The World Is Not Yet Completed: Moral Imaginaries and Everyday Politics in Progressive Religious Communities

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE WORLD IS NOT YET COMPLETED:
MORAL IMAGINARIES AND EVERYDAY POLITICS IN
PROGRESSIVE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
AUGUST 2013
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Rhys H. Williams, Kelly Moore, and J. Talmadge Wright for their ongoing advice on and support of this work. Additionally, I would like to thank my professors and peers in the Loyola University Sociology department. I could not have asked for better mentors, colleagues, and friends through the research and writing process. I am also grateful to the Loyola University Chicago Sociology Department and Graduate School, as well as to the Arthur J. Schmitt foundation, for fellowships that contributed to my ability to complete this project. Importantly, I would like to acknowledge and thank the members of the six groups that were studied in this work. In these communities I found warm, friendly, and helpful people and I am grateful for their assistance in this project. Finally, I’d like to thank my parents for being the supportive, Midwestern types that they are.
For Courtney, obviously
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CHAPTER ONE

GENTLE, ANGRY PEOPLE:
FAITH AND POLITICS IN THE EVERYDAY

I think, you know, we're not sitting in anger. We're angry, but the response takes the power of getting upset and the response comes through positive action and emotion, rather than just screaming and yelling and ranting and raving. At least for me. That's what I've seen. I think, you know, we're still a gentle angry people, not just Dignity, but a lot of people in the church. You know the song.

When Gene, a long time member of the LGBT Catholic organization Dignity/Chicago said the above to me, I made a mental note to myself: I have no idea what the song “Gentle Angry People” is, but it sounded like something I should look up.

A bit of research on the Internet led to me find out that “Gentle Angry People” (sometimes called “We Are a Gentle Angry People,” there seems to be some ambiguity in the official title) is a song by feminist folk singer and activist Holly Near. The generally agreed upon lyrics are as follows:

We are a gentle angry people and we are singing, singing for our lives
We are a justice seeking people and we are singing, singing for our lives
We are young and old together and we are singing, singing for our lives
We are a land of many colors and we are singing, singing for our lives
We are gay and straight together and we are singing, singing for our lives
We are a gentle, loving people and we are singing, singing for our lives

I was able to find a video of Holly Near singing a somewhat modified version of the song that focused more specifically on women’s rights at the March for Women’s Lives in
2004\textsuperscript{1}. As Gene indicated during our conversation, the song seemed to be a perfectly appropriate encapsulation of the kind of faith-based activism aimed at equality that he was talking about.

Additional research into the song deepened the story, however. While trying to find the lyrics to “Gentle Angry People”, I learned that many Unitarian Universalist congregations have turned the song into a hymn\textsuperscript{2}. What’s more, I found a video of a group of demonstrators who marched from the First Unitarian Universalist Church to the Capitol in Madison, Wisconsin, during the mass protests against governor Scott Walker’s attempts to curtail worker’s rights\textsuperscript{3}. The protesters sang a modified version of the song that highlighted the claims made by the activists:

\begin{quote}
    We are a gentle angry people and we are fighting, fighting for our lives  
    We are the teachers of your children and we are fighting, fighting for our lives  
    We are the students young and old and we are fighting, fighting for our lives  
    We are the nurses of your patients and we are fighting, fighting for our lives  
    We are protectors of your safety and we are fighting, fighting for our lives
\end{quote}

I found myself becoming emotional as I watched the video of the protesters singing the song in the dark of night outside the capitol building, and it occurred to me that there was no solid line where the “spirituality” of the song ended and the “politics” of the song began. Marching from a church to the capital, singing a tune that was both a hymn and a folk song challenged any easy connection between faith and politics that place the two on opposite sides of a finely drawn boundary. Rather, I reacted strongly to

\textsuperscript{1} The video of that performance is here: http://youtu.be/IAQkVjJzRnE  
\textsuperscript{2} The song, sung in church as a hymn, here: http://youtu.be/kEHcy08hf5E  
\textsuperscript{3} The video may be seen here: http://youtu.be/CpRRnPc9b0E?t=1m25s
the video because of its plea to understand the ordinary lives of citizens as imbued with greater, perhaps even sacred, meaning. There seemed to be no venue where “Gentle Angry People” was purely a “hymn,” nor purely a “folk song.” When Near sang the song at the March For Women’s Lives, she was presenting it as a transcendent statement about the rights of women, something beyond mere “politics.” Likewise, when a group of churchgoers get together and sing the lines “We are gay and straight together,” certainly aware that in many churches, gay and straight are not together, they are making a bold statement that rings with earthly resonance. The words may change to reflect the specific venue the song is being sung in or the situation that it is addressing, but the story stays the same: the song integrates the political and the spiritual, blurring the lines between those languages. Gene from Dignity/Chicago, it turns out, was right to cite this particular song when talking about the righteous anger of people of faith.

Thinking more about this particular folk song, I realized that what is so unique about it is that, in actuality, it is not unique at all. What is religious is often imbued with political meaning and politics often references a transcendence that is undeniably religious. What’s more, the living out of political and religious beliefs and values is not always actualized in grand gestures, but is sometimes reflected in simple statements or everyday behaviors. While the protesters in Wisconsin were participating in a large-scale mass protest event, the version of the hymn they sung grounded its lyrics in the everyday, imbuing the daily struggles of someone doing their job with wider political meaning. The

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Following feminist scholars who see politics at work in our everyday lives, I understand politics broadly in this dissertation, seeing it as relating to, on the one hand, decisions about power, policy, status, and inequality and, on the other hand, to understandings of the rights and responsibilities of groups and individuals in civil society.
The Embedded Politics of Everyday Life

Despite the fact that much work on collective action in sociology has focused on mass mobilization against the state, there has long been a tradition that has, instead, examined how politics are a part of the everyday sense-making and identity construction of social actors (Auyero 2003; Bender 2003; Eliasoph 1998; Epstein 1991; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Jasper 1999; Nepstad and Williams 2007; Luker 1984; Moore 1996; Munson 2008; Polletta 2004; Scott 1987; Williams 2000). This stream of thought has understood politics and protest not only in large-scale collective action against the state, but in the small choices we make about our beliefs and values in our everyday lives. Taken together, this work challenges us to think holistically about politics and collective action. We are not only political creatures when we are political in public, and not all of our political choices represent clearly delineated lines of strategy.

In other words, politics is sometimes people marching in the street to agitate for a larger piece of the pie, but politics is also sometimes a musician slapping a peace-symbol sticker on her guitar or someone choosing to pay a few dollars more to support a local business instead of a big box store. Often, politics is done multiple ways, and often by the same people. Choices such as what to eat, where to shop, what to wear, whom to associate with, where to worship, what to drive, who to vote for, and who to love all show how political meaning works its way into the contours of our lives. Because politics is so often bound together with these ordinary behaviors, it is difficult to place a fine line between where “politics” begins and where other forms of activity end. Like the song
discussed above, our beliefs, values, and behaviors cross boundaries, integrate with each other, and manifest differently in a variety of contexts. Put simply, politics is embedded in the everyday.

To address the everyday morality of “embedded politics,” this dissertation examines six urban, religious communities from a variety of faith traditions and polity structures as they engage with their social worlds and imagine/re-imagine their own communities around social issues including race, gender, sexuality, and inequality. These religious organizations each seek to make what they perceive as a constructive impact on the world and perceive some type of social struggle external to them that they are called to make statements and take action on. In being called to action, the strategies and pathways faith groups can use to understand and confront social problems are not always clear. This dissertation uses a comparative, qualitative method to explore three primary research questions: how do religious communities (1) organize the emotions, identities, and practices of their adherents around particular beliefs and values; (2) integrate religion and politics in ways that connect these and other languages together; and (3) construct meaningful moral universes that shape individual and community practices with regard to social issues?

If my interest is in how politics become embedded in the everyday, why examine religious groups as opposed to more fundamentally political groups, such as social movement organizations? There are several reasons. First, I wish to highlight that political behavior, up to and including collective action, is not extraordinary, nor does it belong exclusively to groups that define themselves as social movements or political organizations. The political field is inherently integrated with other fields, including
religion. Second, religion is an ideal place to examine politics because both fields stress morality and delineate appropriate behavior with regard to social issues. Because both the political and religious fields shape how we understand what “right” and “wrong” belief and behavior look like, I suggest the two fields almost inherently bleed into each other. Finally, though the sociology of religion has traditionally put questions of “religiosity” at the forefront of the sub-discipline (Smith 2008), an undercurrent of work has emphasized “lived religion” (Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008), decentering elite proclamations and macro level trends in favor of examining how religion is experienced in the everyday lives of groups and individuals. I wish to combine this line of thinking with the above-mentioned stream of thought on embedded politics in this dissertation, exploring both religion and politics as part of the everyday sense-making practices of groups and individuals.

Additionally, I focus here on progressive religious communities because I expect the cultural work to be explicitly visible. Both public and academic discourses have typically understood religion as a conservative social force, creating the space for both commentators and scholars to take the idea of “conservative religion” for granted. George Yancey and David A. Williamson (2012), for example, found that self-identified secular individuals often were unable to distinguish between people who were conservative and people who were religious, shifting between the two as if they were a single, unquestioned identity. To be a religious progressive in the United States, then, is to afflict what is comfortable, requiring extra cultural work that resting on the settled assumptions about religious conservatism does not.
This dissertation will explore three main themes with regard to the six communities.

1. Drawing on Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman’s concept of “group style” (2003), chapters two and three will examine the beliefs, norms, and boundaries of each group. Through this, I develop the concept of the *facilitating space*, a space that while generally apolitical, facilitates political behavior and collective action by organizing the beliefs, emotions, identities, and aptitudes of members.

2. These groups facilitate political behavior by integrating the religious and political fields in specific ways that connect various levels of society, drawing lines between the behavior of individuals and the structure of society. In particular, the groups integrate the moral concerns of religion and the structural analysis of progressivism to push for meso-level solutions to social problems. In chapter four I will examine how the groups integrate politics and religion in ways that stress community action.

3. Finally, our beliefs and values require us to have an ability to “imagine out” of our social position. To construct an action-oriented ideology requires an ability to make connections between different parts of society, as well as to cast oneself and one allies in an unfolding socio-political drama. In chapter five, I will examine how the six groups create what I am calling *moral imaginaries* that draw on the everyday concerns of the community to envision the connections mentioned above, ultimately shaping social action. I will conclude by examining the differences in how the groups conduct political talk and civic action. If I am correct that moral imaginaries shape social behavior, we will see the moral and political choices made by the groups differing in observable ways.
In the remainder of this introduction, I will provide a brief theoretical orientation as well as discuss the methods used to collect my data.

**Theoretical Orientation: Collective Action, Civic Engagement, and Culture**

To fruitfully orient myself towards understanding the six communities I am studying, I turn to a variety of work on social movements, civic engagement, and religion. In particular, I am interested in work that engages culture, politics, and faith in everyday practice and community life as this work will provide the necessary background to situate the religious groups I am examining. Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman (2003) point out that much sociological work moves back and forth from cognition to social structure without considering the role that group life plays in shaping how people experience, think about, talk about, and live in the world. Despite this, many theorists have recognized the importance of group life for understanding political and civic engagement (Eliasoph 1998; Hart 2001; Lichterman 1996; 2005; Perrin 2006; Polletta 2004; Wenger 1998) and I will draw on this work to construct a theoretical orientation for the dissertation. This research has consistently found that *how* groups interact shapes their social, political, and civic engagement. I follow this work in considering the communicative styles and collective identities of groups to understand their collective action. I will focus on three particular ways that existing literature has understood the relationship between groups, culture, and collective action. These include (1) thinking of the nature of spaces and communities themselves, (2) thinking about how groups communicate with each other, and (3) theorizing about how culture creates pathways to action.

A great deal of sociological work has considered the nature of spaces,
organizations, and communities. This work examines the *forms* of group life and how settings and spaces themselves shape action (Evans and Boyte 1986; Fine 2012; Leach and Haunss 2009; Lichterman 2012; Moore 1996; Polletta 1999; 2004; Wenger 1998). Paul Lichterman (2012), for example, suggests that we think of religion as a quality of *spaces and settings* rather than of individuals. Identities, Lichterman notes, are social constructions, meaning that we cannot assume that individuals carry around a single, unitary identity with the across different social settings. Rather, Lichterman suggests that participants in interactional scenes draw on their background knowledge to classify “what kind of scene this is.” That knowledge along with cues from others helps them enact a group style that participants consider appropriate for the scene. (20)

This includes the expression of religious identities. Participants will try and figure out whether or not this is a setting where religious talk and identities are allowed and how/when they should be expressed if they are. As such, individuals may be “religious” in a variety of setting-specific ways, because the behaviors and identities that we understand as “religious” are called forth only in certain settings, and only in certain ways in these settings.

Lichterman’s understanding of settings as shaping individual expression of language and identity dovetails with work on organizations and institutions. As Williams (1995) points out, social movement organizations often reflect the goals and values of the group in their form. Work in “new institutionalism” has stressed that organizations represent symbolic systems which create rules that shape the behavior of actors within those institutions by delineating what is deemed possible as well as what is considered  

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5 I will be returning to the connection of identity to space and organizational form later.
routine, everyday action (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). This line of thinking has been challenged for ignoring the agency and ongoing interaction of social actors within institutions and organizations (Hallet 2006; Kane 1997; Moore 1996), ultimately seeing people as “oversocialized” (Hallet 2010) by institutions. Tim Hallet (2006; 2010), for example, has promoted grounding new institutionalism with a focus on interaction, showing how macro-level myths do, in fact, become a part of organizational culture, but that the ongoing interactions of social actors within organizations can challenge or interrogate these myths. In other words, social settings are rich with meaning that shapes the behavior of the actors within them, but not in an overdetermined way. Additionally, as the social actors that makeup an organization change and as the organizational environment around it shifts, the norms and values of the organization itself may be called into question or become the site of social struggle. Kelly Moore (2008; 1996), for example, studied scientist-activists as they challenged the relationship between the scientific establishment and the military, suggesting that scientists drew on the ideological and political currents of the “overlapping organizations and networks to which they belong” as they attempted to challenge the moral order of scientific organizations (2008: 10). This work demonstrates the multifaceted connection between organizational form, socio-political environment, and member identity in shaping collective action. While meaning is embedded in organizational form, because organization members have identities that include other organizational affiliations, as well as wider traditions they can draw on to make sense of their experiences, the meaning in organizational forms may be challenged, as the scientist-activists that Moore (2008) studied did by drawing on the traditions of the New Left and peace activism.
Within the sociology of social movements, a prominent understanding of space is represented by what Evans and Boyte (1986) call “free spaces,” or the social settings where “people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue” (17). They conceptualize free spaces as physical locations that provide (marginalized) groups with a space to develop an oppositional culture (see also, Fantasia and Hirsch 1995; Morris 1984; Polletta 2004; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Francesca Polletta (1999), however, suggests that the “free spaces” concept has actually identified three kinds of spaces, not one. The three kinds of spaces are (1) transmovement spaces widely connect activist networks through time and across space; (2) indigenous spaces that are culturally and economically shielded from dominant groups and have dense internal ties; and (3) prefigurative spaces where activists model relationships and styles of life that are different from the mainstream.

Despite the differences in the above work, collectively, these insights into spaces suggest a number of shared understandings. Key among them is that spaces are important for political and civic engagement because they represent patterned social arrangements that allow for the creation of cultural material that shapes the behavior of social actors. As Polletta’s typology above indicates, however, part of what makes a space a fruitful site for mobilization is how interaction is patterned within it. Polletta suggests that different kinds of social spaces connect activists and potential activists to each other in a variety of ways, creating different models for and norms around interaction that shape movement activity. Following from this, because different groups and spaces have divergent logics by which the people in them understand social action, we must attend to
how people talk with each other in group settings to fully understand how culture and 
meaning shape civic and political engagement (Eliasoph 1998; Eliasoph and Lichterman 
2003; Epstein 1991; Fine 2012; Hart 2001; Moon 2004; Moore 1996; Perrin 2006; 

A number of theorists have provided useful theoretical insights into how 
communicative norms and patterns in group settings facilitate different understandings 
about politics or civic engagement. Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman (2003) notably 
use the term “group style” to refer to the “recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from 
a group’s shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the 
group setting” (737). Connected to Lichterman’s (2012) previously discussed 
understanding of how social actors understand “what kind of scene this is,” group styles 
are shared across various groups and individuals entering into these spaces look for clues 
as to what “genre” is dominant in a particular setting and align their behavior 
accordingly. Other scholars have proposed similar concepts for understanding group 
interaction. Jean Lave and Ettienne Wenger (1991) suggest the phrase “communities of 
practice” to refer to communities that share a profession or craft, and highlight the 
process through which joint participation, interactions within the community, and a 
shared repertoire of meaning help newcomers to a community learn the knowledge 
necessary for identity formation and ongoing membership within the group (Wenger 
1998). Similarly, Gary Alan Fine (1979, 2012) uses the term “idioculture” to mean “a 
system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an 
interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further 

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6 I will return to this idea in chapter two when I discuss group style more thoroughly.
interaction” (1979: 734). In these various understandings, shared meaning, embedded in practices and knowledge, shape group life. A wide variety of research supports such claims, finding, for example, that individuals with religious motivations for service may keep them quiet if religious talk is not a part of the culture of their environment (Bender 2003) or that people in different social groups talk in highly divergent ways about politics (Perrin 2006).

A key theme in the literature on group communication and civic engagement is what kind of talk allows groups to, in Paul Lichterman’s (2005) words, “spiral out” from their own group into the wider society. Lichterman suggests that many theorists assume that connections between diverse people are all that is necessary to create bridging social capital (see Putnam 2000), but challenges this idea, claiming that how people think and talk about their ties matters as much as just having the ties in the first place. In doing this, Lichterman posits that we cannot understand culture and civic engagement entirely in terms of discourses and frames but, rather, must attend to the observable ways that people actually talk about and enact their cultural understandings within social settings. Stephen Hart (2001) supports these claims, using the terms “expansive” and “constrained” discourses to describe styles of communication that dovetail with the styles Lichterman discusses. Groups with a constrained discourse focus predominantly on instrumental concerns, avoiding discussions that would link issues of concern to wider meaning. Groups that practice expansive discourse, on the other hand, imaginatively connect the issues they discuss to transcendent ideals. Nina Eliasoph (1998) and Dawne Moon (2004) both ethnographically studied groups with discourses that Hart would call “constrained,” and found that group norms which saw “politics” as dirty business to be avoided in group
conversation often led to a focus on interpersonal relationships that deemphasized collective rights. Richard Wood (2002), on the other hand, found that the faith based community organizers he studied were able to develop an “expansive” language, in Hart’s terminology, that expressed compelling moral visions of society and created highly effective collective action.

