SOCIAL CONTEXT AND THE PRESBYTERIAN GAY/LESBIAN ORDINATION DEBATE: TESTING OPEN-SYSTEMS THEORY

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This paper examines the context within which Presbyterian Church (USA) leaders formally decided to prohibit the ordination of openly gay and lesbian elders, deacons, and clergy. Data from resolutions presented to Presbyterian General Assemblies from 1990-1996 reveal that a disproportionate percentage of initiatives seeking to restrict leaders' sexual behavior in general, and homosexual behavior in particular, come from Synods located where conservative Christians dominate the religious culture. State and county-level data on religious affiliation gathered by the Glenmary Research Center were merged to correspond with Synod boundaries. Analysis reveals that resolutions explicitly prohibiting homosexual and non-marital sexual behavior by church leaders are, overall, more likely to come from Synods where conservative Christians disproportionately outnumber Presbyterians. However, our analysis falls short of completely explaining this phenomenon. The Synod from which the single largest number of conservative overtures originated is actually the same one wherein conservatives are least prevalent. Thus, we provide qualified evidence that aspects of the larger "Open-System" within which church leaders make decisions help predict organizational action. In general, we argue that Presbyterian leaders who live and work where Biblical conservatism dominates the cultural scene are more likely to act in ways which reflect a literal interpretation of Biblical prohibitions against homosexuality. But much more work needs to be done.

Over twenty years ago, delegates to the 1978 and 1979 General Assemblies of the United Presbyterian Church drafted and re-affirmed legislation regarding the ordination of gay and lesbian persons. Calling it "definitive guidance," church leaders declared that "self affirming, practicing homosexual persons (and) persons engaged in same?gender relationships are not to be ordained (as clergy or lay leaders) to office in the denomination." (UPCUSA 1978:261-266; 1979).

Even so, many Presbyterian congregations continued to exercise congregational autonomy by ordaining gay elders and deacons (Anderson 1997). These practices were rebuked by the 1985 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), triggering heated debate over the next several years (Anderson 1997; PCUSA 1985).

By 1996, after considerable division throughout the denomination over the issue of homosexuality in particular (and by extension all definitions of appropriate sexual behavior), the General Assembly adopted and sent to each Presbytery (regional governing body) the following amendment to its Book of Order (PCUSA 1996:79):

> *"Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman, or in chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacraments."*

This amendment was subsequently adopted by a narrow majority of the PCUSA's Presbyteries during late 1996 and 1997.

What social forces and changes are driving this process? What can sociologists of religion learn from a contextual analysis of the debate occurring within the Presbyterian Church (USA) and elsewhere? Over the past twenty years, issues related to the moral behavior of church leaders, particularly the ordination of gays and lesbians, have raised controversy within virtually every major religious denomination in the United States (Ammerman 1997; Anderson 1997; Hartman 1996; Siker 1994; Wood and Bloch 1995).

This paper argues that the official denominational policy of the Presbyterian Church (USA) which prohibits the ordination of gay or lesbian leaders resulted at least in part from a plurality of General Assembly resolutions which came from regions wherein Conservative Protestants disproportionately dominate the cultural context. We utilize principles from "Open-Systems" organizational theory to explain process by which this ecclesiastical decision emerged.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The movement toward formally institutionalizing "fidelity and chastity" within the Presbyterian Church (USA) occurred in the wake of the changing character of American religion: Mainline Protestant denominations are losing members and Conservative Protestants are gaining members (Finke and Stark 1992; Hoge 1979; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1994; Iannaccone 1994; Wuthnow 1988). While Conservative Christianity has its roots in early 20th century revivalism (Hunter 1983), contemporary Evangelicals still adhere to specific "fundamentals" of religious principles. These include, but are not limited to, belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ and the proclamation that the Bible is the literal Word of God in every detail (Ammerman 1988; 1990; 1997; Hunter 1983; Smith 1999). We argue here that formalizing and ratifying more restrictive moral guidelines within the Presbyterian Church (USA) has strengthened its ideological tie toward the Religious Right.[1] Why is this happening?

