11. THE ORGANIZATIONAL VITALITY OF CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTISM

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ABSTRACT

I argue that two insights of organizational sociology enhance standing explanations of the vitality of conservative Protestants (CP) faiths. I outline the limits of rational choice and subcultural identity approaches to CP vitality, and show how Stinchcombe’s early (1965) claim about the organizational production of solidarity, and the institutionalist notion of the field, help to readdress those limitations.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational sociologists are venturing well beyond their usual purviews of industry, education, and government to bring their distinctive vision to bear on topics as diverse as social movements (Chenies, 1997; Armstrong, forthcoming), art worlds (DiMaggio, 1991), slave economies (Stinchcombe, 1995) and parenting (Heimer & Staffen, 1998). Not even religion has been spared (e.g. Chaves, 1996; Becker, 1999; Elizalde, 2000). Complicit in this imperialism, I here bring organizational insights to bear on an enduring puzzle in the sociology of religion: the vitality of high-commitment religion in general and conservative Protestant Christianity in particular.
If we take as a working definition of vitality the ability of a cause to sustain or increase recruits, reserve flows and cultural visibility over time, there is little question that conservative Protestant faiths are vital ones. A traveler on the suburban ring freeways of any city sizeable enough for suburbs finds large houses of worshipping and proportionally large parking lots, bearing names like Crossroads Community Church, Lake Bible, and Valley Baptist. The appointment of John Ashcroft, a devout Pentecostal, to the U.S. Attorney General’s office is but one indication of conservative Protestants’ growing visibility in the political sphere. And in terms of sheer numbers, these believers are a formidable population; recent scholarship indicates that fully a quarter of the U.S. population participates in this world of faith (Woodberry & Smith, 1998).

My primary task is to illustrate that the toolkit of organizational sociology can help us build better explanations for the vitality of conservative Protestantism. Specifically, I argue that two insights of organization theory—one about the organizational production of solidarity, the other about the cultural basis of organization-building—enhance standing explanations for why conservative Protestantism is such a strong world of faith. First, borrowing from Stinchcombe (1965), I argue that enduring commitment to conservative Protestant faiths is secured by nested organizational relations that link each believer’s primary groups to the broader religious collective in both practical and symbolic ways. Second, I argue that the institutionalists’ concept of the organizational field reveals features of conservative Protestantism that make it organizationally fecund. Conservative Protestantism’s vitality, I argue, is partly a function of two aspects of the faith: its embedding of the faithful in dense and nested organizational relations; and its ability to generate and sustain new organizations over time. The larger implication of these arguments is that conservative Protestantism is appropriately understood as an organizational system, and therefore ripe for more elaborate analysis with the techniques of organizational sociology.

The following is divided into four sections. In the first section I provide a working definition of what I mean by “conservative Protestantism” and briefly describe the two most prominent standing explanations for this faith tradition’s continued vitality. Second, I revisit a lesser-known portion of an otherwise widely cited paper to suggest that Arthur Stinchcombe’s early insight about the organizational productiveness of sacred coalitions is a useful tool in explaining the durability of conservative Protestant faiths. Third, I use the concept of the organizational field to reveal the multiple cultural resources that conservative Protestantism promises in the hands of organization builders. Finally, I suggest metaphors for summarizing these insights in a portable, economical way.

In the interest of brevity I offer only a schematic treatment of large bodies of inquiry in sub-fields of organizational sociology and the sociology of religion. I rely heavily on key pieces of scholarship to orient my claims, and I flesh them out with evidence from my own research among conservative Protestant home schools (Stevens, 2001).

**WHO ARE CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTS, AND WHY HAVEN’T THEY GONE AWAY?**

Specifying the boundaries of conservative Protestantism is difficult because it is a trans-denominational movement. No single Protestant tradition encompasses the entire cause. What CPs share are a cluster of theological beliefs, organizational linkages, and behavioral tendencies. Theologically, they tend to believe that the Bible is the authoritative word of God, that salvation is constituted by a personal relationship between individual believers and the divine, and that believers have an obligation to evangelize. Common indications of these beliefs are CPs’ professed faith in the facsimile and perfection of the Bible, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and the conviction that people are born sinful and must be “born again” through individual acceptance of salvation. Under this broad umbrella are several different theological orientations: fundamentalists take an especially strong view of Biblical authority and have a separatist conception of the role of God’s people relative to secular society; evangelicals are somewhat more flexible about Biblical interpretation and tend to be relatively more engaged with secular institutions; charismatics and Pentecostals, who may be either fundamentalist or evangelical, have an activist conception of the work of the Holy Spirit and tend toward more enthusiastic worship experiences that may include faith healing and speaking in tongues (cf. Woodberry & Smith, 1998). “Conservative Protestantism” is thus a term for a family of faiths that share a theology characterized by commitment to biblical authority, personal salvation, and tax imperative to evangelize. CPs are linked organizationally as well as theologically (Woodberry & Smith, 1998, p. 33). Conservative Protestantism is constituted largely by a dense web of organizational affiliations that extend far beyond church membership. Denominational affiliations link congregations across the country and around the world, while inter-denominational coalitions such as the National Association of Evangelicals bridge more nominally different CP faiths. There are conservative Protestant daycare centers, summer camps, day schools, colleges and seminaries that also connect people across denominational camps. CP media organizations minister to Christians by print, television, and radio.
CP mission societies spread the faith at home and abroad, while other organizations target particular social issues such as abortion and homosexuality. That this aggregate of organizations meaningfully coheres is evidenced linguistically: believers sometimes colloquially refer to this organizational world as "the kingdom," the earthly province of the Heavenly Father.2