Francesca Polletta (2004), like Wood, suggests that the internal communicative cultures of political and civic groups provide tangible resources for mobilization and collective action. Polletta specifically looked at social movement groups that practiced participatory democracy, where “deliberative talk” (as opposed to “adversarial democracy”) was the norm. This style led participants to learn how to refine and debate their positions, which Polletta found (1) heightened solidarity, (2) brought innovative ideas into groups, and (3) helped move communities from talk to action. Despite this, Polletta cautions against drawing too sharp of a demarcation between strategy and identity, suggesting that the two can coexist, sometimes beneath the surface of a group’s deliberations. Certain organizational forms or communicative norms may be selected because they are familiar, or resonate with the identities of activists even as they confer tactical benefits or allow for the strategic forging of ties with other groups. As such, Polletta turns our attention away from assuming that collective action is either the result of rational calculation by social actors or of ideological commitments and towards examining the actual internal processes of groups and organizations to better understand their deliberative processes.

Polletta’s work also points to a third consideration: how culture helps social actors construct pathways to action. Her suggestion that forms or styles may be selected because
they are familiar or resonate with a group’s sense of identity suggests that groups and individuals act socially in the world on the basis of cultural considerations. There are a number of ways to understand the idea that culture assists in creating action. On the one hand, a number of theorists have posited that culture is a series of rules, regulations, or dispositions that shape our behavior and embodiment in different settings (Bourdieu 1984; Sewell 1992). Not incongruent with these lines of thought, other theorists suggest that culture provides repertoires of action that may be appropriated by social actors (Swidler 1986, 2001; Tilly 2002; Williams 1995). Steven Vaisey (2009) has suggested that what he calls the “justificatory” model for culture in action, represented best by Ann Swidler’s repertoire based understanding where action is taken and culture is used to justify it, has almost fully replaced the Weberian/Parsonian understanding of culture providing cognitive beliefs that motivated social action. Despite this, Vaisey posits that this model does not fully wrestle with deeply held notions of what is right or good, preferring to focus on highly deliberative use of culture, rather than more automatic usage of culture.

While a full exploration of this question is not central to this work, I suggest that a way to sidestep Vaisey’s concern, at least somewhat, is to focus on identity and action. As Polletta (2004) posits above, an understanding that certain types of action are familiar or resonate with who one is. This logic combines the repertoire concept with more embodied/disposition-oriented understandings. As Rhys H. Williams (2007) suggests, religious language is

a set of symbols, originating in a particular social group and its (sub)culture but not existing solely there, that expresses the group’s identity and explains and justifies the group and its existence both to itself
and to others… Religious language and meanings become entwined with culturally approved ways of thinking, acting, and being. Religion helps legitimate cultural forms and, in turn, becomes a legitimate mode of expression within a culture. (43)

This understand suggests that a “repertoire” of available culture (religious language and meaning, in this case), does exist in the wider social world, but also posits that this language is both constituted by and constitutive of wider social norms, and that religious language and meaning are connected to expressions of collective identity. Understood this way, culture creates pathways to action both because it provides the available sense-making and acting resources as well as because groups seek action that represents who they are to the social world (Dillon 1999; Jasper 1999; Luker 1984; Munson 2008; Wilcox 2009; Young 2006).

We can see these ideas in the work of scholars of social movements and civic engagement. Kelly Moore’s (2008) aforementioned work on scientist-activists found that the groups she studied creatively drew on cultural traditions of knowledge, politics, and authority, including liberalism, moral individualism, and New Left-inspired Marxism, ultimately “unbinding” scientific authority from the scientists who traditionally held it due to convictions they held about the increasingly close relationship between the scientific field and the military. Maren Klawiter (2008) calls the “shared goals, assumptions, discourses, interactions, allies, opponents, sources of support, constituencies, and collaborations” that allow for such cross-movement integration “cultures of action” (45). These cultures of action represent both constraint, in that they shape the “hats” individuals wear in different social settings, as well as agency, in that they are conceptualized as shifting and dynamic, responding to changes in the fields they
exist in. Further, Deborah Gould (2009) connects these ideas to the deep-seated reactions that Vaisey is interested in examining. Gould found that the anti-AIDS activist organization ACT UP had an “emotional habitus” that involved nonconscious reactions to stimuli (affect) being turned into emotion through “systems of signification that structure our very feelings” (21). For Gould, in other words, deep-seated reactions are given social meaning when they are connected to identities and meaning systems that exist in the wider world.

Additionally, it is worth pointing out that thinking of culture in terms of repertoires for collective action does not have to suggest an overly agentic model that presents a never-ending array of choices. Rather, the pathways to action that are constructed using available cultural material from existing repertories may represent the choices available given constraint or even repression. As Orit Avishai (2008) found through a study of Jewish Orthodox women, very real normative and structural constraints can exist on people who, nonetheless, “do” religion by semiconsciously self-authoring a religious subject against the backdrop of perceived cultural “Others.” Avishai rejects the language of “strategy” in terms of understanding religious action as a “of conduct and being,” ultimately suggesting that agency is not inherently strategic and constraint does not entirely cut off agency. Rather, we perform identities using resonant cultural material in specific situations, tying the idea of identity and repertoires back to the notion that groups and institutions have internal styles and meanings embedded in organizational forms.

Pulling the above themes together, I suggest a cluster of shared ideas. First, there is a question about culture’s constraining and enabling elements. Culture is understood,
on the one hand, as providing resources for representation, connection, or expression (Kniss 1997; Polletta 2006; Williams 1995) while, on the other hand, as shaping what is in the available repertoire (Dillon 1999; Kniss 1997; Tilly 2002; Wood 2002; Young 2006). Secondly, identity is often perceived of as a link between these two. “Who we are and how we do things here” (Edgell Becker 1999) powerfully shapes organizational form (Hallet 2006, 2010; Polletta 2004; Luker 1984; Moore 1996), tactical choice (Epstein 1991; Polletta 2004; Moore 2008), styles of engagement (Epstein 1991; Lichterman 1995; Moore 2008), and communicative norms (Epstein 1991; Hart 2001; Lichterman 2005). Finally, groups are a primary location where these linkages and identities are given meaning through shared talk and practice (Eliasoph 1998; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Fine 2012; Hart 2001; Wenger 1998).

How does the above provide a theoretical orientation for this dissertation?

Drawing on qualitative research on the six progressive religious communities I am examining, I both draw on and contribute to the above literature in a number of ways. First, I take seriously the internal communicative practices of groups. Following the above work, I understand these practices as potentially enabling of collective action. In chapter two I expand our understanding of Eliasoph and Lichterman’s (2003) concept of “group style” by presenting stylistic templates that cut across the various groups in the study. In chapter three, I draw on the understanding of space and organizational form as constitutive of meaning, identity, and practice and propose the idea of “facilitating spaces.” This concept understands groups as the connective tissue between individual biography and civic engagement by positing that group members are prepared for wider civic engagement through their participation in community life. Finally, work on cultural
repertoires and talk in groups leads me to consider how politics and religion are integrated in chapter four, as well as to present the concept of moral imaginaries in chapter five. I present moral imaginaries as a primary way that groups are able to underpin the “expansive” discourse that Hart (2001) suggests is vital to civic engagement by constructing representations of how various elements of society are connected to each other, creating the space for connecting local issues or personal experiences to what Hart calls “transcendent ideals.” Before unpacking these ideas in the following chapters, I turn now to a discussion of the methods used to collect data in this dissertation.

Methods

The process-oriented questions I have posed require analysis at the level of lived experience and group life. To assess these questions I have used three qualitative methods: ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and archival research. This triangulation of methods allows me to construct a holistic picture of the social worlds of the communities, examining their practices and beliefs from multiple perspectives. I will now turn to the various elements of my method to explain each one in detail, beginning with a discussion of how groups were selected for study.

The six communities selected for this study are as follows:

7 Dignity/Chicago, JPUSA, and Reba Place Fellowship are not pseudonyms. Neighborhood Church, Mind, Body, and Soul Church, and Welcome and Shalom Synagogue are pseudonyms. The determination of this pattern was based on three factors: 1) how difficult a group was to mask (for example, JPUSA, a 400 person commune, is very difficult to mask), 2) how public a group is/how connected to public organizations they are (Dignity/Chicago is connected to DignityUSA, a highly public movement), and 3) to a lesser degree, personal preference of the groups and myself based on discussions about the above two factors. All referenced members of groups that have been given pseudonyms will have their identities masked throughout the paper. Members from non-masked groups will have their identities masked throughout the dissertation.
1. **Dignity/Chicago (D/C)**, an LGBT-identified Catholic organization founded in 1972. They are connected to the nationwide organization DignityUSA that stands for LGBT inclusion and rights in both the Catholic Church and society. D/C provides a weekly mass as well as organizes social events and protest actions.

2. **Jesus People USA (JPUSA)**, a large (approximately 400 people) commune in Chicago’s Uptown neighborhood. They run several businesses and non-profit organizations, including a food pantry and a homeless shelter, as well as a record label.

3. **Neighborhood Church (NC)**, a Protestant congregation in a Chicago that draws on multiple denominational traditions. They are a multi-racial/ethnic congregation, with immigrants from a variety of nations making up approximately half of weekly attendees. They conduct a weekly service, organize social activities, and do community service and activist work, including a food pantry.

4. **Mind, Body, and Soul Church (MBSC)**, a black Protestant congregation in the African Methodist Episcopal tradition. They conduct a weekly service and organize service activities including a weekly soup kitchen and a senior service program.

5. **Reba Place Fellowship (RPF)**, a commune (approximately 80 members) with two locations, one on Chicago’s north side and the other in the nearby suburb of Evanston. RPF is involved in peace, environmentalist, and anti-poverty work.

6. **Welcome and Shalom Synagogue (WSS)**, a LGBT-identified Jewish congregation, founded in the 1970s. They have a part-time rabbi and perform a weekly Shabbat unless they are in leadership or they specifically requested otherwise in their informed consent form.
service as well as organize social events, political action, and educational programs.

Following Joseph Maxwell (2005), I have purposefully selected groups that will provide me the kinds of information I would be unable to gather in other settings. In this case, the information in question is how religious communities with an emphasis on social justice live out their beliefs in everyday practice and imagine/re-imagine their communities around these issues they confront. All the groups I have selected, therefore, share important commonalities, namely that they are all faith communities and they all have a proactive orientation towards social justice. By this, I mean they actively promote change in the direction of greater structural and/or symbolic equality for specific, marginalized populations. Because of this, all of the groups I am observing could generally be characterized as liberal, progressive, or left-wing to varying degrees, although some of the groups would shy away from those labels while others would embrace them. Universally, however, the groups would all reject being labeled “conservative.” For the purposes of this dissertation, I will refer to the groups as “progressive” as I feel that this is the term that most accurately sums up the general socio-political stances of the groups.

Despite these similarities, there are conceptually important organizational, demographic, and cultural differences between the groups I am studying as well. On the

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8 Additionally, these labels are contested within groups as well as between them. For example, Reba Place Fellowship actively shies away from the language of “liberal” or “left-wing,” but this is a norm reflected predominantly by older members of Reba Place. Younger members are significantly more likely to embrace those labels. Likewise, members of Dignity/Chicago have varying levels of ambivalence with regard to the term “liberal” with some members openly using it to describe themselves and the community and other members bristling at it. I will discuss the implications of terminology later in the dissertation.
organizational end, the groups have very different institutional styles, as I will further
detail below. Two of the groups are communes and the other four are congregations. All
of the groups are connected, in various ways, to other networks or institutions, either
through denominational allegiances or partnerships with other organizations. These
structural differences have ramifications that I will explore in later chapters. The groups
also have significant demographic differences. The groups range greatly in age, level of
educational attainment, racial and ethnic background, and faith tradition. Faith tradition,
in addition, leads to a third comparative wedge: the groups have vast cultural differences.
The differences in faith tradition lead to very divergent understandings about the role of
religion in society. For example, this study includes a Jewish congregation, a Catholic
organization, a Mennonite commune, a white Protestant commune, a multi-racial/ethnic
Protestant congregation, and a black Protestant congregation. These traditions each have
very different understandings of faith, individuality, ethnicity, community, and practice
that are brought into their social action (Ammerman 2005; Kniss 2003). On top of this,
these groups are connected, through their members and their allegiances, to different
cultural fields outside of religion. Members of Dignity/Chicago and Welcome and
Shalom Synagogue, for example, are active in LGBT-rights organizations and the wider
LGBT community in Chicago. Many members of Jesus People USA are involved in
music subcultures such as punk, metal, and goth. Some members of Reba Place
Fellowship are connected to various progressive movement groups such as
environmentalist and anti-racist groups. These organizational, demographic, and cultural
suggest that a variety of interpretive schema (Sewell 1992) will be available to members
of these communities.
The main comparative wedges that exist in this dissertation emerge out of these differences. Analyzing the processes I am interested in looking at across these differences allows for me to examine how a variety of elements come to bear in meaning creation in the groups I am studying. By observing across the differences detailed above, I am able to examine how different groups construct different visions of community. As an example, some of the groups I observed very actively bundle environmentalism and economic inequality together into the category of “environmental justice,” while other groups do no active cultural work to bundle these ideas together and thus seem to have no single name for that concept.

It must also be stated that I am selecting events and processes as well as groups and individuals, given that my questions are about the use of culture in the enactment of moral projects in the every day. To analyze these processes I am concentrating on internal and external events in each group. By “internal events” I mean events in which members of the group interact with each other in regard to questions around the working, identity, and life of the community. By “external events” I mean events in which members of the group interact with groups and individuals outside of the group to act in the social world. These events will allow me to see the application of understandings about the world towards the end of shaping the world or the community. The groups I have selected have consistently worked through both kinds of events over the course of my study, providing me with a great deal of data for analysis. Ultimately, the similarities, differences, and events discussed above are important because the groups selected for this dissertation represent the creation of a series of case studies in which sites and groups were chosen both for their unique properties and their comparability with regard to key
To collect the data analyzed in this dissertation, I used three, main qualitative methods: ethnography, interviews, and archival research. Here, I will detail the three methods discuss how and why I have used each. Through ethnographic observation, I have treated each group I have observed as a particular case study of this theory whereby I can collect data on the processes I am interested in as they happen. As Paul Willis (2000) comments,

Meaning-making… is not free and open but intrinsically framed and constrained, as well as enabled, in specific and contingent ways by powerful external structural determinations. It operates within material conditions and given or inherited formations of sedimented or textual meanings… symbolic activity brings some sense of wider positionality and outside formation of the self: an awareness of causation, axis of support of cultural being and consciousness located somewhere other than at the geometric centre of the self. (4-5)

Lofland et al. (2006) suggest that ethnography allows us to observe social activity such as talk, action, and discourses. To analyze the social worlds of the group and come to an understanding of their conceptual categories, I have participated in their practices, learning the contours of how their social worlds operate. I analyzed each group over a period of one to two years, attending worship services, planning meetings, social events, activist events, and whatever other events were available to me to attend, including living for three days at JPUSA and going on retreats with members of both RPF and JPUSA. The groups in my study engage in practices together in very different ways. For example, RPF and JPUSA are communes, which means that there is almost no end to the amount of time I could observe them, while WSS and D/C spend only a few hours a week together for worship services, events, and meetings. As such, I have spent a different
amount of time with each group, averaging between 80-120 hours per group. Despite this, I have covered the group life and interactions of each group as extensively as I have been able. To analyze the ethnographic data I have collected, I wrote up extensive field notes after site visits and coded those notes, paying special attention to the cultural resources used in internal and external events to shape how each group conducts social action as well as understands community life. For example, how do the cultural considerations of the group appear to direct them towards certain values, tactics, styles, and interpretations and away from others?

Through interviewing the participants, I have been able to assess if what I am seeing through participant observation is also how the participants understand their social worlds. I have conducted 73 semi-structured interviews towards the end of understanding the experiences of community members in wider contexts, as well as to integrate the multiple perspectives of my participants into holistic understandings of the communities (Blee and Taylor 2002; Weiss 1994). Since my predominant interest is in how the groups live out their beliefs, I have focused on the members’ participation in their respective communities in interviews, coming to an understanding of how they have experienced their position in the group. I have selected interviewees with an eye towards attaining as many viewpoints on each group as I could by interviewing differently positioned people including leaders, lay members, long time members, newer members, and demographically different members to create a “panel of knowledgeable informants” (Weiss 1994) that has allowed me to collect multiple viewpoints on the operations of the group. The interviews typically lasted an hour and fifteen minutes but ranged from 25 minutes to almost four hours.
Finally, I have used archival research to provide information on past events (Clemens and Hughes 2002). Lofland et al. (2006) suggest that archival research can place other forms of data in context by providing necessary history on events, issues, and settings. The groups in my study vary in the archives they keep, from detailed and extensive records of the various projects and events they have participated in to more limited and scattered collections. In either case, I have examined records, including official histories, bulletins and newsletters, promotional materials, news clippings, and photographs and videos, with two primary questions in mind:

1. What have been notable events the group has participated in?
2. What kinds of discourse surrounded these events?

Examining the group’s archives with respect to these questions has provided me with a sense of what the history of the groups has been and allowed me to study the group’s values, strategies for action, allies and opponents, and use of language. This has been useful for seeing how the groups understand themselves and others (Clemens and Hughes 2002; Lofland et al. 2006).

In the next chapter, I will thoroughly introduce each of the six groups using Eliasoph and Lichterman’s (2003) concept of group style towards the end of providing a background on who the groups are and where they come from. After that, in chapter three, I will turn to examining how the groups facilitate political beliefs and action. Chapter four will explore the various ways that the groups integrate religion and politics in their language use. Then, in chapter five, I will explore how these groups construct moral imaginaries that shape their social action. Finally, a concluding chapter will return to the above questions and pose ideas for future research.
CHAPTER TWO

BOUNDARIES, BONDS AND SPEECH NORMS:

“GROUP STYLE” AT THE SIX OBSERVED COMMUNITIES

Communities construct who they are through talk and practice (Fine 2012; Wenger 1998). These conversations and practices are constitutive of the meaning and identity formation that anchors the “who” of a group. Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman (2003) call this “group style,” or the “recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from a group’s shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the group setting” (737). “Group style” is how they understand the genres of social interaction that recognizably exist in settings, orienting participants in those settings towards certain understandings and actions. To operationalize group style, Eliasoph and Lichterman suggest observing “group boundaries,” or the group’s understood relationship to the wider world; “group bonds,” or the way a group expresses members’ responsibilities to each other in the group context; and “speech norms,” or what is deemed appropriate to say in a group context (739).

The concept of group style serves a corrective to work that “made a conceptual leap from the social system straight into the individual’s psyche and back out, with little attention to patterns of communication” (736). By looking at group boundaries, group bonds, and speech norms, we are able to examine how a particular setting orients
participants in that setting towards social action. Participation in the community requires plugging members into a series of relationships, rhetorics, practices, and knowledges that connect the individual to both the community and the wider society in a way that emphasizes the group’s particular style.

