes on my conversation with Rachel and is a combination of paraphase and direct quotation. The directly quoted portion is in quotation marks.

3. He follows the lead of Herberg (1960) and treats Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish traditions in the United States as the three major "churches."

4. See Friedland and Alford (1991) for a discussion of these institutional logics. Scholars of religious groups have noted these differing moral logics before; see Tipton 1982. Elfriede Wedam's chapter in this volume also explores a similar kind of tension between a moral ethic of caring and a moral ethic of justice. Nancy Ammerman (forthcoming) suggests that taken together, this concern with doing what is right, but also caring, is characteristic of what she calls Gold Rule Christianity, an ethic and set of practices that informs both congregational culture and decision making and individual religiosity in American religion. She further shows that this ethic is found among both liberals and conservatives.

5. The literature on boundary work is huge and growing, an interest in this formal process having been recently revived in the sociology of culture by influential work such as Michèle Lamont's (1992) study, *Money, Morals, and Manners*. One of the best examples of an analysis of boundary work is Christena Nippert-Eng's (1996) *Home and Work*; this book also contains an up-to-date literature review on the study of boundary creation and maintenance.

6. If "the coherence of social life rests on the convictions we share about its moral meanings," (Tipton 1982:xiv), then conflict provides a good window into the shared or divergent expectations that constitute this coherence—the moral order. I use "moral order" here to indicate both a broad sense of identity and mission and a more specific sense of what the group's boundaries are and what are the requirements of membership (cf. Wuthnow 1987).

7. A longer introduction to the study's methods and overall findings is available elsewhere (Becker, 1995, 1997, forthcoming). This sample includes 19 Protestant congregations from a wide range of denominations, as well as two Catholic churches and two synagogues (one Reform, one Conservative). The

congregations were chosen to span polity types and cultural orientation (liberal/consevative).

8. See Becker (1995, forthcoming) for a discussion of the differences between more privately oriented congregations, which I label "house of worship" and "family," and those more publicly oriented ones, which I call "community" and "leader" congregations.

9. Citing of particular scriptural passages to prove a point or provide a rationale for a specific action.

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