Conservative Protestants also are distinguished by their style of religious involvement. Relative to liberal Protestants they attend church much more often, give money more regularly to religious organizations, and are more likely to attempt to win others to their faith (Smith et al., 1998). They also are more likely to volunteer at their churches and in other religious organizations and less likely to give time to secular causes (Weithman, 1999). Overall, then, conservative Protestants may be described as Bible-believing, born-again, densely networked with other believers and highly committed to the ministries of their faith.

Despite impressions of definition and measurement, there is no question that conservative Protestants comprise a substantial portion of American society. Compiling results of a wide range of studies, sociologist Christian Smith and his colleagues estimate that fully a quarter of the U.S. population is conservative Protestant (Woodberry & Smith, 1998). More remarkable than the sheer size of this kingdom, perhaps, is how marginal this world of faith has been to mainstream sociology. As others have pointed out (Smith et al., 1998, p. 99), the academic invisibility of conservative religion was long exacerbated by the dominance of secularization theory, explicated most famously by Peter Berger (1967), which held that societies inevitably become more secular as they modernize. Attempts to rebuild the theoretical framework of the sub-field to accommodate for the empirical inadequacies of the Bergerian thesis have continued robustly, but regarding the reality of CPs in contemporary America, explanatory efforts fall into two broad streams.

Rational Choice Approaches

Thirty years ago, Dean Kelly demonstrated that conservative Protestant faiths were thriving numerically in this country, relative to the more liberal mainline Protestant denominations (Kelly, 1972). Subsequent theoretical work elaborated a poignant reason why, namely, that churches which expect more from their members have more to give back to their members in turn. There are two basic strains of this body of scholarship. The first, perhaps best represented in the work of Laurence Iannaccone (1994), begins with rational choice theory's presumption of atomistic, self-interested individual actors. Iannaccone models how religious groups with elaborate participation and lifestyle roles generate more satisfying collective goods, thus showing why an individual believer might choose to invest the time, energy, and money in a church that demands a lot of her, when she might just as easily attend a church down the road that is less greedy in its demands. Iannaccone argues that the higher the investment individuals make in a congregation, the greater the amount of resources available for disbursement back to the faithful. The argument is a brilliant application of rational choice theory to a realm of human experience colloquially thought to be exempt from such instrumental thinking. It is a more moving experience to sing a hymn, for example, when one is surrounded by hundreds of voices, and when everyone knows the words, than to sing the same song in an empty pew while stumbling over the verses. Churches that place high demands on individual congregants also mitigate free-rider problems, because those unwilling to do the hard work of changing their behaviors and beliefs to conform to the faith will choose to go elsewhere.

Another strain of this scholarship focuses not on individuals and congregations but on the broader religious landscape. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark (1992) argue that religions are best understood as "firms" purveying "religious goods" in religious "markets." As in other markets, religious firms compete with one another for adherents who essentially are shopping for the best religious goods value — for those firms that will give them the richest worship experiences, strongest sense of community, and highest degree of practical services (such as daycare and leisure activities) for their investment.

The exigencies of the competition are complex, however, as religious firms face contradictory incentives for how to conduct their business. On the one hand, religious firms face an incentive to demand more from believers in order to supply rich collective goods and to mitigate the free rider problem, but they do so at the expense of appearing strange or deviant to the broader culture, thereby losing some of their general legitimacy and their street appeal to casual shoppers. Religions that try to accommodate the values and practices of the broader culture (for example by having less orthodox views about seven-day creations, virgin births, and homosexuality) buy a good deal of legitimacy in the short term, but in doing so they erode the overall level of commitment made to the firms by individual believers, and they make the faith more susceptible to free riders. As does Iannaccone, Finke and Stark build their work with rational choice presumptions of actor instrumentality, but their vision focuses on denominations, rather than individuals or congregations, as the key players.

Rational choice approaches offer cleaner and compelling explanations for the ongoing vitality of conservative Protestantism. CP faiths remain strong because they obligate believers to invest heavily in them. They therefore have much to offer believers in return: invigorating worship experiences, beliefs that have the
weight of truth because they are constantly repeated and reinforced through interaction with other believers, elaborate social services, durable communal ties, and a distinctive collective identity. CP faiths also mitigate the free rider problem because they oblige people to make otherwise uncomfortable commitments – to believe that the Bible is literally true, for example, or to contribute a lifetime of Sunday mornings to the faith.