In this chapter, I will introduce the six groups that I observed by examining how they create communities of faith, meaning, and practice by providing a picture of how the groups understand who they are and what they do. Drawing on Eliasoph and Lietherman's concept of group style, I will show how the groups draw on various cultural resources, both faith-based and secular, to define what constitutes adequate participation in the group setting. Because these groups are socially active groups defined, in part, by their social action, I will concentrate on how they construct group styles that shape the answers to the questions “who we are” and “how we do things here” (Edgell Becker 1999). Below, I explore each of the six observed groups, detailing what their particular group style is and how we can see it actualized in group boundaries, bonds, and speech norms. Then, to conclude, I discuss how the six communities nuance our understanding of group style by exploring how the group’s understandings of what held the group together shaped their bonds, boundaries, and norms.

**Dignity/Chicago: Claiming a Rebel Catholic Identity**

It was a crisp, fall night and the Methodist church where Dignity/Chicago (D/C) conducts mass was particularly crowded. I settled into my usual seat towards the back of the church. That night I was running a bit late so I did not have time to chat before the service with members, but I did give a quick “hello” to Gene, a fixture of D/C who often hands out hymnals and nametags before the service. As one member said, “Gene was
sitting at the welcome table the first night I had showed up, 20 years ago [and] Gene is still sitting at that welcome table.” Relationships at D/C, I have learned, are deep and time-tested. Much of the core membership has been attending mass at D/C since the 1980s or 1990s. For a group without an official home in the institutional Catholic Church, they have enviably deep roots.

As mass began, Chris, the president of D/C, strode up to the front of the church and began the group’s normal introduction in his gentle voice, “Welcome to Dignity/Chicago, everyone! Dignity/Chicago works for respect and justice for all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons in the Church and in the world.” He smiled, and looked towards the back and the room and said “We’re going to do something a bit different tonight. See, we’ve been on a long journey here at Dignity/Chicago, a sort of re-envisioning process. As we thought about this, it occurred to us that we’ve always just had ordained men say mass here. If we’re going to stand for something, we should stand for confronting all inequalities in church and society, so we decided that it was time for woman priests to say mass at Dignity. I want to introduce Reverend Barbara to you all, she’s going to be saying mass tonight.”

The small but energetic choir began to belt out the opening hymn and Rev. Barbara, flanked by Ginny, D/C’s transgender Lay Minister of Worship and another member of the community carrying the Bible above his head walked down the aisle, smiling warmly at the community. I began to realize that part of the reason the church was so packed tonight is that a number of attendees seemed to have turned out specifically to see Barbara. People I had never seen before were waving to her and shaking hands with her as she walked toward the altar. For all the fanfare at the start of
the service, what followed was a fairly typical Catholic mass, with a few slight twists to remind folks we were at D/C. Barbara, a studied and charismatic preacher, gave a moving sermon about what it meant to grow up Catholic and not see a woman’s body on the altar or hear a woman’s voice saying mass. As per usual at D/C, the entire community came down to stand around the altar and hold hands for the giving of peace, the Lord’s Prayer, and the blessing of the gifts. When the mass was almost over and it was time for announcements, D/C member Mark began to creep slowly up towards the front of the church, looking around with feigned concern at the walls and ceiling. When he reached the podium, he exaggeratedly wiped his brow in mock relief and said “Well what do you know? The building is still standing!” At this, the community cut loose with laughter, cheering, and applause. Mark continued, saying “Who would have thought? All those years the Church worried about this and look, we weren’t struck down!” The choir then closed out the mass by singing one of D/C’s preferred hymns, “A Place at the Table,” which features the following lines:

For woman and man, a place at the table,
revising the roles, deciding to share,
with wisdom and grace, dividing the power,
for woman and man, a system that’s fair.
And God will delight when we are creators of justice and joy

For members of D/C, Catholicism is not a matter of following official doctrine or being in favorable standing with the official hierarchy. D/C, along with all the other chapters of the national organization DignityUSA, were expelled from the official Church in the 1980s. Rather, members of D/C see Catholicism as a matter of deep identity, shared practice, justice, and rebellion. To be Catholic at D/C is simultaneously a mundane statement of what one believes as well as a defiant manifesto about who one is
at a core level. In this section, I will explore how these two understandings sit next to each other in a way that defines the group style of D/C.

D/C operates with one, highly salient, sharply drawn boundary: they are an organization aimed squarely at the institutional Catholic Church. When they participate in direct action activism, it is in direct opposition to the Church. When they make public proclamations, they do so by casting themselves as the voice of marginalized LGBT Catholics in Chicago. In the above vignette, when Mark said that the building did not cave in because they had a woman say mass, the target of his joke was the institutional Church that continues to disallow women to become priests. Even in D/C’s typical introduction to their mass, stated above, the community makes it no secret that the Church is the target of their activity.

The nature of this boundary at D/C is complicated, however. It is not simply a matter of “us vs. the Church.” The Church is both loved and hated, respected and feared, at D/C. For members of D/C, Catholicism is a deeply rooted identity and is discussed more like the way people tend to discuss identities such as race, ethnicity, or, appropriately, sexuality, rather than something that can be easily changed or switched.

Describing what made the community catch on in the early days of D/C, Sean said,

> Once you are baptized you were Catholic. You could not become un-Catholic… The only place these guys could fit in, was the fact that they were Catholic. They had the right to go to mass… They still felt an affinity to it, it was so much a part of their formation of who they were [and] you only have one choice, you either embrace or reject it. And for many people it was so much [of] who they defined themselves as human beings that they had to deal with it.

This statement, which was echoed almost universally by members of D/C, shows the degree to which what it means to be Catholic at D/C is tied up with shared history,
practice, and collective identity. Catholic identity is seen as immutable, something that cannot be denied you, no matter what. Michele Dillon (1999) also found that members of Dignity posit an immutable Catholic identity, and suggests that Dignity, like other “pro-change Catholics” (a term I borrow here from Dillon) are drawing on Catholic symbols and identity while recognizing dogma and authority are social constructions. Since Dillon’s research, however, DignityUSA broadly, and D/C specifically, have increasingly distanced themselves from the institutional Church, recently partnering with other pro-change Catholic organizations, including Call to Action, Fortunate Families, and New Ways Ministry to form a coalition called Equally Blessed.

This represents something of a sea change in how members of D/C understand what they do. As D/C member Mark explained to me,

Dignity originally thought "okay, we're going to witness and be this enclave for gay Catholics who disagree with Church teaching and it is our hope through prayer and teaching and argument and suasion that Pope John Paul II and Paul VI and now Ratzinger are going to change and they'll see the light through the works of the Holy Spirit, and everything's going to be fine." Well, that has not happened! But something else has happened. It's not happening up there, but down here, au contraire!

He went on to discuss his excitement both at the Equally Blessed coalition as well as how progressive his local parish seems now compared to how it used to be. Members of D/C have largely accepted that the Catholic Church is not going to accept and celebrate same-sex relationships in their lifetimes, if ever. As such, D/C has been shifting in regard to whom they count as on their side of the boundary, so to speak. While the institutional Church is still firmly on the other side, other pro-change Catholics, such as the above-mentioned groups as well as the woman priest movement, are increasingly seen as directly allied with D/C. Likewise, many members of D/C suspect that regular Catholics
in the pews are also increasingly on their side. I will return to D/C’s understanding of having woman priests say mass in subsequent chapters. For now, I will note that members suggest that, until recently, this was seen as the far edge of what would be possible at D/C; something that was on the table, but represented extreme rim talk (Goffman 1974; Moore 2008). Members felt it moved too far away from official Church dogma and history, making them even more illegitimate. As the institutional Church continued to make their position on LGBT exclusion clear, however, members of D/C found their alliances and understandings shifting.

As well as serving as their main boundary issue, Catholicism is also what binds members of D/C together, but in a way that reflects their LGBT identity. D/C is an organization that has a long history and many of the members have actively participated through much of it. With few exceptions, D/C’s core membership is middle aged and older, meaning that long-time members have shared much of their lives together in this community. This often comes up in conversation. At D/C’s 40th anniversary banquet, for example, Chris was presenting a member with an award for his service to the community and joked “He’s been a fixture here for a long, long (pause), long, long, long, long, long time!” Jokes aside, sharing this history has meant that members of the community have gone through many trials and crises together. This was made clear when the community hosted a Lenten series of talks led by a local lesbian Baptist preacher. She asked members of the community what they think some of the things that have brought them closer together are. Members responded by saying that being active in ministry and service during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s was a watershed moment for the community. Others said that rallying together when they were officially kicked off Church property in the
late '80s was pivotal in their history. Still others suggested various protest events they had participated in, such as a vigil held outside of Holy Name Cathedral protesting the Church’s letter condemning same-sex marriage in 2003 (an event I will discuss in detail in chapter five). D/C’s history has been one of struggle against the Church and the larger culture, and this has forged the relationships the members have with each other. To be a member of D/C is to share in the emotions, practices, and relationships that have developed around this struggle.

The ultimate expression of the bonds and boundaries that make up D/C’s group style can be seen in their mass, where their assumptions about the community, Catholicism, sexuality, and morality are given form in speech and practice. As mentioned in the section opening vignette, D/C’s mass is, in many ways, a fairly typical Catholic mass. The small changes, however, speak volumes. For one thing, since the late 1990s, D/C has used inclusive language for the service, beginning the mass with “in the name of God our Creator, Christ our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit” as opposed to the more conventional “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” This reflects, according to D/C, their understanding that we are all equally made in the image of God. Hymns at D/C tend to have a decidedly socio-political flair. Favorites include the above-mentioned “A Place at the Table,” as well as a song called “Believe Out Loud,” written specifically about LGBT faith, and “Go Make a Difference¹,” often sung in a gospel arrangement to end special events such as their 40th anniversary mass. Communal prayers at D/C often explicitly reference politics, with members making prayer requests for worker’s rights or

¹ Lyrics can be found here: http://www.lyricstime.com/steve-angrisano-go-make-a-difference-lyrics.html
an end to war and violence. Additionally, D/C will, occasionally, conduct lay led masses. These masses do not feature the Eucharist, suggesting that the community does hold certain privileges exclusively for the clergy, but do feature every other part of the mass. Likewise, as mentioned, D/C concludes services with the entire community joining hands around the altar for the final sections of the mass, including the giving of peace, which is a very familial affair at D/C. At a typical D/C mass I am usually hugged and kissed by a dozen or more people. This is not the distant handshaking and terse stating of “peace be with you” that I grew up with in my family’s parish. Rather, members embrace, kiss, take a minute to catch-up, and offer congratulations and condolences about life events for several minutes. This was often repeated to me, by members of the community, as something that set them apart from regular churches. For example, when I asked Chris, D/C’s president, about the community’s mass, he laughed and said “It's not like we have a ‘gay mass,’ but the sense of people is that we're inclusive. It's obvious that we have gay men and women there, there are some of the cultural components, like kissing one another and all that.”

Interestingly enough, D/C’s homilies, the central part of the mass where the priest presents moral teachings, are rarely overtly political, although even here we see how the group’s style is put into practice when we read between the lines. D/C has traditionally had mass led by sympathetic male priests who were doing it under the table. My impression of the homilies given by these priests was that they were often the normal homily they gave at their regular parish that Sunday morning, with perhaps an improvised line or two added to relate the message to LGBT concerns. However, since woman priests have begun saying mass, the teachings in the homilies have developed an
undercurrent of rebellion. Reverend Barbara, for example, who said mass most frequently at D/C during my observations, gave a homily about how the Virgin Mary was a woman who heard God’s call and answered “yes.” She concluded by saying that if Mary herself is allowed to answer “yes” when God calls her to service, who could deny another woman from answering “yes” to God? The only somewhat submerged political message was that the official Church has no right, at least no God-given right, to deny women the ability to answer God’s call to become clergy.

To summarize, D/C is an LGBT identified Catholic organization that conducts a weekly mass as well as organizes and conducts social activities and political activism. The most salient boundary the community operates with is the firm boundary that separates them from the institutional Church. This boundary has become stronger over the years, with members giving up hope that they will be accepted back into the fold and increasingly turning towards partnerships with other pro-change Catholic organizations. D/C’s history of struggle leads them towards fairly tight and familial relationships with each other as well as a rebellion-oriented understanding of the church. They put their group style into speech and practice through their weekly mass, which draws on a number of shared understandings the group has to create a service which is both very Catholic and very outside-the-box, simultaneously.
Jesus People, USA: Counterculture Christians

Experimenting With Community and Justice

The first person I saw on my initial visit to Jesus People USA’s (JPUSA²) main building, a refurbished hotel affectionately referred to by the community as “the friendly towers,” was barreling through the lobby wearing a t-shirt for Florida death metal band Obituary. Obituary was a band I had grown up listening to who are known for their disturbing and violent lyrics; not exactly the sort of band t-shirt you expect to see at a Christian commune. “Nice shirt,” I said. The man smiled a cheerful, gap toothed grin and said “Thanks, dude!” before hopping onto an elevator that was heading upstairs. I was not sure what to expect prior to arriving, but a quick scan around the lobby of the hotel disabused me of any stereotypes I could have about what an evangelical Christian could look like. People with dreadlocks and ripped jeans, tattoos and long denim skirts, old and young, meandered about. Some conducted business, some just passed through, others looked as bewildered by the place as I was.

A young man with long, jet-black hair and black eye shadow was walking quickly past me. “Excuse me,” I said, “I’m supposed to meet with the men’s coordinator. He’s going to give me a tour.”

“Um…” the man replied, looking back into an office off to the side of the lobby, “he’s not in there right now. If you hang out here for a few minutes, I’m sure you’ll catch him. Tall guy, ponytail.”

² Pronounced juh-poo-zah. This is what members call the community in casual conversation.
“Thanks,” I said. “I’m Todd. I’m hopefully going to be conducting some research on JPUSA. Do you live here?”

“Yeah,” he replied, and we began to chat about the community. I expressed my shock at seeing an Obituary shirt as I walked in, which turned our conversation to music. He began telling me about his Christian goth rock band. It was pretty standard band talk: we’ve been looking for a bass player, we’re recording a new record next month, that sort of thing. “We’re playing soon. You should come see us,” he said.

“I’d love to,” I replied. As soon as I had gotten the words out, a young man walking past us interjected, dripping with disgust, “No you won’t, unless you like drum machines.” With this, the gauntlet had been thrown. The three of us wound up debating the merits of drum machines for the better part of 10 minutes. Eventually, the men’s coordinator did show up and give me a tour but, frankly, I remember the tour about half as well as I remember that conversation about drum machines.

I did, eventually, get to see that member’s goth band at JPUSA’s summer music concert, Cornerstone Festival. As I walked around the grounds, a young woman who also played in the band and lived at the community, whom I had gotten to know during my observations, came running up to me wearing a long, black prom dress. “Are you coming to see my band?” she asked, excitedly. It was 11:00 at night, and I was actually quite tired and had not planned on it. Goth music is not really my thing and I figured I would just go to bed. I felt trapped, though, as she stared at me, and thought it would be rude to say no. “Sure,” I said. “I’ll come by.” I figured I would peek my head in the tent they were playing in for a song or two and then duck out to go to sleep. When I arrived, the tent was packed with Christian goth kids decked out in black make-up and clothes, waiting for the
show to start. As the band (which I noted now featured a live drummer instead of a drum machine) took the stage, the audience went wild with cheering and applause. The band exploded into their first song and my jaw dropped halfway to the ground. They were amazing. Their singer, the unassuming young man I had met in the lobby a year or so earlier was wearing a black, lace veil and writhing around on stage like snake. Their bass player, one of the first people in the community who sat down to talk to me about his life there, was swinging his long hair around and thundering out the low-end. Lights flashed and people in the audience sang along to every song. I stood there, frozen in place, trying to get over seeing these people, who seemed so unassuming during the day, transformed into rock stars at night.

Just as I was thinking this, the bass player grabbed the microphone and said “This next song is about a werewolf.” The audience cheered. “This werewolf story is a bit different, though. Usually, werewolves are normal by day and then become monsters when the moon comes out. In our werewolf story, though, we’re all monsters, not quite in control of ourselves, not quite able to be fully human, until the light of Christ shines on us and makes us the whole men and women we’re meant to be.” The drummer and keyboard player started the pounding introduction to the song, and then the full band lurched into the first verse.

Discussing whether or not drum machines are acceptable in goth music or how werewolves serve as a metaphor for being born again are par for the course at JPUSA. JPUSA prides itself on being a place for misfits. One member said to me that if you want to dedicate your life to Christian ministry, but there’s no regular church you would fit into, JPUSA is your place. As such, it is hard to pin down a single “style” for JPUSA. It
is a large and complicated place with many different voices, expressions of faith, and religious identities. Despite this, there are definitely things that bind members of the community to each other as well as things that separate them from others. In this section, I will discuss how JPUSA constructs a group style that revolves largely around delineating a sharp boundary between themselves and mainstream/conservative Protestantism as well binding themselves to each other through a shared passion for culture and community.

JPUSA’s Christianity reflects a generally progressive view of the world that includes a critical analysis of racism and inequality as well as (often) feminist readings of gender and sexuality. While JPUSA is a diverse group and there are conservative voices within it, most members of JPUSA, and many of those who represent the community publicly, profess a fairly progressive understanding of politics and theology. This creates some of the social boundaries that the community understands as separating them from others. JPUSA see themselves as a countercultural alternative to the highly individualistic conservative Protestantism of the Christian right. When Ronald Enroth, a religious researcher, critiqued JPUSA as being overly authoritarian in his book *Recovering From Churches That Abuse*, JPUSA member Jon Trott (2000) responded by saying that “Enroth’s bias [is] a middle class one, aimed squarely at a group of people living as a countercultural community” (8). Trott and I discussed the incident sitting in the modest room he shares with his wife at the friendly towers on one of my first visits. Trott’s socio-political issue of choice is gender. He is a Biblical feminist and feels that this separates him from many conservative Christians. We discussed how people with different theologies can come to agreement on issues if they have a shared sense of social justice,
something he feels many evangelicals are lacking. “I find,” he said, giving an example, “that I agree more with my agnostic brother than I do with all the conservative evangelicals in my family,” something he said he felt was probably true for many members of JPUSA.

This boundary is reflected in JPUSA’s public writing. Much of the work on their official blog, Wilson Station, discusses racial and class inequality from a Christian standpoint, often featuring pointed critiques of what is presented as mainstream Christianity’s lack of attention to these issues. For example, JPUSA community member and Christian rock pioneer Glenn Kaiser (2011) wrote,

Some reading this will certainly say “O.K., there goes Kaiz off on his left-leaning, liberal koolaide”. Ahhh, but most making such judgments do not live anywhere near street kids popping off nine mil. pistols… Sure, sin IS the core issue. But there’s plenty to go around regardless of your politics. And it does seem to me that all too often average Christians do not think very deeply -nor on many levels DO much at all to bring positive, healing change among people. In fact it seems to me most Christians want a good job, a safe and healthy life and in practice largely remove themselves from difficult situations where any positive change might be modeled through them… There are too many glib comments being made by white and yes, simple-minded Christians who themselves exhibit a racist judgment upon a people they have little to do with and frankly, don’t WANT to get involved with.