While the Presbyterian Church (USA) convenes as a whole only once a year, the denomination consists of 171 regional Presbyteries which are, in turn, organized into 16 larger regional Synods. Each Presbytery convenes clergy and lay leaders from its con-

stituent congregations at least three times each year; these leaders take care of their congregations' business as well as help develop the national agenda through resolutions (overtures) which are debated at Synod and National Assemblies.

Delegates to each Presbytery meeting are individual leaders of specific congregations. Each of these individuals is elected to office by fellow members of their congregation. Local church boards (Sessions) typically meet monthly, taking care of internal business as well as keeping track of the national agenda. All of these church leaders live and work with others in their communities; they interact and share influence with many others who are not affiliated with their congregation, and with those who are also not Presbyterian. These networks are an integral part of what organizational theorists describe as an "open system" (Hall 1987; Perrow 1986; Scott 1997). We argue that an "open-systems" analysis captures the context within which Presbyterians do their congregational and synodical work. An open-systems approach to organizational action argues that congregations, presbyteries, and synods:

- are private, yet they exist in a competitive relationship with other organizations in their environments;

- depend on voluntary compliance of their constituents;

- persuade constituents to comply with organizational goals by appealing to individuals' values and interests;

- are in a position to both transform, and be transformed by social forces in the environment.

(See Davidson 1985; Koch 1994; Koch and Johnson 1997; and Scherer 1980 for more of how open-systems theory applies to religious organizations).

Since delegates to presbytery meetings are all members of local church boards and clergy leaders of individual churches, we contend that congregations and presbyteries are organizational actors in a larger open system. Decisions at the organizational level reflect the competing and converging values and interests of their leaders and constituents. The values and interests of their leaders emerge through interaction with others within as well as outside the congregation. Currently, Presbyterians (among other mainline denominations) are losing members; Evangelicals are gaining. As Presbyterian leaders interact with others in a more religiously conservative "open system," there will be an increasing tendency to generate a more religiously conservative organizational agenda of their own as they evaluate their congregation's organizational interests. At the very least, adopting a conservative agenda in an open system disproportionately dominated by conservatives reduces the likelihood of defensiveness and membership drift. Further, while "in-switching" to mainline denominations such as the PCUSA is declining (Hoge et al. 1994), this remains a vector by which a religiously conservative open-system shapes the extent to which a PCUSA congregation may be receptive to evangelical influence. It may also contribute to building more hospitable interactions among leaders in the larger community.

Finally, we connect the content of the debate over gay/lesbian ordination in the PCUSA to what is "fundamental" to the Religious Right. In aggregate, Presbyterians decided to formally prohibit practicing homosexual people from becoming (or continuing to be) church leaders based on a literal interpretation of the biblical narrative (Rogers 1999). While there is considerable debate over the meaning and context of specific biblical prohibitions against homosexual behavior (Gomes 1996; Nelson 1979; Wellman 1999), it is clear that the denomination as a whole leaned toward the literalist approach and became more formally aligned with the Religious Right.

SUMMARY AND HYPOTHESIS

The debate over moral norms and policy outcomes within the Presbyterian Church (USA) can be theoretically framed as follows:

- The current religious environment in the United States is characterized, at least in part, by a continuing decline in membership and power of mainline Protestant groups and a concurrent increase in the membership and power of Conservative Protestant groups.

- Open-systems theory suggests that church leaders interact with others within a plurality of organizational forms and competing values and interests; this creates a competitive environment within which members of mainline and conservative Protestant churches interact.

- Prohibiting homosexual behavior reflects a kind of biblical literalism which aligns the PCUSA with Evangelicals in their larger context.

Thus, we put forward the following hypothesis:

- The ratio of Conservative Protestants to Presbyterians in a given "open-system" (Synod) will predict the likelihood of a resolution emerging from that territory which seeks to place restrictions on the moral behavior of Presbyterian leaders.