The elegant application of rational choice theory to religion, though, has not been matched by an equally sophisticated organizational vision. Scholarship that depicts churches as firms making management decisions about optimum commitment levels is useful, but it tells us less about the totality of a religion’s organizational expression. Rational choice approaches have yet to accommodate the organizational complexity of religious worlds. Local congregations and denominational orders are only two components (though crucial ones) of vital faiths. A thorough understanding of religious vitality requires that we understand the role that other kinds of organizations play in building the faith. Rational choice explanations for religious vitality (at least those currently available) do not tell us what to do analytically with the religious day schools, colleges, retirement villages, publishing houses, conference centers, television stations, and mission societies that help to comprise conservative Protestantism. Nor do they help us think about families – whether to regard them as mere sub-units to congregations, perhaps, or as organizationally irrelevant.

The Subcultural Identity Approach

In their landmark study of conservative Protestant evangelicals in the U.S. (Smith et al., 1996), Christopher Smith and his colleagues pointed out an additional blind spot in rational choice approaches to religion. While they accepted the general logic of the market scholars, Smith and his colleagues argued that the religious markets story painted too clean a dichotomy between high commitment and low commitment religions – between those that ask a lot from their followers at the expense of cultural legitimacy, and those that more broadly accommodate the larger culture. The Smith team argued that some faiths are vital precisely because they simultaneously build demanding religious communities and also remain actively engaged in the institutions and beliefs of the broader society. Their case in point was Protestant evangelicalism, a strand of conservativ Protestantism that shares some of the separatist orientation of fundamentalism and some of the cultural accommodation of mainline Protestants. For example, evangelicals need to concur with fundamentalists about the primacy of the Bible as God’s word, but they also need to be well educated in secular institutions and eager to put the tenets of their faith to intellectual scrutiny. Evangelicals have built an elaborate social world for themselves at some distance from the mainstream culture, but their world also mimics mainstream sensibilities, such as the broader culture’s psychotherapeutic approach to social problems (cf. Shibley, 1996). This dissatisfaction of engagement and separation from the broader society is what the Smith team argues creates a fertile tension for evangelicals; the tension takes the form of a constant theological challenge to be “in the world but not of the world,” and the psychic buzz of knowing, but also transcending, the normative.

The Smith team built its case primarily through the use of survey and interview data, and perhaps because of this methodological approach, their argument is largely about what makes evangelicalism compelling to individual believers. Evangelicalism persists by ‘embedding itself in subcultures that offer satisfying morally orienting collective identities’ (p. 118), but just what a subculture looks like organizationally is something the authors leave to other scholarship. Evangelicalism remains a vital faith because it sustains “both clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant subgroups” (pp. 118-119), but just how this distinction and engagement are structured empirically is outside the framework of the study. The work is, explicitly, about the “effectual character” of evangelicalism, “not so much of the organizational structures that transmit it” (p. 88).

But of course, those organizational structures are non-trivial parts of evangelicalism’s vitality, as Smith and his colleagues pointed out. “Two distinctive features of the evangelical movement’s structure and culture… facilitate its growth and vitality… First, evangelicalism exhibits a tremendous fluidity with which it generates entrepreneurial leaders. . . . Second, evangelicalism successfully incorporates a rich variety of Christian traditions and positions into a common identity movement without relying on geographical or organizational centralization or uniformity to do so” (p. 86). My premise below is that viewing religions as organizational systems – as well as meaning systems and aggregators of individual preferences – gives us fuller purchase on how religious vitality is manufactured.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTION OF SOLIDARITY

At the beginning of the final section of his 1965 essay, “Social Structure and Organizations,” Arthur Stinchcombe rehearsed the familiar argument that the process of industrialization attenuated solidarity in human groups and made collective life less intimate, more instrumental. “The notion is that the more formal, impersonal, technical social relations there are in a group, the less
intimacy, charity, and mutual faith there is likely to be." The remainder of the section was devoted to turning this well-worn claim upside down. "There is . . . not a shred of evidence for this proposition, and a good deal of evidence against it," Stinchcombe maintained (p. 185). In fact, he argued, formal organizational relations are the engines of strong collective identification. "What makes communalism a clinical entity, whose symptoms form a syndrome?" Stinchcombe asks rhetorically.

The essential answer is that a communal group is a group whose well run in the primary groups and smaller communities of which it is composed: the normative principles, values, and history of the community form a part of the culture of smaller groups (in the particular interests, leadership, and the relative power and dependency within smaller groups to those consistent positions) (p. 186).