We see a number of the boundaries that JPUSA uses activated in this passage. Kaiser identifies himself as a “left-leaning, liberal,” but places his politics squarely within the context of the low-income/high-crime neighborhood the community lives in. Additionally, he aims his comments at “white,” “racist,” and “simple-minded Christians” who “want a good job, a safe and healthy life,” and “remove themselves from difficult situations,” who he challenges to model positive change. This passage typifies how JPUSA understands itself as urban, prefigurative, and working against structural
inequalities, in comparison to other Christians who are seen as often complicit in inequality or oppression.

These boundaries are brought into particularly stark contrast for those who work at JPUSA’s community run shelter, Cornerstone Community Outreach (CCO). Members of JPUSA often understand the individuals who work at CCO as some of the most politically aware and progressive members of the community. Even if a member does not come to JPUSA or begin working at CCO with a progressive mindset, they may develop one through participation in the shared practices of the shelter. Drawing on the above detailed boundaries, JPUSA member and CCO employee Lizzie told me,

You have, like, a lot of suburban churches where, you know, they go to church, and I think that their hearts are in the right place, but they don't really know how to serve. Like, with JPUSA, you are given places to serve. Like, there is an endless amount of work to be done. So, it really facilitates that. For me, my faith was always an internal thing, but now I'm feeling like it's growing into something that's a little more external as well. And it's because I can practically apply it, you know?

Members consistently reiterated to me that learning how power and inequality work in urban politics has been transformative for them. These boundaries mean that the speech norms of the community give members a language to cast the gentrifying forces in the neighborhood, such as politicians and corporate interests, as outside of their boundaries, and understand the poor in the neighborhood as closer to the community.

JPUSA’s internal bonds are somewhat more opaque, but largely center around a countercultural, communal, and expressive version of Christianity. While members have told me that this has not always been the case, JPUSA’s understanding of Christianity is extremely broad and community members express their faith in a variety of different
ways. As mentioned earlier, JPUSA put on a yearly music festival for twenty-eight years and, in addition to this, runs a record label, a skate shop, and houses several Christian bands. Members are also active in writing for various outlets, including a member who writes for horror movie magazine *Fangoria* from a Christian perspective. One member of the community, who works in JPUSA’s in-house high school, told me that at the end of the school year they had themed days such as a *Lord of the Rings* day and a Muppets day where students could dress up as their favorite characters and discuss these popular works. When I lived at the community, I went to an open-mic night that featured a stand-up comedian, three slam poets, and two singer-songwriters. As one member explained to me, JPUSA is a place where anything you are into can be a part of your Christian walk. Whether it is movies, games, skateboarding, or music, you will find a community of people willing to share in your passions with you and understand them as Christian gifts, worthy to be brought before the community and used to praise God.

While these shared aesthetic endeavors bind members together, members are further joined by a shared commitment to strict communalism. I was repeatedly told that communal life is a challenge that requires a high degree of commitment. One member reported to me that the first time he lived at the community it was suggested to him by his mentor that he leave because he did not seem sure community life was for him (years

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3 JPUSA’s Cornerstone Festival (C-stone) ran from 1984-2012 and was a fixture of countercultural Christianity. The festival saw declining attendance after the 1990s and was hard hit by the recession that started in 2008 and, as such, members of the community decided to end it in 2012. At the final festival, almost every band I saw made some kind of statement about feeling privileged to play the final C-stone but also being saddened by the loss of the festival for the Christian music scene. Members of JPUSA suggested the same thing to me: many of them first found the community through C-stone.
later he moved back in and has now lived there for over five years). This communalism means regular Bible study, submitting to various authorities over you, sharing money and work with your neighbors, and participating in a communal morality. One interviewee explained this by saying that JPUSA does not necessarily think that, for example, smoking or drinking are sins in and of themselves. Rather, JPUSA understands that many people in the community (meaning both the commune itself as well as the surrounding neighborhood) may suffer from addictions or behavior patterns associated with drugs or cigarettes they are seeking to work through and, as such, individuals within the community are expected to behave in a way that helps others avoid temptation. Members report feeling a strong sense of this sort of communal morality, where their fate is inexorably linked to the others around them, necessitating shared practices and behaviors that place the community above the individual.

To summarize: JPUSA is a large and diverse community, but publicly constructs and maintains its group style by drawing boundaries that align the community with the urban poor and against voices, particularly Christian voices or political voices, that would oppress or silence the marginalized. Internally, JPUSA’s countercultural version of Christianity stresses an expressive understanding of faith where members share their artistic gifts and passions as legitimate and beautiful ways to praise God. They are additionally bound together by a commitment to placing community, both in the sense of JPUSA itself as well as the surrounding neighborhood, over the individual.
Mind, Body, and Soul Church:

Tradition, Community, and Moral Uplift

It is a slow day at Mind, Body, and Soul Church’s (MBSC’s) weekly soup kitchen, located in the basement of the church. I am sitting with several of the elderly volunteers from the church at the table in the main area of the room, where clients wait for their number to be called before going into the dining room. In the next room is the serving line, where several hairnet-clad volunteers scoop the food they have spent all morning preparing onto paper plates as well as long tables with white, disposable table cloths on them for the clients to sit and eat. “There’s usually more people here by this time,” Evelyn commented, looking into the sparsely packed dining room.

“It’s pretty cold out,” I suggested. “Maybe people are staying in today?” It was early January and it was, in fact, bitingly cold.

Evelyn and Cheryl shot each other knowing looks. Cheryl looked at me and said “Maybe, but more likely they think they don’t need it today because it’s just after the first of the month.”

Evelyn nodded agreement. “Hopefully they’re buying food with that money, she added.”

Cheryl shook her head. “You can bet your bottom dollar they’re not,” she responded, a touch of resignation in her voice. Then, wearily, with a heavy sigh, she mused “You’d think they would save that money, but that’s just not how some people think.”

Despite the slow start, the kitchen did eventually pick up, with many clients arriving, including most of the regulars. My job at the soup kitchen is a combination of
making sure that clients take a number when they come in and standing in the doorway between the two rooms to keep an eye on what is going on in both of them. There is a fairly extensive set of rules clients are supposed to follow. When they arrive, they have to take a number. They then sit in the main room until we call them, based on how full the dining room is and how many people are currently in line. They cannot take any food with them as they leave and they cannot get seconds until fifteen minutes before closing time. Most importantly, however, is the single, animating rule that drives the relationship between the volunteers and many of the male clients: “rest your cap.”

“Every week I tell you, and every week you give me trouble!” Evelyn exasperatedly says to one of the regular clients. “Now rest your cap or we won’t let you in!”

The client looks inside the dining room and sees one of the other volunteers, Angie, wearing a black baseball cap that says “Woman of God” on it. “She don’t have to take off her hat,” he mutters at Evelyn.

“No she doesn’t,” Evelyn firmly responds, “because she’s a volunteer and we have to keep our heads covered so our hair doesn’t get in the food. You are not a volunteer, and you’re in the house of God, young man, so take your hat off!”

I chuckle to myself, watching this interaction, remembering an interaction that the two of them had a few weeks ago. The client told Evelyn that no one calls him by his name. She asked what people call him instead, and the young man replied “Lothario, cause I’m good with the ladies.”

“Oh,” replied Evelyn, without missing a beat, “do the ladies like that Lothario doesn’t have a job?” Not surprisingly, Evelyn won out in the end today as well: the house
of God comment convinced the young man to take off his hat and trudge into the dining room. Evelyn turned to me and said “That one don’t have manners. He talks like someone owes him something.” Even as she said it, though, she was smiling warmly, betraying at least some affection for the young man she had to scold each week.

At about five minutes to closing time, Miss Bonnie, who tends to be in charge of the soup kitchen, yells out to us that it is time to lock the door. Cheryl and I walk over to lock up and find an older woman about to enter. “We’re closed,” Cheryl flatly says to her. “Please,” the woman replies in a thick Eastern European accent, as she pulls her coat around her, “I just want to have a quick meal. I’m running late, and it’s very cold out.” Cheryl mulls it over for a second and tells me to go run and see if there’s still food. I dash into the dining room and call out to Miss Bonnie “we have enough for one more?” She gives me a look of feigned exasperation and replies “I suppose.” I run back and let Cheryl and the woman know. “Okay, come on in, but hurry, we’re closing soon” Cheryl says, and the woman shuffles quickly into the dining room. Cheryl then turned to me and said “You know, I just hate locking this door when we have any food left. I know we’re not supposed to let people take it or anything, but it just doesn’t seem right.”

MBSC is a congregation in the Black Church tradition of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination. The Church has been through a great deal, including a scandal revolving around misappropriated funds that nearly destroyed the community. Pastor Diana, MBSC’s charismatic spiritual head who was installed after the scandal, described the church she arrived at just a few short years ago as “broken.” MBSC was not hopeless, though. Pastor Diana saw much within the community to draw on.
What I found was a church that was very rich in their African American history, in their history in this community. A very proud people, that their grandparents and great grandparents had built this church, while they served as servants in this area to the white community… What these people needed was love, but they also needed someone who was going to kick their butts, for lack of a better word, and remind them, first of all, you're screaming about this pastoral abuse, but you let it happen… So I went about training them. I took our discipline, the law of our church, and I began to help them understand what that was, here are the ways that you can handle or confront situations when you have pastoral abuse. So once they were empowered to know that, okay, if I begin to fail you, you have some out, some way to deal with this. They appreciated that.

Pastor Diana eloquently summarized much of what I have found about MBSC’s group style in this statement: MBSC is congregation where both community and personal responsibility are held in high regard, defining the boundaries, bonds, and speech norms that make up the group style of the Church.

In the above ethnographic vignettes we see how the group creates boundaries based on morality and behavior, following the understanding laid out above by Pastor Diana. The volunteers, particularly the older women who make up the bulk of the soup kitchen crew, are comfortable commenting negatively on the behavior of the clients. The women provide a light-hearted, running commentary on almost everyone that comes in. The ability to gossip and chat with each other, in fact, is a large part of the appeal of working in the soup kitchen for the volunteers. One day, Angie and another woman named Kathy were talking at the table. When Kathy began to talk about someone else, Angie held up her hands and said “Nope! I’ve given up gossip for Lent. When someone starts to gossip, I’m supposed to say ‘No! I’m just looking for Jesus!’” Angie then turned to me and said “You’re going to be hearing that a lot from me,” and they both laughed.
Since much of this talk was about people who were either not members of the church or were clients of the soup kitchen, my initial reaction to this was to look at it through the lens of something Omar McRoberts (2005) discusses in his book *Streets of Glory*: middle-class African-Americans attempting to distance themselves from working- and lower-class African-Americans. After spending more time with the members of MBSC, however, something became apparent: it is not *distance* but *closeness* that drives the boundary policing talk that goes on in the soup kitchen. This became clear to me when I began to realize how *personally invested* members of MBSC are in the local community. An early indication of this came when I walked into the soup kitchen a bit earlier than usual one day and found the other volunteers poring over tattered, old yearbooks for a group called The Chessmen of the North Shore, an African-American men’s club. The books, from the 1960s, featured pictures of all the Chessmen, as well as advertisements for local black-owned businesses. The women called me over to show me the pictures, making comments about the men like “He was so handsome back then, have you seen his son lately?” and “What happened to his wife after he passed? I haven’t seen her recently.” They pointed out all the black-owned businesses that have since closed, reminisced about what nice places they used to be, and tried to figure out what had happened to all the owners and their children. It became clear to me that, as Pastor had said, this was a church with both deep roots and deep pride in the local African-American community.

Suddenly, relationships between the volunteers and the clients snapped into greater clarity for me, and I began noticing things I had not noticed before. What I was thinking of as merely “gossip” actually demonstrated a great deal of insider knowledge
about the people who attend the soup kitchen. I started to notice that volunteers often asked clients personal questions, often about their family or things going on in their life. For example, a handsome young man came up to the table to take a number one morning. It was the first time I had seen him visit the soup kitchen. The volunteer next to me said “Young man, you look familiar. Do I know you?”

“I been around the neighborhood since I was little,” the man replied, “and I still got a lot of people who stay around here.”

The volunteer studied him for a second and then said “Wait, I know you!” and then began to rattle off how she knows various relatives of his. The young man nodded his head after each name and said “Yes, she’s my aunt… yeah, that’s my cousin.”

I began to realize that I was not observing a symbolic boundary between the volunteers and the clients, but rather a moral boundary that anyone could be on the “right” side of. This was reinforced by attending services at MBSC. Like many congregations in the black church tradition, MBSC engages in many practices that stress accountability to the community, such as presenting your offering to the church in front of the whole congregation and dramatic altar calls at the end of the service. Pastor Diana’s sermons, additionally, tend to revolve around issues of personal responsibility. She often calls out individual members of the community to bring their concerns, struggles, or failings before the congregation. The first service I attended, for example, she pointed to a woman during her sermon and said “Do you remember after your husband was in that awful accident? That was a real struggle for you!” She continued to use this woman’s personal tragedy as an example of how bringing your troubles before the community and Christ can help you through hard times. On another occasion, Pastor
Diana pointed to a different woman in the community and talked about how the woman told her that she could give up meat for Lent except when her sister came over, which Pastor presented as reflecting her pride at wanting to cook an impressive meal for her sister. The boundaries at MBSC are based less on specific, hard lines demarcating the community from other people and more on a very vocal understanding of morality and community, where to be “close” is to submit to collective judgment and exercise personal responsibility.

To summarize: MBSC is an AME congregation where both personal morality and one’s connection to the local community are highly salient. To participate in the community is to, at least to a degree, submit to the communal judgment of those around you. To participate is also to be a spiritual and moral arbiter in the lives of others. You have a responsibility to care for those around you in the community. Familial closeness and insider knowledge bind people together and, ultimately, govern interactions between members.

**Neighborhood Church:**

**Diversity and Community in an Urban Space**

The first time I attended Neighborhood Church (NC), a friendly, older woman warmly greeted me and before I could find a seat I had shaken hands with what felt like half the congregation. “Are you new here?” I was asked, over and over again. When I replied “Yes” to one young man he said “Welcome to our holy chaos!” I looked around the austere space and could immediately see what he meant: half a dozen languages were reverberating around the room, creating a thick stew of sounds, both familiar and unfamiliar. Children ran around the space and played with each other while the band
warmed up. A young, warm-faced woman, who I would later find out was Pastor Wendy, seemed to be in six different places at once, shaking hands and chatting amicably with people. As I sat down, I overheard an older man teaching her how to say something in Swahili for the service. She was repeating it over and over as the man said “Closer, closer, that’s good!” The service was scheduled to start at 9:30, but things didn’t really get underway until significantly later, with the room continuing to fill up until close to 10:00 a.m.

This frenetic energy continued when the band kicked off the service by launching into their first song. The worship band at NC knows their way around a tune, and they were in fine form that day. They projected the lyrics, in English, up at the front of the room, just above the large wooden cross that serves as the focal point of the space, as the worship band jammed on contemporary hymns, calling out to the audience to participate. Members of the church danced effusively, harmonized along with the band, and raised their hands to the sky, swaying to the beat. In between songs, the bandleader, a young man with long hair and a scraggly beard, would often pray spontaneously as members of the congregation would bow their heads. “Lord,” he began one prayer, “there are systemic things we confront in this broken world. There is poverty, Lord. And those with power, Lord, you know that they will abuse that power!” Someone from the congregation called out “Amen!” and the band began another song, singing praise and thanks to God.

After the singing concluded, the worship leader, a young, handsome, brown-haired man with a button down shirt, invited the community to greet each other by passing the peace of Christ. They projected how to say “The Peace of Christ be With You” on the wall at the front of the church in eight different languages. “We are a
community of many nations,” the man said, “so perhaps pick a language you don’t know off this list and share the peace of Christ with your neighbors in that language. I’ll start. Son te pheap!” The congregation responded “Son te pheap!” in unison, a phrase which I later learned was spoken in Khmer, and began the celebratory process of hugging, hand-shaking, and catching up that is giving peace at NC.

As the friendly ruckus died down several minutes later, the worship leader asked visitors to stand up and be greeted by the community. The Catholic parish I grew up in had never done anything like this, and I felt my stomach tense up when I realized that someone was bound to notice me as he went around the room. The visitors who were introducing themselves before me had come from far and wide: friends visiting from Africa, students from California moving to the area for school, and a family from South Asia touring the U.S. When it came to me, I stood up and said “Well, I’m a researcher studying faith communities from just down the street, so I guess I’m not as exciting as everyone else.” The congregation, however, erupted in laughter and applause, melting away my insecurities at not being interesting. In my field notes I wrote “I could actually feel the love. I see why someone would come to this church.” I learned something interesting about NC at that moment: while their population comes from far and wide, their concern is the local and immediate. In this section, I will discuss NC’s group style, focusing on how they create a loosely cohesive identity that draws on their strengths as a multi-cultural community.

NC is a diverse group and, as such, boundaries, bonds, and speech norms have to take that diversity into account. It is difficult to base boundaries, for example, on explicit identification with a certain social category because the congregation’s wide diversity
(racial, ethnic, sexual, economic, political, and theological) means that some groups and individuals would inherently be excluded. Rather, boundaries, bonds, and speech norms are built around shared meta-ideologies and pluralistic practices that delineate how to do faith in this particular setting. In other words, NC’s group style revolves around a sacralization of the very diversity that makes them unique, as opposed to concentrating on specific beliefs or practices.

Boundaries at NC are constructed and maintained through identification with specific ideological positions as well as through shared practices in the community. Teachings at NC are given by many different members of the community and represent a diverse array of viewpoints, but predominantly present the word of God through the lens of progressive, global politics. As an example, one young man began a teaching on Palm Sunday by saying that Jesus was a peacemaker, saying “This King arrived on a donkey, not a warhorse.” Behind him, pictures in a slideshow displayed a gathering of global justice protesters in Washington D.C., hoisting giant puppets above their heads as they marched. He continued, saying “Jesus is someone who brought the foreigner, the eunuch, away from the margins and towards the center. We need to think, then, who do we leave out as a church?” As his slides continued, he began to list off people that the “Church,” by which he meant both the Church writ large, as well as NC in particular, leave out. “It is the Church who wants to kill Jesus for bringing attention to the marginalized. To the illegal immigrant, to the gender nonconformist, to the feminist.” As he names these groups, an image of Latino men handcuffed in front of a police car flashed on the screen. He concluded by showing a pictures and presenting a narrative about El Salvadorian
peace activists murdered by U.S. supported death squads. The message was clear: Jesus may have come on a donkey, but the U.S. and the Church often come on a warhorse.

This narrative is fairly typical for a Sunday teaching at NC. So much so, in fact, that one Sunday I was casually chatting with a member of the community before services and she said “I normally read fantasy novels, but lately I’ve been reading a lot of economists who are critical of capitalism. It’s hard reading, but I’m doing it anyway.” When I asked her why, she laughed and replied, “This is kind of a left-wing sort of place, and I want to be able to understand what people are talking about.” She wasn’t incorrect in her assessment of NC: an understanding, either academic or personal, of structural and economic inequality, particularly at the global level, enhances one’s ability to fully understand and participate. The above example demonstrates how NC uses a faith-based reading of progressive politics to populate a social map with allies and opponents, drawing boundary lines and delineating what is appropriate to do, feel, and say in the setting. Members of NC actively attempt to decenter dominant viewpoints, theologies, and narratives and replace them with those on the margins. As such, NC draws boundaries that connect the congregation to marginalized social groups and categories while distancing themselves from those who are understood as oppressors.