METHODS

We use secondary analysis and content analysis to measure our independent and dependent variables. These are as follows:

The Independent Variable:

Ratio of Conservative Protestants to Presbyterians

Bradley (1992) is the secondary data source for this study. The following Glenmary categories were coded as "Conservative/Evangelical" (Roof and McKinney 1987; Shibley 1991; Smith 1990).

- Assemblies of God, Christian Churches and Churches of Christ, Church of God General Conference, Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), Church of the Nazarene, Churches of Christ, Church of God, General Conference, Evangelical Congregational Church, Evangelical Free Church of America, Evangelical Bible Churches (Fellowship of), Evangelical Mennonite Church, Inc., Evangelical Methodist Church, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Friends International, Fire Baptized Holiness Church (Wesleyan), Fundamental Methodist Church, Independent Charismatic Churches, Independent Fundamental Churches of America, International Pentecostal Church of Christ, Pentecostal Church of God, Pentecostal Holiness Church, Inc., Primitive Baptist Associations, Seventh Day Adventists, Southern Baptist Convention.

The number of adherents to these groups were aggregated and compared to number of adherents to the Presbyterian Church-USA.

The Dependent Variable:

PCUSA General Assembly Overtures Advocating Restrictive Morality

A total of 874 resolutions (overtures) came before the PCUSA General Assembly between 1990 and 1996. 22.4 % of these (n = 196) restricted the moral behavior of church members and leaders. The following coding criteria were used:

Does the overture address the behavior of a group of individuals who are defined in terms of sexual behavior? Does the overture tend to restrict the definition of appropriate sexual behavior for leaders in the Church? Are there specific penalties and procedures prescribed for violation of conventional or prescribed moral behavior? Examples include:

- Ordaining gay/lesbian elders and clergy;
- Fidelity within, and chastity outside marriage;
- Adjudicatory procedures regarding sexual behavior;
- The process by which morality issues are debated and studied;
- Definition of beginning of life;

Inter-coder reliability, calculated as a correlation coefficient, is: 0.715

RESULTS

Table 1 provides the information needed for analysis. In order to empirically examine the open systems proposition, we created an index of conservative religious environment (fourth column). The fifteen synods were then divided so as to create a dichotomy comprised of the eight more conservative synods (in terms of non-Presbyterians) versus the seven less conservative synods. The eight synod versus seven synod split was used

Table 1
Summary of Variables

Synods	States of Synod	Number of Presbyteries	Ratio of Conservatives to Presbyterians	Number of Restrictive Morality Overtures
Living Waters	AL KY MS TN	12	32.05	24
Sun	AR LA OK TX	11	23.87	11
South Atlantic	FL GA SC	16	12.70	29
Southwest	AZ NM	4	10.63	1
Mid-America	KS MO	6	9.35	2
Mid-Atlantic	DE MD NC VA	13	6.99	18
California & Hawaii	CA HI	8	5.86	11
Pacific	CA ID NV OR	11	5.79	13
Sub-total		81		109
		48.2%		55.6%
Lincoln Trail	IL IN	8	4.81	6
Alaska-Northwest	AK WA	7	4.46	19
Rocky Mountain	CO MT UT WY	8	4.42	10
Covenant	MI OH	11	3.02	9
Lakes & Prairies	IA MN NE ND SD WI	16	1.52	6
Northeast	CT MA ME NH NJ NY RI VT	21	1.43	4
Trinity	PA WV	16	1.05	33

because inspection of ratio differences implies the split at 8-7 to be a bit cleaner than that at 7-8. The total number of presbyteries contained in the top eight synods (81) were then expressed as proportion of the 168 presbyteries and 15 synods included in this analysis.[2] The resultant value of 0.482 is taken as the expected value of the proportion of restrictive morality overtures coming from the eight synods; this is the null hypothesis of no difference. Using the value of 0.482 as our expected value is based on the assumption that where a particular concern is generally shared across the nation, resolutions will emanate with relatively equal frequency from the various synods. We assume, *ceteris paribus*, that if the environmental hypothesis is false, restrictive morality overtures will emanate from synods at an approximately equal rate.