For Stinchcombe communal groups are constituted by organizational relations, of varying size and intimacy, that cohere ideologically. Within the commune, small groups are understood to be building blocks of the larger, and the culture of the larger is presumed to legitimately permeate the smaller. Among Stinchcombe's examples of highly communal groups were Jews (vs. Protestants broadly), fraternities (vs. dormitories), and ethnic groups with elaborated state systems (vs. those without). The insight may be just as clearly applied to conservative Protestants. I apply theory to case below by first considering the sheer number of organizational relations within this religious world, then describing the degree to which those relationships are given ideological coherence.

Density of Organizational Relations

One of the first things any student of conservative Protestantism learns is that the faithful are not just highly but also multiply committed. There is the church, certainly, which may be attended several times a week. But there is also the home Bible study group, perhaps running under the umbrella of the church but perhaps instead an independent entity with its own leadership hierarchy and participation rules. There is the religious day school for the children. There is the religious conference center in the mountains, or at the shore, where family vacations are spent. There is the foreign mission society that gets a check each month, and the religious college alumni association, and the religious periodical whose most recent issue is always on the coffee table. And there is the congregation back East, previously attended before the job transfer, that still sends its monthly newsletter and that occasionally receives a financial "love gift" in return. As Stinchcombe's insight would predict, the number of such relations for a given believer varies directly with the strength of her identification with the faith.5

Nested Relations

The sheer fact that CP's spend so much time in religious activity means that intimate life is permeated by the faith. Just as the structure and process of public schoolings blurs the line between household and polity (for example by altering the rhythm of domestic schedules and providing much of the content of household conversation), the structure of religious communities affects how families manage their private lives. Leisure time is spent at church, both in formal worship and in an array of other activities, often called "fellowship," that do double-duty as spiritual nourishment and entertainment. Bible studies, athletic leagues, choral groups, prayer hours, camping trips, ice cream socials, volunteer work days, and potlucks are common entries on CP congregational calendars.

Beyond the complexity of church schedules, CP theology obliges believers to be just as faithful at home as they are at church. Christianity is regarded as a life commitment, one legitimately permeates all facets of experience. Just as educators permeate the interior of domestic life through homework regimens, and more subtly through the dominant developmental ideology that "learning happens all the time," CP authorities admonish the faithful that Christianity is a total commitment, one which should be enacted at home through a variety of practical technologies. This means that much formal worship happens at home. Mornings may begin with Bible study and prayer, meals with the giving of thanks. Evenings may include another round of Bible study, in the form of "family devotions." Beyond the mere content of private life, the structure of intimate relations is given considerable attention by conservative Protestants. They have a lot to say about what an ideal household should look like, and they spend considerable energy getting their families to conform to the planner. A simple visit to a CP bookstore (there is at least one in every city of a substantial size) will give a sense of the elaborate conversation among these believers about how private life should be put together. There are primers for godly woman-, mother-, and wifehood, and comparable volumes for the men. There are Christian dating manuals, parenting manuals, and books of tips for teens. On your way out, take a look at the bulletin board and the flyers by the door. There may be announcements for upcoming live events of interest to godly families: a group rally of the Promise Keepers, a ministry to evangelical men; a family seminar.
by Gregg Harris or James Dobson; an inspirational lecture specifically for women by Elisabeth Elliot or Beverly LaHaye. How far do the faithful go in putting the lessons of these authorities into practice? The preponderance of evidence indicates that there is no clear relationship between the teachings of CP ideologues and the mechanics of real-world CP family life (e.g. Gallagher & Smith, 1999; Ammerman, 1987, pp. 134-146; Rose, 1977). Popular media depictions of conservative Protestants all thinking and loving and parenting alike are inaccurate. But it is nevertheless the case that these faithful support a thriving industry of speakers and authors who purvey expertise in the mechanics of godly families. And there is some evidence that they move to the endeavor than just talk: for example, CP mothers are more likely than others to stay out of the paid workforce (Woodberry & Smith, 1998, pp. 38-40; Ammerman & Roden, 1995).

Conservative Protestants also have maintained a robust tradition of separatist education for their children. A Christian day school movement blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s throughout the U.S (Rose, 1988; Wagner, 1990). Often housed in local churches, these schools were the CP counterpart to the alternative school movement popular in liberal America during the same era (Stevens, 2001, pp. 30-71). Many of these religious schools remain open today. More recently, home education has become the alternative school practice of choice for many conservative Protestants. Today a vibrant religious homeschool movement is institutionally complete: correspondence schools grade and certify home schools; local support groups provide socialization opportunities for the children and encouragement for the parents; regional and national advocacy organizations keep the project legal (Stevens, 2001).