In the above examples, we see this actively cultivated in many places. The bandleader, for example, spoke of “systemic things” such as poverty that must be confronted, suggesting that “those with power… will abuse that power,” and asked God for strength in confronting these ills. The sermon described above privileged (undocumented) immigrants, gender nonconformists, and feminists, connecting them to Jesus, while associating U.S. imperialism and the Church, writ large, to those who killed
Christ. In both cases, we see the sacralization of symbolic boundaries that connect a progressive reading of politics, inequality, violence, and social structure to the Christian cosmology.

In the social setting of NC, members often use radical political language, particularly language that intertwines Christianity with progressivism, constructing the community’s speech norms. I noticed, for example, recurring usage of the phrases “kingdom of God” and “principalities and powers” in the context of CC, in teachings, interviews, and casual conversations. While NC was not the *only* site where I heard these terms⁴, they were used more frequently at NC than any other site. Principalities and powers is a reference to the Bible verse Ephesians 6-12. In the American King James edition this verse reads “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” While the term is sometimes used in Christian thought to talk about a spiritual battle between angels and demons, communalist Christian anthropologist and philosopher René Girard (2001), who is regularly cited as an influence by leaders and members of NC, uses the term to connect the structural powers of this world to the evil influence of Satan, providing a useful shorthand for in-the-know Christians to refer both to structural inequality and spiritual righteousness simultaneously.

This was confirmed for me in a casual conversation with three younger members of NC after a service one Sunday. One of them mentions that he never uses “kingdom

⁴ Members of RPF and JPUSA are partial to these phrases as well, and I will discuss them more a later chapter.
talk” around his conservative, small-town, evangelical parents because it would upset them. I asked what he meant by “kingdom talk” and he explained “you know, like saying ‘kingdom of God.’ That’s not how they talk. It smacks of post-millennialism to them, which, to them, is basically Communism.” Post-millenialists believe that humans must work to make the world a place where Christian ethics reign before the second coming, which can be interpreted as a call for liberal social programs. The other two members agreed. I asked if “powers and principalities” is another phrase that would single him out. He laughed and said “yeah, I wouldn’t use that one around them either!” We see here how speech norms at NC draw on language that imbues progressive social politics with a Christian logic.

Additionally, at NC, there is very explicit rim talk with regard to boundaries, speech norms, and the ideologies they represent, particularly in regard to what it means to be an evangelical Christian. Some of the younger members of the congregation have explained to me that they have come out of conservative evangelical environments and now consider themselves “post-evangelical” or completely disassociate themselves from evangelicalism altogether. This does not, however, ring true for all members of the congregation, many of whom still identify very strongly with evangelicalism. This has led to polite public disagreement about how to use “evangelical” as a cultural resource to create identification in the community. NC engages in the practice of having an “open mic” at the end of the service for members to use as they see fit. This may include commenting, often positively but sometimes critically, on the sermon. After one sermon that was given by a younger member of the community explicitly painted evangelicals as an out-group of NC, a long-time member of the community used the open mic time to
request that people be sensitive to the fact that many community members, including herself, still identify strongly with evangelicalism.

The reason why “evangelical” is a contested social category at NC is because different groups and individuals associate evangelicalism with different value-systems and worldviews. Those who reject “evangelical” as an identity are predominantly younger members who grew up in conservative Protestant churches and associate evangelicalism with political and theological conservatism as well as closed-mindedness more broadly. In fact, the sermon in question, which resulted in the public discussion of the term, portrayed evangelicals as simple, anti-intellectual, and limited in their faith. Many of the young people of NC have come to the congregation because they feel it is a place where they can explore faith deeply with a diverse community dedicated both to social justice and challenging scriptural teachings, exactly what they felt they did not receive in their home churches. The members of NC who continue to identify as evangelical, however, continue to do so because evangelicalism, to them, represents a highly personal and authentic relationship with Christ, something they see as transcending partisan politics. One member, for example, told me that “my husband and I, at Neighborhood Church, we both feel it's important to self-identify as evangelical because sometimes evangelical is a dirty word and we feel it's important to sometimes say ‘no, that's us!’” When I asked her why, she said

I think it's based on some stereotypes that are not necessarily accurate… I think, in very broad sweeping terms, I think sometimes people who are disenchanted with the evangelical church that they might have grown up in and are searching now for an alternative that is not giving up their faith have found refuge in [progressive] theology… Now, I think, a lot of evangelicals are looking a lot more [progressive] in their theology, so I think maybe those distinctions aren't there anymore, but it's still kind of
the way people think about it and the way people talk about it.

This respondent additionally stated that she felt there was great diversity in evangelical theology with regard to ideology, understanding it in terms of a way of connecting to faith rather than as identification with a political platform.

So given these diversities, what does bind people together at NC? The most frequent answer I found was that diversity itself was the primary way people bonded. When I asked one member what creates cohesion at NC, he said,

I think that might be one of the few things, the praxis, that binds us together, is this holiness of diversity. And some of it could be the liberal naivety of "yay, diversity!" And it could be a very deep, religious feeling [that] the heart of God is all people, together. But whatever it is, that's a common pride for all of us, is diversity. I think it's unanimous.

Pastor Wendy echoed these comments, saying,

The great commission… It's going and making disciples of all nations. I feel like we, here, in [Neighborhood Church], have this amazing opportunity to do that because all the nations are here.

These statements were repeatedly echoed in both casual conversations and proclamations from the pulpit. For NC, diversity serves as a way to maintain bonds as members identify ideological with diversity as an ideal. This does not mean that the diversity of NC was completely unproblematic, as will be explored later, but it does seem to be agreed upon as the glue that holds the community together.

To summarize, NC’s group style emerges out of a shared commitment to a politically progressive reading of Christianity that sacralizes diversity and marginality while distancing power and privilege. We can see this at work in teachings and language that actualize these ideals and observe the edges of the boundaries in debates over the how the community should understand “evangelicalism.” We can also see this in shared
practices in the community that promote open dialogue as well as representing multiple voices within the community.

**Reba Place Fellowship:**

**The Power of Personal Relationships**

Panicking, I was driving my car back and forth on the quiet, tree lined street, trying to figure out where I was supposed to be. I was completely lost and was rapidly becoming late for the Reba Place Fellowship (RPF) weekly potluck. Sally, the head pastor of RPF, had told me a rough approximation of where the potluck was held (“It’s right by the intersection”), not knowing that someone as bad with directions as I am needs exact GPS coordinates to not wind up lost. Just as I was about to give up, I saw a young man in torn jeans with a bushy, black beard nearly down to his stomach walking into a small, nondescript building. “That must be it,” I thought. “That guy has to be Reba.”

As I walked into meeting room C, the small but cozy room where RPF gathers for their monthly meetings and weekly potlucks, I immediately felt ashamed of the lemon cookies I had bought at the grocery store to bring as my contribution. The food table was covered in homemade taco salad, freshly baked bread, and gluten-free, carob brownies that made my cookies look rather pathetic. I was arriving just as people were getting ready to eat. A quick prayer was said and everyone pulled out the reusable plates and silverware they brought from home and got into line on either side of the table. Expecting that there would be paper plates, I was the only one who did not bring a plate and utensils from home. “Do you have anything I can eat on?” I asked Sally, meekly. “Of course,” she warmly replied, then began to fumble in the cupboard trying to find a spare plate. I got
the feeling that most people who ate in this room knew to be more eco-friendly than I was being right now and, as such, they did not really have much I could use lying around. Eventually, Sally found me a plate and presented it to me with a smile.

After dinner, Sally introduced me to the community. By that point, I had already met several people informally but this was the first time they had me stand up and explain my research to everyone. “He’s kind of into studying religious groups that are interested in justice” Sally said, by way of explanation. As I spoke, I took inventory of the room: mostly people middle aged and older with a handful of younger folks, mostly white, a fairly even mix of men and women, almost all of them smiling kindly at me as I explained my project.

When I was done, Sally asked if there was other business to attend to. A young, bohemian looking woman stood up and said “I have an update on my arrest!” Members of the community nodded and one person said “Oh, yes, let’s hear about it!” “As you may remember,” the young woman began, “I was arrested for disorderly conduct.”

“Why was that, again?” someone from the community called out.

“Blocking an intersection to protest budget cuts to housing,” she answered, which drew some laughter and applause from the community. “Well, it looks like because the police never actually told us to move, we might be able to beat it,” she explained, adding “so we’re currently refusing to pay the fine.” Members of the community voiced their approval and nodded. The community said a prayer for the woman, praying for continued positive news.

“Does anyone have any new green ideas,” Sally asked, getting back to business. A different young woman, cradling a small baby to her arms, rose to her feet and suggested
getting the community involved in beekeeping. She explained about how they could produce their own honey and suggested it would be something they could do together as a community. An older man with a long white beard and grey suspenders went next, telling the community about the new fish hatchery he and some college students were putting together in a nearby low-income neighborhood. He said his hope was that it would both provide jobs and create healthy food for people in that community. Another member stood and rattled off a list of activist festivals across the country he was hoping to go to and said anyone who wanted to join him should talk to him. Sally ended the meeting by saying “One more thing, I know a lot of you are bird-watchers, so meet me afterwards and we’ll have a discussion about what spring birds we’ve seen so far.” The potluck ended with everyone joining hands in a circle and singing a hymn that everyone but me knew.

Afterwards, I stayed to help RPF members wash dishes. There was a whole process to it (“You rinse in this sink, then soak in this sink…”) and it wound up being a quick job for the four of us who did it. The members squabbled with each other as we washed, saying “You didn’t rinse this one well enough,” followed by “Well, you’re going so fast, I’m just trying to keep up!” It did not strike me as unfriendly squabbling, however. Rather, it seemed familial. The kind of fighting that siblings do, that they never age out of, that has a deep layer of familiarity and closeness underneath a hard exterior.

At this potluck, I had learned a great deal about what it means to be a member of RPF. The boundaries, bonds, and speech norms that make up RPF’s group style have become increasingly clear since then, as I have met, prayed, and celebrated with them. RPF is bonded together in ways almost too numerous to count. Members can report any
number of group reference points, collective practices, and shared identification. One member, reflecting on RPF’s 50th anniversary celebration, as well as other celebrations that he has enjoyed, recalled,

Reba’s 50th anniversary was a huge event… so many people who had been at Reba over the years came together. It seems like a big focus was dance and music cause a lot of original music has come out of Reba, original dances and things, so we witnessed, we saw performances of lots of dances and lots of songs, lots of musicians… what really resonated for me was hearing the stories of people and the history of Reba Place… we celebrate everyone’s birthday here. We celebrate and that is fun. Um, we have annual retreats.

This member’s description of RPF is quite apt: I have participated in multiple potlucks, weekend retreats, board-game nights, and sung happy birthday countless times. When I mentioned this to a long-time member as we lounged in his living room, he said, “Well, of course. The board games, and that sort of stuff, are really part of what makes communal living here what it is, right?” Then he leapt up from his chair and ran into the other room and returned with a deck of cards. The pack of cards said “Dutch Blitz” on it and, laughing, he said “In fact, this is a card game that only Mennonites know how to play! We play it all the time. I’ll teach you.”

It is more than these shared practices and reference points that bond members of RPF together, however. They also collectively vocalize strong commitments to social justice. The above discussion about protest and the police was not out of the ordinary for an RPF gathering. Members often casually mentioned past experiences with protest, participation in civil disobedience, or connections to activist communities. The first interaction that younger members have with the community is, in fact, often through Christian left wing activism. One young member, for example, first met members of RPF
at a conference of the leftist Christian group Jesus Radicals. Narratives of social justice
also form some of the collective storytelling that members do about each other and the
group. Members respect and celebrate each other’s commitments to justice and justice
oriented causes, turning moments of bravery or steadfastness in the face of injustice into
powerful narratives. Here is an example from young RPF member Kimberly, talking
about one of the older members:

There was a guy being arrested in the alley behind [the RPF member’s] house… and he saw this, or heard this, and ran outside. And he didn’t
know what to do so he just threw himself on top of the guy because they
were beating him, and it was just, like, completely unnecessary. Like, they
had already arrested the guy, that was what he needed to do. He needed to
stop it. Calm down the situation, and, like, handle it. And that is radical.
What would I have done? I have no idea. But I know that it would have
outraged me seeing that. I would have felt powerless, but he didn’t.

Additionally, members of RPF bond over a shared language with regard to
understanding the role of religion and healing in the lives of members. In addition to an
understanding of justice as an element of the kingdom of God on earth, members of RPF
see personal healing, in a therapeutic sense, as a major part of what the brings the
community together. One of the most frequent ideas that comes up both in casual
conversations as well as in interviews is the idea of “brokenness;” that human beings are
broken and need the intervention of both God and community to heal themselves.
Members of RPF participate in a form of Christian group therapy with each other called
Emmanuel Therapy in which personal problems are discussed and reframed through the
lens of Christ. In interviews, members regularly mentioned how the community has
helped them with “emotional healing,” make “breakthroughs,” and learn things about
themselves and their spirituality.
RPF’s group style is harder to pin down with regard to boundaries, however. Members of RPF are, almost as a rule, exceedingly polite and I rarely heard “us and them” language used. One member called the polite vibe at RPF “the Reba yes.” When someone at RPF talks to you, he said, they will nod and say “yes, mm-hmm.” to indicate they are actively listening. Before they respond, they will pause and take a few seconds to think and choose their words gently and carefully. It is something, he said, he has picked up since joining. Not surprisingly, a place where careful and gentle politeness rules conversational norms is not a place where sharp boundary demarcations are vocalized.

Additionally, RPF, unlike other observed groups, tends to shy away from active identification with liberalism, despite being a very objectively progressive group. Here is Lucas, again, describing RPF’s “third way” ideology:

Reba prides itself in not being either conservative or liberal. They see themselves as this kind of third option where they don’t follow those conventional political, um, lines… I think, um, maybe that partly comes out of the 60s and 70s where there were a lot of communes and they were like sexually permissive and Reba was like, “Yeah, we’re a commune but we don’t do, like, all the drugs and sex stuff.” And so, some of that comes out of that reaction of like, “Sure, we are social justice-y but were not just like liberals”… So, um, [there’s a] part of Reba that wants to resist that, and, maybe others are saying, “Well, you know, maybe they are right and some parts of outside world we can learn from and really should pay attention to.”

One thing to note here is that Lucas, despite being a member of RPF, still refers to RPF as “them” and “their.” This was fairly common among young people. They tend to have a sense that RPF is old enough and has enough history that happened before they arrived that it still “belongs,” so to speak, to the older members.

Additionally, Lucas constructs RPF as a Christian alternative to both liberal and conservative ideologies. These belief systems are, ultimately, ideologies of the world, not
ideologies of God. Young people at RPF seemed more comfortable identifying with worldly political ideologies (one older member joked with me “I can’t keep up with all their labels. Anarchist, neo-primitivist, I don’t even know!”), but this sort of “third way” thinking tended to permeate fairly widely at RPF. This, coupled with the aforementioned politeness, made specific boundaries somewhat obtuse at RPF.

What eventually became clear to me was that RPF identified with specific social movements, rather than broad ideologies. Most of all, RPF identifies strongly with other communal (particularly, but not exclusively, Christian) groups, seeing them as part of one movement. One of RPF’s stated goals, in fact, is to foster and encourage other faith-based communalist groups, especially in their infancy. RPF often hosts members of other communities who come to visit, and these guests turned up several times a year to observe and participate in fellowship life with RPF. Additionally, members of RPF identify actively with a dizzying array of social movements. Many older members actively participated in the religious wings of the Civil Rights Movement and Peace Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, coming to communal life through their activism.

Members of RPF have actively participated in L’Arche communities, serving people with disabilities, as well as Christian Peacemaker Teams, conducting faith-based non-violent resistance. Younger members identify strongly with ecology, the Global Justice Movement, the Occupy Movement, and the Jesus Radicals, peppering causal speech with positive references to these groups. The pulse of the community, in general, has a 1960s countercultural feel to it. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, I found the meetinghouse by a man with a long beard. This was no accident: long beards, ripped jeans, quilted skirts, vegetarian meals, and folksy, communal singing at meetings give the
community an earthy vibe that sits well with their communalism and identification with progressive activist movements.

Despite the strong movement identification, there is little in the way of explicit “out-group” making, as mentioned. Unlike other some of the other observed groups, members of RPF are less likely to aim their conversations or practices towards statements of who they are not. While they see themselves as an alternative to both liberalism and conservatism, this does not come up in conversation regularly. The rim talk of RPF occurs with regard to each other: members are acutely aware of who believes what with regard to specific, hot button issues, and these issues form the contours of how the groups connects and disconnects itself to the wider world. A particularly salient issue is LGBT inclusion. For many members, particularly younger members, LGBT inclusion is a non-negotiable. They do not wish to be part of a community that actively excludes LGBT persons. Other members, however, are uncomfortable with this leading, initially, to avoidance of the issue and then, eventually, to a full-scale, community wide discussion on the issue (I will explore the debate around this issue extensively in chapter five). These wedge issues represent the closest thing to active boundary maintenance I have witnessed at RPF. Generally speaking, rim talk is not particularly salient.

To summarize: RPF is a communalist Mennonite group that is bound together through a large number of shared practices and a great deal of shared history. Their community culture encourages politeness and prayer, as well as faith-based discussions of politics. They do not, however, operate with sharply salient boundaries separating them from out-groups. Rather, they connect themselves with a larger number of social movement groups, constructing an internal patchwork of identifications.
As I sampled food for the Purim cooking contest with Alan, a long-time member of Welcome and Shalom Synagogue (WSS), he leaned over and asked “You know the old joke about Judaism and food, right?” “Of course I don’t,” I replied, my mouth half full of vegetarian chili. Alan smiled and said “The history of Judaism can be summed up as ‘they tried to kill us, they failed, let’s eat.’” Given the number of times I had been stuffed full of food at WSS, this struck me as a plausible, if condensed, history. This was the second Purim I had attended at the congregation. The reading of the Purim story began, this year, with Rabbi Chaim, a friend of the community, giving an introduction where he said that the narrative is about diversity, represented by the Jewish heroes Esther and Mordechai, winning out over the homogeneity envisioned by the anti-Semitic villain, Haman. By celebrating Esther and Mordechai, the Purim story is sacralizing diversity, according to Rabbi Chaim’s interpretation. As per the Purim tradition, members of the community cheered when Mordechai and Esther’s names were mentioned during the reading of the story and booed and hissed when Haman made appearances. WSS added catcalling at verses that could be taken subversively or suggestively. A line in the story that says the land was gripped in fear that women would be disrespectful to their husbands, for example, was met with cheers, whistling, and applause.