In fact, the eight synods with the more conservative environments generated 109 of the 196 total restrictive morality overtures produced in the time frame observed. This results in an observed proportion from the "gang of eight" of 0.556, 0.074 units (or 7.4 percentage points) greater than the expected value. The expected value of 0.482 generates a standard deviation of 0.410 and a standard error (standard deviation of the sampling distribution $/s^2 /n$) of 0.032. The difference of 0.074 yields a Z score of 2.312, a value significant at " = 0.025. Consequently, we are able to reject the null hypothesis of no difference.

Our measure of environment is only a rough operationalization and use of the synod is a crude level of measurement. Nevertheless, these limitations are more likely to blur the

distinctions we are seeking rather than enhance them. Therefore we take the significance obtained as a strong "go signal" to pursue this hypothesis in a more rigorous, refined manner.

CONCLUSIONS

We began this exploratory study as a test of open-systems organizational theory. We examined the extent to which a specific contextual characteristic helps us predict the move toward moral conservatism within Presbyterian Church (USA). Our analysis provides qualified support for our hypothesis. In aggregate, if we know the ratio of Conservative Protestants to Presbyterians in each Synod of the PCUSA, we can predict the geographical context from which a preponderance of formal restrictions emerge which govern the sexual and moral behavior of church leaders.

Open-systems theory argues this results from an accommodation to prevailing, locally normative religious views which ultimately serves congregational interests. Presbyterian congregations are less likely to lose members to more explicitly conservative congregations in their communities if their local appeal includes both the traditions of the denomination and an accommodation to prevailing, locally normative religious views.

This exploratory study leaves many questions unanswered. While the overall analysis offers support for our open-systems hypothesis, it fails to explain why the synod from which the single largest number of conservative overtures emerged is also the one where the ratio of Conservatives to Presbyterians is the smallest (1.05 to 1 in Trinity Synod). Further research will need to examine the theoretical and methodological limitations of our argument.

Smith (1999) and Wellman (1999), for example, offer "subcultural identity theory" to explain the persistent success of American Evangelicalism. This perspective argues that evangelicalism thrives because it rigorously protects its cultural distinctiveness. Evangelicals maintain a level of competitive tension with the surrounding environment. In the case of Trinity Synod (Pennsylvania and West Virginia), Evangelicals and Presbyterians may well be struggling for ideological dominance. While this idea fits our open-systems model in that it acknowledges the influence of competing organizational ideologies, it resists the notion that an organizational type will accommodate toward another to further its own interests. Rather, subcultural identity theory might well predict the social source of these restrictive overtures would come from an environment where Evangelicals and Presbyterians are competing on a relatively equal plane.

Our analysis was limited to tracking the number overtures coming from synods. Synods are comparatively large, and potentially diverse geographic entities. Our reason for doing so related to the secondary data set from which we derived the independent variable. Glenmary data are coded to county and state boundaries; synods more readily correspond at the state level. Presbyteries often cross state and county lines. A presbytery-level of analysis may help us adjudicate the extent to which an Evangelical-like Presbyterianism is the result of accommodation toward, or successful competition with, religious conservatives regardless of their relative numbers.

This exploratory study serves up an agenda for further theoretical and empirical research not only on the question of Presbyterian morality, but on larger issues of organizational interaction and competition among the religious.

NOTES

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1. Marcum (1991), and Hoge et al. (1994) note that sizeable numbers of Presbyterians identify themselves as "Conservative." Balmer (1993) and Smith (1999) outline elements in the history of the PCUSA and with the Evangelical movement which tie Presbyterian tradition to the principles of conservative Christianity.
2. The Synod covering the territory of Puerto Rico (and the Puerto Rico Presbytery) and two non-geographic Presbyteries (Hamni) were excluded from the analysis. Puerto Rico is contextually distinct from the United States; non-geographic Presbyteries cannot be understood as a cultural context.

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