Whether through private day schools or home schools, the incorporation of child education under the umbrella of the CP elaborates organizational relations among the faithful. The religion comes to encompass a wider swath of life for both children and their parents, and it also penetrates further into the heads of young people, shaping not just religious instruction but all fields of learning. The density of organizational relations among conservative Protestants is rendered meaningful and given legitimacy by a rich vernacular of unity. Notably, these believers use both imperial and intimate metaphors to describe who they are relative to one another. This is a "kingdom" of believers on Earth, one that mirrors a heavenly kingdom. But believers also speak of a "family" of believers. God is the father in this mythical household, and all Christians are "brothers and sisters" in the faith. The fact that members of this vast population use a family metaphor to describe their unity is testament to conservative Protestants' accomplishment at networking their group ties ideologically. The largest collective — all of God's people — is cognized with reference to the smallest and most affectively charged one.

Stinchcombe's lesson, here applied to conservative Protestantism, is rather straightforward: religious vitality is largely a function of the relative density of organizational relations within the religious population, and the degree to which intimate primary relations (family) are practically and ideologically linked to more general secondary ones (the family of God). The insight richly expands currently popular explanations for religious vitality. By beginning with the organizational structure of a faith, rather than with its participation rules (as in rational choice approaches), we get a vision of the whole of which rule-followers and individual organizations are only parts. Religions come to look less like aggregates of believers and more like organizational and cultural systems. Further, individual believers come to look more like products of a supra-individual phenomenon and less individually responsible for the robustness of their faith.

At the same time, Stinchcombe's organizational vision leads the subcultural identity approach a means for describing the empirical mechanics of the "subcultures" and "morally oriented collective identities" that make for religious persistence, and the "distinction and engagement" that make for vitality. Subcultures emerge as organizational systems with legitimating ideologies that provide for compelling identities (e.g. CPs as "children" in the "family of God"). Distinction and engagement come into view as organizational variables, indicated by the extent to which organizational affiliations are within or beyond the faith. The application of Stinchcombe's insight facilitates apprehension of religions as organizational phenomena more broadly. This move is not a new one, indeed it is built into the rational choice approaches, with their emphasis on participation rules and aggregate resources over meaningfulness and ritual. But it remains the case that the larger toolkit of organizational sociology has only begun to be fully exploited directly by sociologists of religion (e.g. Chaves, 1996, Becker, 1999, Eisseland, 2000). This is unfortunate, because organizational sociology has the theoretical lexicon to make new sense out of old puzzles in religion, for example, the standing question of what to do analytically with all those religious organizations that are not churches or temples or synagogues — organizations so essential to a vital faith tradition but that do not fall neatly within the congregational type.

CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTISM AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL FIELD

A key insight of institutional theory is that the process of organizational formation is not driven purely by instrumental needs or efficiency considerations;
organization-building gets done within cognitive and environmental constraints as well (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). People do not build organizations in certain ways merely because those ways are efficient in some utilitarian sense. Rather, institutionalists argue, people build organizations in ways they know how to, and in ways that will seem appropriate to the constituents of the new concern.

New organizational efforts draw from available models of how to organize — models made known, familiar, and appropriate to tasks at hand by wider institutional logics (Heimer, 1996). Doing otherwise is invariably treacherous or even unthinkable. This is why early activism for women suffrage took the organizational form of federated clubs (Czitrom, 1997), and why a nascent gay and lesbian movement looked much like a civil rights effort (Armstrong, forthcoming; Johnson, 1994-1995). The men and women who built these causes did so in light of the forms they knew, and they made their efforts in shapes that were acceptable to those whom they wanted to join their cause, or at least to lend credence to their claims.

Institutionalists also point out that organization builders face significant contextual limitations on what organizational forms may even be possible: as women, early suffragists were barred from the conventional political apparatus, so they gave their movement an organizational expression (woman’s “clubs”) that was acceptable to men of power. The first “homophile” movement organized as a civil rights cause so that homosexuality might be viewed as a legal issue (and hence amenable to lobbying and litigation) and not a moral one (harder to change). The big point is that organization building is a meaningful activity as well as a practical one. Those who do the work of assembling organizations must do so in ways that are intelligible and acceptable, both to themselves and to relevant others in the social environment. That environment is not uniform, however. What counts as acceptable organizational practice varies across different social contexts. Different sectors of a society are characterized by distinctive regulatory schemes, normative systems, and cognitive orientations. To describe some of this variation, institutionalists use the notion of organizational fields — clusters of organizations that are linked both instrumentally and culturally. A field is comprised of “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services and products” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 143). Fields are not just social agglomerations, they also are cultural ones. As Scott notes, the field concept “connotes the existence of a community of organizations that partake of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and successfully with one another than with actors outside of the field” (Scott, 1994a, pp. 207–208 [quoted])

The Organizational Vitality of Conservative Protestantism

Conservative Protestantism is appropriately understood as an organizational field, characterized by distinctive organizational templates, behavioral norms, and symbols of shared purpose that facilitate the proliferation and coordination of organizational activity (cf. Scott, 1994b). In brief: a significant part of what makes conservative Protestantism vital today is an organizational field that encourages entrepreneurship. In what follows I describe several important characteristics of the CP organizational field: the ministry form; the rules of private life that govern CP leaders; the field’s elaborate symbol system; and its practical protestantism. Together, these field characteristics help to explain conservative Protestantism’s remarkable and enduring vitality.