After the reading was done, the Purim Spiel began. The Spiel is a comedic play, written and performed by the community that recasts the story of Purim in light of contemporary events. This year, the Spiel featured Esther stand-in Madonna, the pop-singer (played by an WSS member in an outrageous blonde wig), and Mordechai from
The Purim story squaring off against the evil villain Haman and his wife, Ayn Rand (played by WSS’s professorial Rabbi Elliot in drag, demonstrating his glacial patience). The plot centered on Haman and Ayn Rand’s plan to build a giant tower to relocate all the poor people of Shushan into so they could destroy it, killing them all. Madonna and Mordechai uncover their plan, however, and instead of letting the poor move into the tower, enlist them in an “Occupy Shushan” movement. When this climactic moment in the Spiel arrived, the stage was swarmed with WSS members in vibrant costumes, holding protest signs and chanting, “We are the 99%!” The Spiel ended with the tower coming down as planned, but because the poor of Shushan refused to go in, only Haman is killed. Ayn Rand gets far enough away from the tower that she is only hit in the head by a falling brick, declaring afterward “that brick hitting me on the head suddenly made everything clear: Objectivism makes no sense! I’m going to go join a kibbutz and write erotic fiction!” The evening was brought to a close with communal singing and praying, as well as announcing the winner of the cooking contest, who won the coveted “Golden Bubbie” award.

How does this ethnographic vignette demonstrate how WSS constructs and maintains its group style? Some elements of WSS’s groups style are fairly straightforward: they are a Jewish community that promote themselves as LGBT, suggesting that identification with these social categories would make up a significant portion of the community’s identity. While this is true, looking at the boundaries, bonds, and speech norms that constitute participation in WSS actually paints a more complicated picture. For example, what does it mean to draw boundaries with regard to Judaism or to
bond around a shared LGBT identity? WSS sheds light on how ideologies and practices shape what seem to be simple matters of identification in complicated ways.

Turning to the celebration of Purim as outlined above, for example, we see that identifying as Jewish brings up complicated boundary issues. For WSS, Judaism is explicitly connected to being marginalized. In the Purim Spiel detailed above, the surrogates for Jews in the modern retelling of the story are the poor who band together to form an Occupy Movement. Likewise, Haman is portrayed as a greedy gentrifier in league with libertarian hero Ayn Rand. The Purim Spiel the previous year, which focused on LGBT issues such as same-sex marriage to a greater deal, featured Haman partnered with Anita Bryant, the public face of anti-gay politics in the 1970s. In both instances, the Jews of the Purim story are connected to marginalized groups, the poor or LGBT individuals who want the right to marry, and set against opponents representing politically conservative forces who would deny rights and promote oppression.

This theme was reiterated to me in many times in interviews. Members of WSS are strident progressives, and explicitly understand Judaism, being LGBT, and being liberal as intimately tied together. Rabbi Elliot emotionally explained this to me as we sat at a small table overlooking the street at the Center on Halsted, an LGBT community center. The Rabbi had just come from a meeting of a coalition that addresses the rights of LGBT immigrants where he was serving as a representative of WSS. When I asked him to talk about how coalitions and activist work such as this connects to WSS mission, he replied,

How can you read these texts and preach these texts and not walk the walk in some way? You can't just talk about it! You can't read, I mean, at least 36 times the Torah says “You must not oppress the stranger! You were
strangers in the land of Egypt. You know what it is to be a stranger. You must love the stranger as yourself?” Again, and again, and again, and again. So how can you read that and just say, “Well, you know, I've got mine, so that's all I care about” (we laugh). That doesn't seem left wing. That just seems, like, human to me.

We continued to talk and the topic of conversation turned to anti-gay crusader Anita Bryant, who I had already seen depicted in the first Spiel I saw at WSS as in league with Haman, the villain of the Purim story. Rabbi Elliot proudly said that in Florida, heavily Jewish districts voted against her organization’s attempt to repeal Florida anti-discrimination ordinances. “Jews understood that, viscerally,” he said. “This is simply an extension of civil rights.” I asked him why he thought that was. He answered

Historical experience. It's got to relate to that. We were strangers in the land of Egypt. Even on this immigration stuff! What happened to the Jews in Europe was their citizenship was taken away from them and they had no protection! They were completely vulnerable! That's why I can't understand someone like Eric Cantor. Where did he have his Bar Mitzvah? I'm so glad I'm not the rabbi who officiated his Bar Mitzvah! I can't understand where that comes from.

There is evidence to suggest that clergy are often more progressive and more activist-oriented that their congregations (see Mueller and McDuff 2004). While Rabbi Elliot is definitely further to the left and more socially active than the average member of WSS, the other members of the community do, largely, share his orientation and understand group boundaries in a similar way. Alan, who told me the “let’s eat” joke, had this to say:

Not only are we survivors, but because we have been through so much hatred and so much anti-Semitism from almost from the day that Moses came off the mountain, allegedly, um, that I think that there is almost like an inbred empathy um within our DNA that says, “Oh there is an underdog? You need to, kind of, look at that underdog.”

In a similar vein, when I asked WSS member Megan about what the appeal of the
community was to her, she connected Jewish history and LGBT history in a way reiterated to me by several members of WSS.

I mean [being gay], it does tie into being Jewish in a way, because for a lot of, historically speaking, I think Jews had it the same way, where there were times when they could not be out and proud and, you know, that keeps popping up throughout history. Who knows if it is going to pop up again, but, um, I think there is a very clear connection between being gay and Jewish in how we adapt through history.

These quotations highlight the group boundaries that WSS operates with, as well as some of the ways members speak about issues in the group context. WSS is a setting where boundaries are drawn explicitly around perceived oppression and minority status, with those who face oppression due to their social positioning bundled together with WSS, with political conservatives on the other side of the boundary.

These boundaries manifest in talk at meetings of WSS, both religious and otherwise. While not all members of WSS are particularly outspoken nor activist-oriented, they share a background assumption that people attending are have a generally progressive worldview and at least a conversational knowledge of political issues and figures. Political conversation is part of what binds people together at WSS. After Shabbat services, members stay for a social hour with snacks and drinks to chat. Most of the conversation revolves around catching up with each other; people ask about work, relationships, family, job searches, and school. In these conversations, though, politics, especially as it relates to being Jewish or gay, is likely to come up. One evening, an older member of WSS gave me an unprompted history of Jewish labor activism in Chicago over cake and punch. At one of the first services I attended, a longtime member and I casually chatted about school when the topic of Israel came up. “You know,” she said,
“as a lesbian and a feminist, I think the thing I’m proudest about with regard to Israel is that they’re just way ahead on things like abortion rights and LGBT rights.” She said this was because Judaism had an understanding of civil rights and individual choice and protection built into it, something that came up often in my interviews.

The understanding that the community is a safe place for political discussion helps construct the speech norms that members have, including the kinds of jokes and references members use with each other. An ethnographic example will demonstrate this: on a chilly November night in late 2011, I stood huddled on a street corner with several members of WSS. The congregation was participating in their bi-annual partnership with Food and Faith, a non-profit that feeds homeless individuals on the street. The aforementioned Rabbi Chaim works for Food and Faith and WSS has a friendly relationship with them. As we stood on the street corner handing out soup and sandwiches to a diverse group of clients, the discussion turned to politics. First, members joked about Dan Savage’s neologism of then presidential candidate Rick Santorum’s name. Then, the conversation turned to a critical discussion of Fox News’ Megyn Kelly saying that pepper spray was a “condiment, essentially” after several Occupy Movement protesters had been brutalized with it. Eventually, Sarah, a prominent member of WSS, said “You know, this is probably the best liberal crowd I could hope to be in on a Wednesday night. I’m sure there are some Republicans somewhere talking about how great pepper spray is, but we’re sitting around talking about how awful police brutality is, and we’re doing it while we feed homeless people!” Her comment was met with laughter and agreement from the other congregants.

In this ethnographic vignette, we can see how identification and de-identification with different social categories served to delineate boundaries, defining what kinds of people, so to speak, were participating in this joint action. When Sarah said that this was “probably the best liberal crowd” she could hope to be hanging out with on a Wednesday night, she was identifying the members of WSS participating in the action with the wider social category of “liberal,” actively connecting them to greater traditions, structures, and beliefs beyond themselves. Conversely, she identified “Republicans” as outside of the delineated boundary. Additionally, in that example, we see the use of ideological argot and knowledge used to solidify “how we think here.” The comment about Dan Savage’s use of the word “Santorum” drew a great deal of laughter from the group and was presented without explanation. It was assumed (correctly) that members of this crowd would get the joke. This assumption posits an unspoken understanding: members of WSS are ideologically against Republicans but have progressive activist and sex-expert Dan Savage as a shared reference point.

To summarize: group style at WSS revolves around boundaries that stress the group’s ideology as well as the historical marginality of Jews. Those who share the group’s progressive beliefs and those who have also faced oppression are considered fellow travelers of WSS. On the other side of the boundary are people and groups seen as oppressors. For WSS, this tends to be conservatives. This colors the way that members of WSS talk to each other and relate. Jewish identity at WSS is created through talk in terms of political identification with other marginalized groups or progressive movements.
In this chapter, I have discussed each of the six observed communities’ group styles. While the communities differ on many important aspects, there are several commonalities across most or all them:

1. Many of them explicitly identify with the marginalized.
2. Many of them posit an understanding of the community as the primary authority with regard to morality and behavior.
3. They all connect these understandings and identifications with ultimate truth and reality.
4. They all embed their group style in talk, practices, and reifications (Wenger 1998) that actualize it in the social world.

To conclude, I will explore Eliasoph and Lichterman’s (2003) concept of group style as per the above discussion of the six groups. Eliasoph and Lichterman suggest that we examine group style by looking at the following elements: (1) group boundaries, or what the group’s relationship to the wider world is and/or should be, (2) group bonds, or how members understand their “mutual responsibilities” to each other within the group, and (3) speech norms, or what constitutes appropriate ways of speaking within the group (739). Following work in neoinstitutionalism, Eliasoph and Lichterman suggest that group styles are not confined to a particular group, per se, but cut across groups. In other words, a group’s style is not theirs alone, but is a local version of a wider way that many groups relate to each other. In their 2003 article theorizing group style, however, Eliasoph and Lichterman focus predominantly on the very specific styles of two groups, ACES and the Buffaloes. While they do suggest that these groups draw on greater discourses, such
as the widely shared notion of expressive individualism, these discourses do not represent group bonds, boundaries, and speech norms, and Eliasoph and Lichterman do not fully explore the cross-group nature of group styles in this piece. Based on my research into the six above discussed communities, I suggest two templates of group styles that emerge out of the above data, which I call “being with your people” and “the ongoing practice of diversity.”

*Being with your people* represents boundaries, bonds, and speech norms that put into practice a comfortable sameness. It is group style based on a common *identity*. In the six observed communities, this template is represented by MBSC, WSS, and D/C. It is notable that all three of these sites are congregations based in shared social positioning: LGBT and Catholic for D/C, African-American protestant for MBSC, and LGBT and Jewish for WSS. As detailed above, each of these communities have tacit assumptions about bonds, boundaries, and speech norms that are based on sameness, including shared history, similar reference points, and common experiences. Members of WSS, for example, would often casually refer to Shabbat services as “getting our Jew on” and discuss how going to services, especially at an LGBT synagogue helped them feel comfortable and affirmed in their lifestyle and culture. Likewise, members of MBSC often told me that they would not be comfortable going to white churches or churches that did not worship in a black church style because they would feel out of place or disconnected from how they understand religious practice. Finally, members of D/C, as Chris said above, have (subtle) markers of their shared sexuality in the service as well as a common history of LGBT and Catholic related activism and action. In each of these instances, group bonds, boundaries, and speech norms are predicated on a sense that
participation in the group revolves around comfort among individuals who share experiences, social positioning, and reference points.

*The ongoing practice of diversity,* on the other hand, represents boundaries, bonds, and speech norms that put into practice through the ongoing act of reconciling diversity. It is group style based not on a shared identity, per se, but rather on a shared *ideology*. In the six observed communities, JPUSA, RPF, and NC represent this template. It is notable that the two communes and the multi-cultural/racial congregation fall into this template. Each of these communities base their group style not on similarity, but on how to hold people who are different together based on common practices that enact their beliefs. For example, JPUSA recognizes that they have a diversity of cultures, theologies, and politics under their roof, but a shared belief that they are doing Christian work and that communal living is a righteous and desirable way of being in the world bind them together and provide them with norms for communicating with each other, even across their differences. A similar viewpoint is found at RPF, where even members who disagree strongly on issues or have very divergent theologies or politics understand themselves as “in fellowship” with each other. Likewise, as will be discussed later, NC deliberately constructs their boundaries, bonds, and speech norms around recognizing and managing their great internal diversity.

When we compare these two templates, we see that they are not mutually exclusive. Members of JPUSA, RPF, and NC have an “identity” and a shared history. Likewise, members of WSS, D/C, and MBSC have an “ideology” that shapes how they see the world. We are dealing with a chicken and egg question: what is the primary template that, effectively, came first? At WSS, for example, the shared experience of
Judaism and being LGBT (or an ally) shape their ideology, which finds expression in the community. As such, the *identity* is the prime characteristic. Ideology is almost a background feature at WSS. Recall how casually Sarah, in the above vignette about serving with Food and Faith, correctly assumed that people would get her references and share her beliefs in conversation. This is because she assumes, as do other members of WSS, D/C, and MBSC, that those she is speaking with have certain background assumptions that provide them with identity characteristics that allow them to participate in the community. This cannot be assumed at JPUSA, RPF, and NC, where conversations about what the identity of the community is happen constantly and at length. Because there can be no assumed shared background or belief, the bonds, boundaries, and speech norms of these communities cannot suggest a comfortable sameness but must, rather, construct and maintain an *ideology* that holds the diverse membership together. N/C, for example, has regular meetings about a variety of topics in an effort to better understand where people from diverse theological and cultural viewpoints are coming from on important issues.

I do not suggest that these are the only two possible templates of group style. Indeed, additional research could uncover a number of templates that operate across many groups. Instead, these templates represent the two main poles of group style that I observed in the communities I studied. In later chapters, I will discuss how the communities’ identifications and understandings are used as tools in the construction of moral imaginations that posit a connection between the individual, the community, the society, and ultimate reality. First, though, I will turn in the next chapter to discussing how these communities facilitate political and civic engagement.
CHAPTER THREE

THE TRANSMUTATION OF ANGER:

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AS FACILITATING GROUPS

Will and Miranda are a young, Christian couple doing community ministry and activism in London through an international missionary organization called InnerCHANGE. The work Will and Miranda are currently doing revolves around building bridges between different religious, racial, and ethnic communities to combat poverty, racism, and violence at the neighborhood level. They envision a world where churches of all different denominations and faith traditions can come together to empower local contexts to become thriving and diverse communities. In fact, when I first spoke with Miranda, we discussed faith and political action and she said "You know, the church really should be a social movement. We should start thinking about it like that." Will and Miranda's story illustrates a variety of ways that the church may be thought of as a "movement-like," but also highlights several of the weaknesses with the current analysis of social movements, collective action, and civic engagement within sociology.

In this chapter, I will explore how the everyday social spaces and groups of people’s lives provide them with languages, skills, dispositions, relationships, and emotions that can be directed towards political action. The power of these groups lies in their predominantly apolitical status. The six groups I am examining in this
dissertation are faith communities that individuals primarily attend or live at for religious reasons. Despite this, the groups in question integrate religion and politics, creating the space for political meaning to enter into the everyday practices of their adherents. I suggest that, as a result of this, these groups ultimately facilitate civic and political activity, despite their primary goals being apolitical, in a way that would be missed by state and movement-centric approaches to studying social movements and political behavior.

Returning to Will and Miranda, I first met the couple at Neighborhood Church (NC), where they attended services for several years. They were interested in doing the kind of community building work they are currently doing in London prior to arriving at NC, but their time at NC helped prepare them by giving them opportunities for leadership in a diverse church and neighborhood. They engaged in the theology and practice of diversity in Christian community at NC, giving them first hand experience of both the joys and challenges of working across language barriers and differences of culture, faith, and class. Eventually, they decided to join InnerCHANGE to put their theology into practice in a new location. When I sat down with them to discuss their experiences at NC, they were confident that their time at the NC had prepared them for the work they do now.

They arrived at NC, however, already interested in putting these ideas into practice. Will and Miranda met while attending a prestigious Christian college. Miranda majored in anthropology, and told me that the social science departments were the "liberal bastion of hippies" at the school. In this context, she learned to think about how spirituality and culture are connected. Will and Miranda were given the space to explore
theology deeply in college, and attended chapel talks by progressive Christian speakers such as Shane Claiborne and Jim Wallis. Will, who had enlisted in the ROTC program at the school, quit after his first year, unable to reconcile his emerging theology of peace and justice with a future in the military. "It’s really hard for me to love my neighbor if I’m shooting him from 200 yards away," he explained. Prior to attending NC, or becoming a part of the community building group they are a part of now, Will and Miranda had found the space to work through issues about faith, justice, and community at their Christian college, priming themselves for the work they would do later in life. In fact, Will and Miranda first joined NC, in part, because of contacts they had through their college and attended NC because they were interested in worshipping with a multi-cultural, progressive congregation involved in “missional work.”

How a “Movement-Centric Approach” Misses the Embedded Politics of Everyday Life

Will and Miranda’s story is significant because the typical movement-centric approach to the study of social movements would miss the important milestones of the couple's long and winding journey to their current activist work. The Dynamics of Contention model (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), for example, would most likely not define what Will and Miranda are participating in as "movement activity" in the first place because it does not always directly target the state. Even if Will and Miranda were to participate in claims-making directly against the state, typical models of social movement activity focus on “mobilization,” examining how the social movement

1 By “movement activity” I mean the collective action we typically associate with social movements such as public protest, strategic framing, and claims-making against authorities.
organizations (SMOs) involved in the protest communicated with each other and with powerful allies, disseminated resources, “framed” issues, and took advantage of political opportunity structures, missing the couple’s time at NC and their Christian college. This movement-centric approach is useful in explaining particular protest events or successions of events, but by treating a “movement” as both the unit of analysis and a bounded “thing,” we miss larger questions about how activism is facilitated outside of spaces and organizations that do not fit our definitions of social movements. In effect, a movement-centric approach to social movements renders invisible how someone like Will went from being a future soldier to a community activist by concentrating on the end result rather than the process.