A Distinctive Organizational Form

Among CPs, evangelistic efforts of all sorts are often called “ministries,” a term that is an apt descriptor of an organizational form distinct to conservative Protestantism (cf. Stevens, 2001, p. 170). Not necessarily a church and not quite (or not only) a business, a ministry is a pyramidal form administered with a mix of charismatic and bureaucratic authority. Many ministries are churches, or church movements, such as Vineyard and Calvary Chapel (Miller, 1997).

But a ministry can purvey just about any good or service. It can be a religious day school or a homeschool correspondence program or a college. It can be a magazine, a Bible study guide, a publishing house, or a recording studio. It can be an evangelistic effort at home or abroad, a medical charity, or a political advocacy group. In order to be a legitimate ministry the organization must somehow serve a heavenly purpose, but that purpose may be evangelistic, inspirational, or reformist.

Ministries also are characterized by a distinctive organizational form that mixes charismatic and bureaucratic elements into a potent syncretism. Ministries typically are capped by a single person with exceptional spiritual and communicative gifts; especially in the early years, the organization’s effort is strongly affiliated with this one individual. As the leader and his endeavor accumulate followers and finances, though, they adopt more rationalized and administrative structures. Tasks come to be distributed by rank and office. Boards of directors (or “elders” or “deacons”) are recruited. Applications of incorporation are filed, accountants hired. Bureaucraticization leads the organizations staying power, while freeing their heads to concentrate on the work they do best: speaking and writing; winning souls, listeners, and clients. Over time, the organizations rationalize even while they maintain their exciting leaders; indeed,
the nominal isomorphism between the leader and his or her organization persists for years (e.g. the Billy Graham Crusade; Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition [cf. Stevens, 2001, pp. 165–175]).

As with bureaucracy and charisma, money and mission can mix potently in ministries, as long as those in charge maintain a normatively acceptable balance of financial solvency and spiritual outreach. Among conservative Protestants it is understood that full-time ministry must be supported somehow. God provides for his anointed leaders, but he is presumed to do so through the faithfulness of other believers. Ministries may legitimately appeal to their audiences for cash in several ways. If the ministry is a church, its leader can admonish members to regularly tithe a portion of their incomes to the organization. Ministries that are not churches cannot make claims on the tithe, but they can invoke the norms of a long CP tradition of tithe evangelism, which stipulate that godly leaders of all sorts can legitimately make financial requests among the faithful. Often called “love offerings,” these solicitations can take various forms: the discreet passing of a hat at events; direct-mail appeals; or informal interpersonal contacts. Additionally, it is acceptable in conservative Protestantism to run one’s ministry as a for-profit business, as long as there is no dint of deception about the remunerative nature of the endeavor. Religious publishing houses and recording labels are prominent examples of ministries that are also — and legitimacy — businesses.

Committing to a ministry as one’s career is given enormous positive sanction among conservative Protestants. Running a ministry is regarded as serving the Lord essentially full-time, as bending one’s life to the will of divine intention. Believers speak of God “calling them to ministry,” while successful ministries and their leaders are said to have been “blessed.” More than a mere alternative among nay, ministry entrepreneurship has special, elevated status as a life choice among believers.

Ministries contribute to the organizational vitality of conservative Protestantism in several ways. They carry a status among believers that encourages people to take the risk of starting a new cause. They enable leaders to make legitimate claims on the resources of believers in the form of tithes and offerings, thus making full-time ministry materially possible. And they offer an organizational template that preserves some of the appeal of charismatic leadership within durable bureaucracies.

Rules of Private Life

There is more to a godly leader than charisma and administrative smarts, however. Godly leaders are expected to enact their faith commitments in all aspects of their lives. This means that in order to maintain their legitimacy, leaders must conform to fairly elaborate norms of personal conduct. They must be faithful in tribe, attendance, and service to their local church congregations; they must be spiritually and sexually faithful to their mates or, if unmarried, remain celibate; and they must lend the service to heaven primacy over service to self. The strength of these norms is most clearly evident in the famous cases of those who breach them: the television couple who kept a little too much of the love offerings for themselves, and wound up in bankruptcy court; the itinerant Southern evangelist who got caught with a prostitute in a roadside motel. The fact that the breaches make headlines in the secular press encourages a distorted view of this organizational field as suspect, its entrepreneurs duplicitous and hypocritical. For every Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, every Jimmy Swaggart, there are hundreds of believer-entrepreneurs who remain faithful to the rather stringent lifestyle expectations that govern leadership in this organizational field.