What do we gain by examining how the kinds of behaviors that we bracket off as “movement activity” are an everyday part of the lives of many groups and individuals? As Sharon Erickson Nepstad and Rhys H. Williams (2007) point out, the “movement-centric” approach taken by most sociologists of social movements, where mobilization is understood as the thing that begs for explanation and socio-political quiescence is taken as the norm, limits our analysis. Rather, by understanding “collective action as a standard part of the human experience, and calls for social change as the norm rather than the exception, our analytic attention shifts to the socio-cultural dynamics that all forms of collective action must negotiate in order to sustain themselves” (422). The political is often woven into our everyday experiences, with many relationships, groups, and communities structuring the way we understand and experience civic life. The political is in our emotions, our communities, our relationships, our aesthetics, and our connections (or lack thereof) to religion. I suggest we need to understand politics in the everyday and
see collective action as, at least sometimes, ordinary as opposed to extraordinary. We
gain a more holistic view of social behavior by shifting to a focus on “embedded politics”
in which socio-political meaning and behavior are a regular part of the lives of groups
and individuals.

When I interviewed global justice activists for a previous project (Fuist 2005), I
heard similar stories to Will and Miranda’s, detailed above. Many of the activists I
interviewed had developed a political consciousness outside of stereotypical social
movement settings. One man related stories of sneaking onto the college campus by his
family’s home while still in high school to attend a club that watched political
documentaries. Another spoke of going to Catholic school and having justice-oriented
nuns talk about why they were against the death penalty in classes. Others related
accounts of how their participation in music scenes such as punk rock or hip-hop shaped
their political beliefs and behavior. It is not merely that social spaces and groups such as
these awaken a political consciousness in participants, however. In actuality, they
perform many tasks simultaneously, including providing knowledge, shaping identity,
making ideological connections, and forging bridges between individuals and groups. In
short, these groups provide the context for people to speak and practice the languages and
behaviors that social movements require for participation, despite not being “movements”
or “social movement organizations” (SMOs) in and of themselves, ultimately facilitating
civic participation, ideological alignment, and activism.

As discussed in chapter one, other sociologists have documented spaces where
political culture has developed before, but they have rarely become central to the analysis
of movement behavior, nor have they moved far away from the typical movement-centric
approach. Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor (1987), for example, examined Alva Belmont House, an official space of the National Woman’s Party, as a place where a feminist culture could be forged and maintained, creating connections and emotional bonds between activists. Ziad Munson (2008) and Richard Wood (2002) both examine how a movement culture can help sustain movement activity, facilitating activism. Aldon Morris (1986), similarly, examines how the Black Church helped create the conditions that allowed for the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. Francesca Polletta (1999) discusses the prevalence of literature on “free spaces” where settings removed from control by dominant groups that can foster political mobilization. Similarly, Darcy K. Leach and Sebastian Haunss (2009) suggest that social movements often arise out of “scenes,” or loosely connected networks of people with a shared identity and set of norms and/or values. While these analyses provide useful theoretical traction, they tend to start with an existing movement and then work backwards to find the space(s) or group(s) that the movement mobilized out of or that kept the movement sustained during periods of abeyance. If we want to know how certain groups facilitate movement activity, we are effectively sampling on the dependent variable when we start with an existing movement and work backwards.

Work on civic participation has also discussed spaces where social and political consciousness can be forged and sustained but often finds that people avoid explicitly moral, social, and political talk, preferring to keep communication personal and polite. Nina Eliasoph (1998), for example, discusses community organizations that could develop into political spaces but often do not because of the desire of participants to avoid alienating anyone through overtly politicized speech. Courtney Bender (2003),
likewise, examines how faith shapes the way people understand the work they do at a non-profit organization, despite a lack of open communication about it. Most notably, Ray Oldenburg (1999) identifies spaces such as coffee shops, bars, and salons that become “third places,” or locations where individuals can “hang out” and build community through conversation, though Robert Putnam (2001) suggests that the United States is losing its once rich tradition of civic spaces and groups such as these. These examples all highlight some important elements of the kinds of groups and spaces that can potentially foster collective behavior: they are groups where talk, shared practice, and a voluntary community are highly important. However, the authors above tend to focus on places where people actively “avoid politics,” in Eliasoph’s turn of phrase, as opposed to places where the acts of conversation, shared practice, and community building come tinged with decidedly “political” edge.

**Religious Communities Facilitating Political and Civic Action**

The six religious sites discussed in this dissertation do not avoid active and challenging discussions of politics, community, and morality. They are not, however, social movements in and of themselves. They are religious groups that provide space for participants to develop certain ideological understandings, potentially (but not determinately) fostering collective behavior. I call these sites *facilitating spaces*. Facilitating spaces are social settings, such as groups, communities, scenes, or organizations, where social, moral, political, and civic understandings are actively debated and discussed, despite the stated purpose of the space being explicitly or generally apolitical. They are locations where, to use Stephen Hart’s (2002) language, “expansive” discourse connects the everyday lives and beliefs of participants to wider
socio-political meaning. As such, facilitating spaces do several things for participants, including (1) providing interpretations that integrate different ideological fields, such as religion and politics (see chapter four); (2) developing a group style (Eliasoph and Lictherman 2003) that helps to coordinate the identifications and languages of participants (see chapter two); (3) serving as communities of practice (Wenger 1998) where meaning, shared action, and experience are organized and given direction; (4) delineating appropriate emotional responses that structure feelings with regard specific issues and events; and (5) connecting individuals and groups with networks of like-minded people. A facilitating space can come in many forms, including a social club, a classroom, a music scene, a workplace, or anywhere people come together for a purpose specific to the space but are provided with the space to have political, moral, and ideological conversations.

Why are facilitating spaces important to study? First, because a movement-centric approach only captures some of the picture of how collective action operates by focusing almost exclusively on mobilization. Additionally, approaches to civic-life, while taking seriously the everyday meaning making of social groups, have rarely been fully incorporated into social movement scholarship. While many researchers (Hart 2002; Lichterman 2005; Warren 2001; Wood 2002) have studied civic groups engaging in political activity, we lack a theoretical concept to identify what these groups do and how they are connected to wider movement activity and civic participation. Second, studying facilitating spaces provides a way to talk about embedded politics at the level of the everyday. Not everyone with a particular belief mobilizes around that belief. Not everyone who does mobilize is involved in movement activity at all points in their life.
Examining facilitating spaces is a way to look at how socio-political meaning making enters into people’s ordinary lives. This privileges the “behind the scenes” work of identity formation, sense-making, and day-to-day practice often implicit in social movement theory, despite the explicit concentration on high-profile activity. Finally, studying facilitating spaces focuses our attention on the collective aspects of political meaning making in society. As Lichterman (2012) discusses, beliefs and practices are contextual, driven by what is expected, appropriate, and supported in a given setting or social group. Thinking of everyday politics in terms of facilitating spaces allows us to pay attention to how collectives and contexts organize and shape the way people understand and participate in political and civic meaning making.

Will and Miranda’s story shows how attending a Christian college facilitated their entrance into NC and how NC facilitated their entrance into InnerCHANGE, their current community activist organization, by providing them with the necessary identifications, networks, and transposable schema (Sewell 1992) to move between groups. It highlights the workings of a patchwork of loosely connected groups that provide the space for meaning making and practice, with civic participation and community activism as the potential, but not essential, end results. The spatial metaphor I suggest to understand the place of facilitating spaces is an iceberg, with the tip representing highly visible civic and social movement activity and the larger, submerged base representing the constellation of facilitating spaces that the tip rests on, providing the necessary meaning, networks, skills, emotional resonance, ideologies, and resources for the most visible activity to happen.

As will be discussed in the present work, faith communities are ideal facilitating spaces for several reasons. First, people attend faith communities to participate in
religious life, providing people with a reason to come even if they do not already share the socio-political beliefs of the group. Second, membership in faith communities facilitates learning about social and political issues and meeting like-minded people, including people active in the sorts of social issues discussed in the group context. Third, faith communities are ongoing. While a short-term group, such as a college class, can certainly develop into a facilitating space, faith groups are ideal because their ongoing nature allows for long-term development of the above qualities, including the development of mechanisms that describe and define them for new members. Finally, as Christian Smith (1996) points out, religion has a privileged position in our society, giving extra weight to what faith groups do and say.

Dawne Moon (2004), for example, demonstrates how churches can become spaces where a moral, social, political, and civic consciousness can be facilitated in her work examining two faith communities debating LGBT issues. While Moon suggests that the churches denigrated “political” understandings of issues, there is no doubt that the “everyday theologies” that the participants in these communities developed to understand sexuality drew on moral, social, and political language. As Moon suggests, “politics” tended to refer to language that challenged what participants held to be true and/or action based on problematic motivations. As such, what was often being discussed in these groups was not at all “apolitical,” but rather involved people coming together to work out nuanced and complicated understandings of social issues. Moon directs our attention away from thinking about politics as movements making claims against the state and more in terms of the everyday understandings of power and privilege that shape people’s lives.
In this chapter, I will explore how the six religious communities I observed act as facilitating spaces. The communities created spaces where members could integrate politics and faith through learning and practice. Members come to associate certain emotions with beliefs, practices, and events as well as understand their identities as connected to the group and its ideas. Several of the observed groups have vacillated over their histories between being more or less of a "movement organization," shifting between periods of participating actively in claims-making and mobilization and periods of quiescence, but in a way that confounds traditional models of emergence-expansion-aborisation (see Nepstad 2008). These groups are not "social movement organizations" that enter into periods of decline. Rather, they are religious communities that occasionally mobilize, often through their connections to other groups. Through examining these facilitating spaces, I will demonstrate that we understand the role of claims-making and ideology differently when we move away from a movement-centric approach that sees mobilization against the state as the center of analysis and shift, instead, to examine how groups shape everyday political understandings. While each of the six communities I have studied serves as a facilitating space in some way, I will concentrate here on two communities: Neighborhood Church and Dignity/Chicago.

**Neighborhood Church as a Facilitating Space**

As discussed in the previous chapter, NC emphasizes racial and cultural diversity and promotes a politicized take on that diversity, integrating religion and politics into a theology of social and economic justice. In this section, I explore how NC serves as a facilitating space by integrating religion and politics, and organizing members’ emotions around these particular issues. NC is a useful illustration of the concept of a facilitating
space because it is a congregation that gives members a community in which to practice and express a Christianity that is both highly emotional and deeply political through creating practices, conducting prayer, and promoting teachings that connect these understandings. Additionally, NC’s structure is fairly decentralized, which means that members are often able to move quickly from the periphery to the center of the community, as will be discussed below, giving adherents no shortage of opportunities to develop skills and put ideas into practice. I will use specific members’ stories to explore how coming to NC allowed them to integrate and organize their identities and practices around faith and justice.

Blake, the first member of NC I will discuss, grew up in a small, theologically conservative church. He remembers knowing from a young age that he wanted to dedicate his life to church service, but did not fully understand what this meant. When he and his wife Samantha were newly married, they joined a small, struggling church plant in a rural area that had a charismatic pastor who Blake remembers as being enthusiastic and “Bible-loving,” but who was relatively new to the job of ministering to a community. Because the community was so small, Blake and Samantha quickly found themselves in a leadership position. As Blake remembers it,

We had the church and two farmhouses and only one pastor. So they decided that the second farmhouse was going to be a place, like, where younger single people could be mentored. So Samantha and I were the mentor couple. [We were] just the right people. We were young, but we were married and thought of as more mature for our age, I guess.

Blake says that this experience, however, taught them a great deal about what not to do in church. Because they were new to church leadership, they assumed that they could be
both peers and authority figures simultaneously, but quickly learned the problems with this.

We were in the position of landlords so we assigned chores, collected rent, but were also trying to do the spiritual stuff. Like, "open up to me," after I'm demanding rent from you. All of the utilities were in our name, so we needed to pay the utilities and they had to reimburse us, so if they didn't, we would be on the hook for the whole bill, so it was our personal finances… Everyone was well meaning, and nobody wanted to do anything harmful, but when the pipes froze, there wasn't any money to fix them… So I kind of got a little fried on church around that point.

After this negative experience, Blake and Samantha wanted to find a way to continue to participate in religious life, but also wanted to make sure they did not repeat this experience. They decided to both enter seminary so they could receive formal pastoral training. Through his studies, Blake came to two important realizations. One was that there was no “right way” to do church. He said this relieved a great deal of the tension from his religious history, providing him with a new, more open model to understand church.

I saw, kind of, coalescing with studies and that experience, I really love the church [but] I'm also very convinced of the church as a human institution, a sociological institution. We have made the church. It is not a divine thing coming down from on high. So I bristle when people say this is the scriptural way to do the church, or whatever other authority, this is "God's way" to do church, or "the right way," because there's so many right ways.

The second realization was that he had a justice-oriented take on faith. He remembered associating religion with progressivism early on in his life, but keeping quiet because he grew up in a conservative church and had no space to develop a vocabulary for talking about it. He found a space where he could integrate faith and justice when he took a
"Biblical Justice" class. I asked him what resonated with him in the class and he said it was reading

Scripture after scripture [about justice]. Where were all these scriptures when I was in all those churches that talked about the Bible being so important? Hearing the issues that were talked about then as being important Biblical issues and then seeing this vast swath of the Bible talking about justice and the oppressed and the poor and the foreigners among you. It was like wait a second, why didn’t I hear this talked about very much?

These realizations set Blake on a different path. His experiences with different church contexts had shaped his identity, practices, and beliefs with regard to religion and politics. While Blake suggested that the churches he had attended before NC were “more politically conservative and [he] started swinging that way, too,” he eventually found facilitating spaces, notably his Biblical Justice class, where he was able to reorganize his understandings in a different way through political talk with others, ultimately putting him on a different trajectory, setting the stage for his entrance into NC.

Blake and his wife moved to Chicago when she entered into a theology Ph.D. program. Having been burned in churches before, as discussed in the above story, they did not immediately begin attending a church in their new home. Blake initially walked into NC entirely because it was two blocks away from where they lived, knowing very little about it. He immediately became enamored with the community because it seemed like they were living out some of the ideas about faith and justice that he had recently been thinking about. In his words,

I was committed to social justice kinds of things more in theory. I had helped do, uh, sort of anti-racism training and stuff like that. I mean, I cared about these issues, but I didn’t quite see how to bridge that as a church thing... So moving here... Justice was important to these people. It
just felt like the Kingdom of God. All the different nations were represented, and it felt good.

He admits later in our conversation that the “good feelings” of "all the different nations" being present may represent "liberal naiveté," but also stresses that, regardless, it is what brought him to NC, saying “that [diversity] initially drew me to it. It is still a delightful amalgam, statistically.”

Additionally, Blake was able to step into pastoral and leadership roles at NC very quickly. A unique element of NC’s structure is that almost everything is on a rotation. This includes preaching duties, worship leading, music, and leadership. I noticed, early on, that if you attended NC two weeks in a row, you would see a whole different group of people performing the visible roles during the service, including saying prayers, leading singing, and delivering the sermon. Because Blake was in seminary, NC agreed to let him begin preaching sermons early on in his attendance as part of the practicum requirements for his degree. Because of this, he was asked to be in a position of leadership. As Blake remembers,

Blake: I was asked to be an elder around that time.

Todd: Do you have a sense for why you were asked?

Blake: Well, I was somewhat known, because I was part of a drama group when I first started.

Todd: So you were visible?

Blake: Yeah, I was visible. People knew, or at least some people knew, I was in seminary classes, so occasionally I preached, for my practicum for school.

Ultimately, for Blake, NC was a community that took things he was working through, both ideas and practices, and provided him a space to actively engage in those
things. He was able to step into preaching and leadership roles as well as engage in what he called “the praxis of diversity” in a welcoming community. Blake’s story demonstrates how NC serves as a facilitating space, but one of many facilitating spaces in an overlapping patchwork of meaning and practice that also included other churches he had participated in as well as his experience in school. Despite this, we see that facilitating spaces do not always end up “mobilizing” members. Blake was happy to have found a group to practice ideas about faith and justice, but he suggested in our conversation that he was not sure whether or not he was going to pursue such an agenda in the future if he ever left NC. I turn now to two other members of NC, Will and Miranda, a married couple discussed earlier in the chapter, whose story follows a similar trajectory, but who end up using NC as a way station through which they enter directly into community activism.

Will and Miranda, first introduced at the beginning of the chapter, have a story that echoes Blake’s in significant ways. As a young married couple, they were looking for a place to organize and put into practice ideas about community, faith, and politics they were developing and found a welcoming community at NC, for many of the same reasons that Blake did. Also, like Blake, they ultimately left to put what they learned at NC into practice elsewhere. By moving through Will and Miranda’s story, we can see how NC, in conjunction with other facilitating spaces, shaped their eventual entrance into community activism.

Will and Miranda grew up separately, in rural Indiana and suburban California respectively, but had similar experiences as young people that shaped their future understandings of faith and community. For Miranda, this was growing up in a mission-
heavy church with a very active, music-oriented youth group. Early in life, Miranda came
to associate both of these things, missionary work and art, with faith. As she remembers,

We had a really great group going. When I was in junior high we got a
new youth pastor, the youth group went to a hundred kids, rockin’ worship
band, we moshed every week (we laugh). So not only was it cool to be a
part of the youth group but the youth pastor was like “be passionate”…
We went on conferences, I was in leadership, and the worship band and
everything, and I’d maybe thought about being a missionary, doing Bible
translation or something, but, um, I wasn’t really sure. But anyway, it was
a good space to grow up in.

Will had a similar experience with Christian youth culture and getting early experience as
a leader and organizer. Will became involved with a men’s group at his church that
facilitated his taking of a leadership role in planning a Christian music festival that
became formative in his experience and understanding of faith. In Will’s words,

Even now, thinking about it, it actually kind of affected my perspective on
things later on. So sophomore or junior year of high school, there was like
an after church kind of informal small group I was in with several other
guys, one of their dads, and the pastor of the church. We’d just kind of get
together and talk about stuff… So at some point, after a few months, a
couple of them were involved in, whatever, the Christian music scene…
and they began talking about there not being a lot of opportunities for
people to play, people to get their music heard, for their to be a Christian
music scene [in our town]. And I hear that and get this idea to, essentially,
put together a summer music festival in our tiny little town... By being a
part of this group, I kind of fell into the leadership role of that.

Over the next two years, Will and his friends dedicated their time to organizing and
executing the festival. Will remembers this experience being foundational for him both
because he was put into a position of leadership and because his understanding of how to
practice Christianity was broadened by having to interact with leaders from other
churches. Remembering back on this, Will stated,

It was the first time that I really had to learn, both by being a part of and
then being the leader of, what it meant to try to get a bunch of people
together behind a common venture. It was the first time I seriously had to interact with the other churches in the community, and had to get to the root of “we all want to see Christianity proclaimed in this town, we all worship Jesus, and we want to pursue that,” trying to have those conversations instead of “do we understand it in the same way”… So, like, all of those things, I think, even though it took several years for that to really kind of flourish, like, in other stuff, even now, I just kind of realize how those seeds were planted that really actually shapes a lot of what caught on later.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given these supportive backgrounds, Will and Miranda both excelled at school and were accepted into a prestigious, Christian university where they met during freshman orientation. As discussed earlier in the chapter, Will was attending school for ROTC training and Miranda was studying anthropology. Will often said during our conversation that he had grown up very conservative and had learned that “pacifists were pussies” when he was young, but felt very strongly that God was directing him out of the military early in his academic career. Miranda, who never had qualms about calling herself a pacifist but admits she did not have a vocabulary for it at the time, was relieved. Will’s move drastically changed the future plans of the young couple, however. At the same time, Miranda remembered there being a surge of interest in social justice while they attended college, recollecting

[College] was where I first definitely started to have this sense of figuring out that the Bible was about more than just punching your ticket to get into heaven, you know?... [We saw] speakers that started to come in and be at chapel while we were there, like Shane Claiborne did a chapel, Jim Wallis did a chapel, Rob Bell did a chapel, they blew the roof off.