CP prescriptions for lifestyle distinctiveness would seem to limit the number of potential entrepreneurs in this field. But as rational choice theory would suggest, limiting entrants is not necessarily bad news (Laumann, 1994). If adherence to strict lifestyle rules is a condition for legitimate leadership, then only those who are fairly serious about ministry will pay the costs it entails. The lifestyle rules thus may sort out potential leaders who have less of the perseverance and capacity for self-denial than is required to see a fledgling church (or store, or summer camp, or whatever) to maturity.

Symbolizing the Faithful

In large and complex societies, it is often hard to know who your friends are. This is especially true for conservative Protestant organization builders, who do their work in a society with many different varieties of Christianity. Catholics, Mennonites, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Scientists, and mainstream Protestant faiths all are Christian, and much of the theology of these other faiths overlaps with that of conservative Protestants. And the conservative Protestant world is itself vast and varied and international in scope. All of this complexity makes coordinated collective action a challenge. Cooperation is much easier when people presume that they share a world view, a fact that is as salient in corporate boardrooms as it is in religious communities (e.g. Kanter, 1977). But how am I to know who thinks like I do, and who does not? One solution is to encourage people to actually live similarly, and this is an important latent function of the lifestyle rules for leaders described above. Another is to use shared symbols of common sentiment to mark one’s organizations as being
of a certain kind. And in fact, conservative Protestants employ a number of devices to mask their organizations as being a peculiar kind of "Christian." CP organizations often use so-called "statements of faith" to make their theological orientation clear. Statements of faith summarize core tenets of CP theology, such as the authority of the Bible, the virgin birth, and the bodily resurrection of Christ. Presented schematically, statements of faith usually take the form of lines ("We believe... ") Sometimes, they are accompanied by similarly schematic guidelines for CP conversion ("God's plan for salvation" is a typical title), which give a recipe-like depiction of CP conversion. As one example, consider the statement of faith that runs in every issue of The Teaching Home, a magazine for CP home schools that is delivered to the mailboxes of over 35,000 subscribers:

The Bible is the inspired, infallible Word of God and constitutes Christ's completed and final revelation to man. The Bible, in its original autographs, is without error in all it teaches. God has insured that all truth is contained therein. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit... All men are in violation of God's righteous requirements and His holy character both in nature and act, and are therefore under His wrath and just condemnation. Salvation is offered as a gift, free to the sinner... in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ above.

The symbolic import of these texts is evident in several ways. First, statements of faith preach to the choir. The religiously uninitiated are unlikely to understand the theological import of biblical inerrancy, for example, but a true believer already knows and so has little need for a statement of faith to instruct her. Second, statements of faith like the one above are remarkably similar across organizations. The Teaching Home even features a sample statement of faith on its Web site, to help those who are starting their own Christian homeschools. groups get this job done quickly. Third, statements of faith sometimes are used explicitly to exclude non-believers. In the homeschool movement, some CP support groups require prospective members to sign statements of faith as a condition of membership or office-holding, while some regional and national consortia of homeschool groups similarly oblige their members to formally concur with a shared statement of faith (cf. Stevens, 2001, pp. 107-142). Beyond home schooling, many religious schools and colleges make formal commitment to a statement of faith requisite for admission.

There are other, less formal ways of indicating that one legitimately occupies the CP organizational field. Believers may colloquially use the term "Christian" to indicate that some good or service is a part of the kingdom, as in Christian school, Christian bookstore, Christian radio, Christian novel. This
VITALITY AS A FUNCTION OF DEPTH AND BREADTH OF ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

When I was a child, I attended Sunday school at a Baptist church very similar to the one Nancy Ammerman describes in her ethnographic classic, *Bible Believers* (1987). One of our class’s favored worship songs had a single, simple verse whose words I still remember:

Deep and wide.
Deep and wide.
It’s a stranger flowing deep and wide.

Young singers attended to each term of the lyrics with hand motions indicating large spatial magnitudes on imaginary horizontal and vertical axes (the song was large in both dimensions). I recall the lyrics were set to the tune of a hymn, but I don’t know the name of the hymn or the tune. I am not sure how well I remember the words of the hymn, even the basic ones. I have often sung the words with the tune in mind, but I have not tried to sing the words without the tune.

A significant change occurred in the Sunday school during the 1980s. The music at the church changed. The hymns were replaced by contemporary Christian songs. The worship became more informal and less structured. The music was more energetic and upbeat. The atmosphere was more relaxed and informal. I remember being surprised by how much the music had changed. I was not sure what to think of the new music, but I enjoyed it.

The Sunday school also underwent changes during the 1980s. The class size increased, and the structure of the class changed. Instead of having a single leader, the class was led by multiple teachers. The class was divided into smaller groups, each with a leader and a small group of students. The groups met in different locations, and the classes were held on different days.

I remember feeling a sense of community and belonging during the 1980s. The class was a close-knit group of people, and we shared a common faith. I enjoyed the sense of camaraderie and support.

As I think back on my experiences in the Sunday school during the 1980s, I realize that the changes were significant. The music, the atmosphere, and the structure of the class were all different. I am not sure how to describe the change, but I remember feeling a sense of excitement and enthusiasm.

Looking back on my experiences, I realize that the changes were important. They were a reflection of the changing culture and society during the 1980s. The church was adapting to the new realities of the world, and the changes were necessary.

In conclusion, I remember my experiences in the Sunday school during the 1980s with a sense of nostalgia. I am grateful for the sense of community and support that I received during those years. The changes were important, and I am thankful for the opportunity to reflect on them.
an organizational template—the ministry—with features well-suited to spotters; a cultural incentive to religious entrepreneurship; lifestyle rules that sort facilitates cooperation; and a Protestant ordre that makes new religious firms CP organizational field helps us explain the breadths of conservative Protestant life—the remarkably wide array of "Christian" enterprises that together comprise a vast religious kingdom.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that a little-used insight developed more than three decades ago can enhance our understanding of conservative Protestantism’s vitality. Stinchcombe’s explanation for group solidarity can complement rational choice approaches to religious vitality by giving scholars better purchase on the import of organizational and cultural inheritance, and by enabling them to broaden the purview of what counts as a "religious" organization. Stinchcombe’s contribution also provides cultural identity explanations of religious vitality, more concretely about the organizational mechanisms that create religious distinction from, and engagement with, the secular world. More broadly, the utility of Stinchcombe’s work invites the theoretical toolkit of organizational sociology. I have shown, for example, that the institutionalist concept of the field enables us to more fully explain why conservative Protestantism is so organizationally fertile.

My task has been to demonstrate that the organizational sociology has a lot this. The interdependence of religious ideas and religious organization at the heart of my analysis is essentially Durkheimian, as some readers have likely noticed already (Durkheim, 1995). A more recent research tradition has examined various organizational dimensions of religious life, the dense and exclusive organizational relationships that contribute to religious solidarity (e.g. Zelizer, 1971; Kantor, 1972); the structure of authority in CP denominations (Harrison, 1959); and how that organizational structure reflects theological disputes among the faithful (Annenmer, 1990).

Organization theory provides the resources, and a solid literature provides the example, for more robust answers to questions about religious vitality. Creating those answers will not only make for a better sociology of religion, it may also better enable us to participate in national conversations about contemporary politics. Robert Putnam has recently suggested, for example, that the organizational fecundity of evangelical Protestantism puts them in the vanguard of efforts to rebuild our ostensibly eroded stock of social capital (Putnam, 2000, pp. 148-180).

Thankfully, the history of these vital faiths indicates that they will await more sociologists. The depth and breadth of this religious tradition assures us of this: conservative Protestantism will be there tomorrow.

NOTES

1. It is no little irony that the contemporary gay and lesbian movement, a cause often thought to embody the opposite "side" of our country’s ideological and lifestyle spectrum, has an organizational constitution similar to that of conservative Protestantism. See Armstrong this volume and Armstrong forthcoming.

2. Not surprisingly, race divides conservative Protestants as much as it does the rest of the society. Some of this unevenness is organizational. Large in size (a consequence of symmetrical exclusion by whites, African-Americans believe have long maintained their own organizational universe (See Lincoln & Minya, 1990; Emerson & Smith, 2000).

3. Old theories die hard. I was taught the parallel between industrialization and community erosion passionately during my undergraduate years in the mid-1980s. Perhaps more surprising is that even through years of graduate school at organically minded Northwestern, my vision was not fully corrected until re-reading Stinchcombe’s essay.

4. For ethnographic examples see Amerman’s classic (1987) study of a fundamentalist congregation, and my analysis of CP home schoolers (Steurer, 2001). The interview and survey data in Smith et al. 1998 additionally demonstrate the multiple organizational commitments that characterize the conservative Protestant lifeworld.

5. Consider, for example, that Protestant evangelicals and fundamentalists are more likely than mainline and liberal Protestants to describe their faith as "extremely important" to them; they also attend church more often and for more varied activities and consume more religious media than the comparison groups (Smith et al., 1998, Tables 2.2 and 2.3).
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REFERENCES


The Organizational Vitality of Conservative Protestantism


12. CRISIS, COLLECTIVE CREATIVITY, AND THE GENERATION OF NEW ORGANIZATIONAL FORMS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF LESBIAN/GAY ORGANIZATIONS IN SAN FRANCISCO

Elizabeth A. Armstrong

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that actors are more likely to create new organizational forms in contexts of collective creativity. Contexts of collective creativity are characterized by intense interaction, uncertainty, and a multiplicity of available cultural materials. The context of collective creativity provided by the New Left made possible the creation of new kinds of lesbian/gay organizations in San Francisco in the early 1970s. The political upheaval of the 1960s enabled the creation of a new political logic; the logic of identity politics, which, in turn, made possible the development of the gay identity politics that structured contemporary lesbian/gay organizations.