The speaker that left the biggest impact on Will and Miranda, however, was a speaker who came to discuss his global missionary work with InnerCHANGE. They recalled being enamored with his suggestion that change cannot happen in an impoverished...
community when people from wealthy churches “commute in,” do their service, then leave. Miranda excitedly remembered how they felt after seeing the chapel talk, saying:

It was evident that they cared for people, they took care of people, and they wanted folks to minister out of who they were. It just seemed to be so holistic, their approach to community building and development and how it was integrated with following Jesus, and that was a new thing, I think, for both of us. And they just, really, they seemed to be doing it right.

The couple had coffee with the speaker who told them that they could join the organization if they wanted. While they said they felt called to do so, they also thought it seemed like a big commitment they were not sure they were ready to make and, as such, they wanted more experience doing missions work before joining.

As a result of this, Miranda decided to do an internship at one of the other communities I observed, Reba Place Fellowship (RPF). RPF was suggested to her by a friend of hers at school who thought their internship program would provide her with the community and mission experience she was looking for without being as large of a commitment as InnerCHANGE would have been. Miranda fell in love with RPF while she was there, but Will felt it was a little too “hippie” for him, so the couple church shopped and settled on NC as a happy compromise.

Will: I definitely wanted more of a missional, inner-city sort of environment. A place with a diverse community…

Miranda: A Hispanic population… And then after we church shopped in this neighborhood, we went back to NC and the spirit of God was there and we were like this was really why we moved here, so we stayed.

Will and Miranda had a similar experience to Blake when they arrived at NC: they found a welcoming community that was putting into practice many of the disparate strands of
ideology and identity that they were becoming central to their understanding of faith, coalescing them into practices and coherent world views. Miranda said

NC was certainly formative for us in a number of ways… I think, God [was] putting me in a place where he was like “now here’s a place where all of these Christians are also thinking about these things and trying to live it out in the context of a local community” and I was like WOW! People like this exist! Here’s like a whole tradition of Christianity that’s focused on community, what the Bible says about love, focused on simplicity, focused on justice!

Like Blake, Will and Miranda were immediately pulled into positions of visibility and prominence through NC’s rotation of authority. Miranda was able to put the artistic talents she had developed as a young person in her church to use by getting involved with NC’s dance group and art directing several church events, while Will became NC’s youth pastor, putting into practice some of the skills he developed setting up the music festival he worked on in high school.

The thing Will and Miranda remember being most striking about NC was the feeling that people were living out faith and justice in the context of a neighborhood community in their day-to-day behavior. Will and Miranda decided, after attending the church for a year, to move five blocks closer so they could live immediately next to the church and feel more connected to the group life that went on there. They also remembered that this understanding of faith and justice meant that the ideology of the church was woven very directly into community practice. The couple recalled how these practices shaped them, saying

Will: A lot of their ethos on community, being intentional in a local spot, coming to NC was a place to actually explore what it looked like to do that. So even if my conservative nature was resistant to a lot of things at NC, I still, eventually, kind of soaked in, yeah, this is actually what it looks like.
Miranda: Yeah, right. It’s almost like people don’t make a big deal out of it. It’s just like, of course Aña from Columbia is going to be passionate about issues that the Columbian and U.S. government are fighting over and she’s going to bring that up in prayer and in the back there’s going to be postcards to send to our senator. Obviously. And obviously the potluck is half vegetarian cause people are concerned about the earth.

Will and Miranda approached their participation in NC from different perspectives. Coming from a more conservative background and worldview, Will was initially skeptical of the community, finding it to be acceptable only because it was a church that dealt with urban social problems. Conversely, Miranda immediately saw it as a “beautiful sandbox” where they were “game to try anything once.” Despite arriving with different points of view, worshiping and working together at NC shaped and converged their identities and ideas, integrating understandings about faith, diversity, politics, and practice.

NC did not act alone in this, however. Rather, NC was one of several groups that bridged into each other. Will and Miranda both had early ideas and skills with regard to faith and leadership developed in youth group settings in their home churches. In college, they were exposed, through participation in their college’s chapel program and through Miranda’s involvement in the social science department, to ideas about faith and justice. In particular, they became aware of InnerCHANGE, a missions group that captured both of their imaginations. Not feeling ready to explore InnerCHANGE right out of college, however, the couple searched for a place they could explore some of the nascent thoughts, ideas, emotions, and practices they had with regard to faith and justice. In this way, NC became a group context to practice and consolidate their ideas as well as develop skills, including living in a tight-knit faith group, participating in justice-based
community work, and ministering to a culturally diverse population, hallmarks of what they do now with InnerCHANGE. Reflecting on when they eventually decided to leave NC and dedicate themselves to long-term community work through InnerCHANGE, they said

Will: The idea of intentional community was core to InnerCHANGE’s ethos. It was something that had been planted in my mind even before coming to NC…

Miranda: And in that sense I would say [InnerCHANGE’s] ethos shaped how we did ministry at NC.

Will: They shaped us for NC and NC shaped us for going back to them.

Will and Miranda’s current work with InnerCHANGE was facilitated by a number of disparate spaces that created an ongoing, shifting world of meaning making and identity formation. NC, in particular, provided practices, ideas, and theologies that allowed them to prefiguratively live out these identities and beliefs in community.

In sum, NC is a congregation that acts as a facilitating space by providing a community where members organize their identities, beliefs, emotions, and practices with regard to faith, politics, and culture. Members of NC regularly practice these ideals in conversation and action with each other. The specific practices of NC, including their sacralizing of political issues, their radical centering of authority, and their community-based ethos, create a town hall environment where members can openly discuss social issues of concern to them. This means that they often reflect on political issues that other communities avoid (Eliasoph 1998), actively creating the space for members to make concerns about these issues a part of their identity as well as their community practice.
Despite this, the stories of Blake and Will and Miranda illustrate that “mobilization” or “civic participation” are not automatic end results of participating in a facilitating space. Blake expressed that he was unsure if he would pursue additional socio-political action if he ever left NC, while Will and Miranda left the community specifically to participate in community activism. There are several reasons for the divergence. First, Will and Miranda had already been exposed to the group they would eventually join prior to coming to NC. NC was, effectively, a way station where they could develop the skills, dispositions, and practices necessary to participate in InnerCHANGE. Blake had no experience with such an organization. Second, Will and Miranda left NC during a lull in activity. When I interviewed Blake, it was at a time of intense discussions about the role of race and sexuality in the congregation that had left many people hopeful for the future but also somewhat burned out on political talk. Blake admitted, in our interview, that while he remained committed to social justice, he wanted to take a break from thinking about heavy social issues for a while, adding that if I asked him again in a year, he might be ready to become active again. As such, different exiting circumstances may have shaped the trajectories of Will and Miranda on one hand and Blake on the other. I turn now to the long history of D/C to explore how the community has increasingly become a space that facilitates civic and political action.

Dignity/Chicago as a Facilitating Space

D/C has a long and rich history that allows us to see how the community has facilitated civic and political participation in various ways over four decades. D/C is a particularly useful example in that a community-defining structural change, namely getting banned from church property and effectively excommunicated from the official
Church, created the room for them to deepen their role as a facilitating space by allowing them to talk politics in a way that they were unable to when they were officially connected to the Catholic hierarchy.

In 1969, the year that the modern LGBT rights movement kicked off with the Stonewall Riots, Father Patrick X. Nidorf began a members-only ministry for gay and lesbian Catholics in San Diego (DignityUSA 2011). In 1970, the ministry, now christened "Dignity," began to meet on church property. That same year, Dignity released a statement of purpose that said "We believe that homosexuality is a natural variation on the use of sex. It implies no sickness or immorality. Those with such sexual orientation have a natural right to use their power of sex in a way that is both responsible and fulfilling.... and should use it with a sense of pride" (DignityUSA 2011). In 1971, Father Nidorf met with the Archbishop of Los Angeles and was asked to resign from Dignity due to their "untenable" beliefs. He agreed, and Dignity officially becomes a lay-led organization (DignityUSA 2011). 1971 also saw Dignity begin to promote themselves outside of Southern California, as well as take tentative steps towards becoming a national organization. By 1972, Dignity held their first annual meeting, attended by 74 members, 22 of whom were priests (DignityUSA 2011).

Also in 1972, D/C was founded, becoming one of the earliest chapters to form outside of Southern California. One early member, Bill, recalls D/C being started by a straight Catholic woman who convinced a Franciscan priest she was acquainted with to begin saying mass for her gay friends in her apartment. D/C soon found a home for its weekly mass and social hour in St. Sebastian’s parish. Bill remembers the early days of D/C being very orthodox. "We accepted the Church’s teachings in every respect except
homosexuality," Bill remembered, "which is now changed. But at that time, I think that appealed to me. I felt that this was a real Catholic Church and a real mass… The quality of the homilies was far beyond anything in the local parishes." When I asked him why the homilies were of such high quality, he told me that high profile Franciscan and Jesuit priests were very active in the Dignity community. Long-time member Sean echoed this, saying "the congregation was filled with priests, because this was a place they could go and talk to each other... We used to have big contingents of Jesuits who came and Dominicans and all of these groups."

Sean also agreed, however, that this was a period of orthodoxy. "No one actually had said the word 'gay' during the mass, we just all knew about it," he said. When I asked Bill why so many priests were at the mass, given that it was just an ordinary mass at this time, he replied "it was this really revolutionary idea, that there could be an underground mass, and the rumor was that Cardinal Cody knew about it, he just didn’t care. This was not an issue that concerned him, and the rumor was that he said 'just don’t get in the newspapers.'" This recollection is widely shared by the long-time members of D/C: in the 1970s and early 1980s, when D/C was still meeting on church property at St. Sebastian's, it was a typical Catholic mass, with little to no political content, that was implicitly accepted by the Church hierarchy.

If D/C was just an “ordinary mass,” why attend church there instead of at a regular parish? Long-time members recall D/C in this period as serving two primary purposes: (1) it was a space for gays and lesbians that was an alternative to bars at a time when there were few places for gays to congregate, and (2) it provided a safe space at a time when homophobia and heterosexism were extremely pervasive in society. Because
the Catholic Church had not taken a strong, official stance on homosexuality in the 1970s, D/C and Dignity more broadly had a sort of implicit legitimacy; priests participated, they met on church grounds, and they conducted a regular mass. Members of D/C remember the church being a sanctuary from homophobia as opposed to a source of homophobia. One member, for example, related that his understanding that being gay was wrong came not from the Church but from being a psychology major in the early 1970s, when homosexuality was still considered a mental disorder.

This was dramatically articulated to me by D/C member Sean, who spent several weeks walking up to the doors of St. Sebastian’s for the D/C mass and then freezing in place, unable to go in, when he first started attending D/C in the mid-1970s. I asked if this was because he felt strange about going into a church, and he responded,

It wasn’t just because it was church. It was because it was gay. It was a gay place and most of these people couldn’t deal with going to a gay place. The allure was that it was church, so it was supposed to be a safe environment... The church had not come out to make a big public stance against it because it was so understood that it was wrong anyway. And yet, the only place these guys could fit in was the fact that they were Catholic. They had the right to go to mass, most of those people were, you know, coming to church celibate so they hadn’t sinned so, um, they still felt an affinity to it, it was so much a part of their formation of who they were so that when they, you only have one choice: you either embrace or reject it and for many people it was so much who they defined themselves as human beings that they had to deal with it.

D/C President Chris echoed this, saying that for many attendees, D/C at this time was a place to come and "reconcile" their gay identity and their Catholicism and then, often, return to their original parish. The appeal of D/C in this period was spiritual and communal: being gay or lesbian was a position of considerable marginality in the greater society, and the lack of gay-identified spaces in the wider culture along with the absence
of a strong statement of condemnation from the church, as well as the implicit acceptance
of having official priests preside over and attend mass, made the church a "safe space" in
an inhospitable society. In fact, members recall non-Catholic men attending services and
sleeping through mass, just to attend the social hour afterward so they could meet people
and feel connected to the community. While D/C did participate in some political
activism in the 70s, including establishing their long-standing relationship with
progressive Catholic organization Call to Action and co-sponsoring the "Orange Ball," a
benefit to raise money in opposition to Anita Bryant's anti-gay ballot initiatives in the
1970s, the primary purposes of D/C in the 1970s was spiritual formation within
community (Dignity/Chicago 2012).

How did D/C act as a nascent facilitating space at this time? While not
particularly active politically, either in behavior or rhetoric, D/C was organizing
members’ identities, even in this early period, as will become apparent in the 1980s. The
creation of a safe space where religion and sexuality could be integrated and relationships
between gay and lesbian Catholics could be forged created both the ideological and social
grounding necessary for mobilization in later years. This mobilization initially revolved
around the central, crystallizing issue for D/C in the mid-80s: the expulsion of Dignity
chapters from Church property as the Vatican made its LGBT exclusion official.

In 1986, the Vatican released an official statement of same-sex relationships
called "A Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of
Homosexual Persons," which effectively stated that being gay is not a sin by itself, but
that it leads to sinful behavior and must therefore be considered "an objective disorder"
(Ratzinger and Bovone 1986). As a direct result of this letter, Catholic parishes across
America began to evict Dignity chapters from their premises and priests began to cut ties with the group (DignityUSA 2011). Chicago was no exception.

In 1988, two years after the letter, Cardinal Bernadin asked D/C to withdraw their official statement that LGBT people can "express [their] sexuality physically, in a unitive manner that is loving, life-giving and life-affirming" (Dignity Chicago 2012). Seeing the writing on the wall, members of the D/C board contacted a local Lutheran church and asked if they would be able to have a mass there, in case they got kicked out of St. Sebastian's. The Lutheran church agreed, so the D/C board met to decide what to do. Gene, who was at the meeting, recalls

> At the meeting it was vote to accept, you know, what the Archdiocese's statement was, that there never was a gay mass, that Dignity never really sponsored this. And we'd become this [new group], we'd be called AGLO, and follow church teaching, and there'd be six parishes that would provide priests who would come and say mass at St. Sebastian's... And like, 75% of the community voted not to accept [the Archdiocese's statement]. And so the board, I think there were 12 on the board, 9 did, voted to accept, and three of us didn't... And that's sort of how we started. And, you know, from there, moving out. It was ours. We chose not to accept. We weren't kicked out. Maybe it's semantics, but I think it's really true, it was "here's the offer, you can accept it or not," and the vast majority rejected it.

As Gene details, D/C was effectively split into two groups: a continuation of D/C that was now officially unmoored from the Church, and a Church-sponsored group called Archdiocesan Gay and Lesbian Outreach (AGLO) that fully accepted and promoted official Catholic teaching on sexuality. By disconnecting from the official Church, though, D/C found themselves able to address political issues in a way they had not been able to before. As one member named Doug put it,

> I think I have seen over the course of time that what was seen as this great insult and injury of being forced out of the church, forced to make that choice to leave the church and becoming, um, formally unwelcome in the
Catholic Church to feeling that this has been a really great thing for us because it has given us the freedom now to really model the Church that we think that we should be.

When I asked him how D/C models the ideal Church, he said through their "progressive liturgical changes" and through having women priests say mass and serve on the worship team. Other members supported Doug's assertion that emotions ran high in the early days of D/C as an excommunicated group, but also recall that the late 80s and early 90s was when the community first began to enter into civic engagement, prefigurative politics, and activism. As Chris recalls,

In the late 80s, when all of that [D/C leaving Church property] was going on, was the AIDS crisis. That took off. So Dignity were some of the people talking about it, Dignity played a leadership role, this is an example of saying 'we can't just leave this to the funeral, we need to do it now. This is our opportunity for leadership and ministry!' And so several people were very involved in establishing a lot of the organizations that still exist, Howard Brown, Chicago House, and Bonaventure House.

Sean echoed, this, remembering the 1986 letter as a catalyst for reorienting D/C towards political activity.

When the AIDS epidemic really began to affect Chicago... People in Dignity, you know, started to work, and they are part of the founders of Chicago House, I mean when Chicago House was first founded, most of us, they all volunteered to cook and clean and find a place for people... And so, Dignity became very political. Then it became political a couple of other times. Um, you know, we sort of had confrontations with the Cardinal, public confrontations about rights for, you know, the sick, about basic human rights, all of these kinds of things went on in the 80s... but it is the Ratzinger letter that brought it to the head where it made people initially stand up and decide whose side are we going to be on.

This shift in what D/C had the leeway to do led to the community to move to the left, both politically and theologically, a process that Doug referred to as "a long, long, bloody journey in many ways, and a long, thoughtful one as well." Members of D/C tend
to remember the changes that came in the 90s in fairly uniform ways. The consistent narrative is that there was a social separation between lesbians and gay men in D/C in the late 1980s and 1990s. In Sean's words, "we ended up finding that many of the women who were coming were coming only when the lay led liturgy was led by women." This split precipitated an internal movement to push towards gender-inclusive language as a way to bridge the gap between gay men and lesbians in the community. As debates over how to incorporate inclusive language dragged on through the 1990s, however, D/C began to lose members at both ends of the political spectrum. Sean further elaborated on this time period, saying "We found out that we lost people who would not put up with changes like that so we had a group that disappeared and then we had most of the women leave because they felt like we hadn’t gone far enough so we had this major drop off of about a third of the people." Effectively, D/C lost more orthodox members, whom current D/C participants suggest returned to their home parish or began to attend AGLO, as well as left-wing members discouraged by the slowness of the process, whom are understood by current members as either leaving Catholicism altogether or finding other, alternative Catholic communities that addressed their specific needs.

Despite the loss of members, the process of shifting D/C to the left had begun, and members saw the process through in a variety of ways. By the time I first attended D/C in 2007, the community solely used inclusive language. During the observation for the present study, they connected with the woman priest movement and now women priests say mass at D/C almost exclusively. What is telling is that members have come to regard the place of women in D/C in highly feminist terms that are connected to broader understandings of interpretation and social justice. As Doug stated,
There are folks whose understanding of the Church is about rules, um, and that if you are going to be a Catholic, that means you are going to follow these rule and this is how you do these things, so you can’t change any of that, because if you change any of that, then you are not Catholic. And the other group, which I would put myself in, you know, are more interpretive. Like, here is the spirit of the law, and if a rule is causing injustice in your community or preventing people from, um, being fully participatory and being embraced and engaged, there is something wrong with that rule, and if you have an opportunity to change them, you should change that or do things with it… But when it comes to women’s issues, which is really where the crux of the conflict is, it’s about how do you make liturgy more inclusive for women, [some members of D/C have said] we can’t do that. That is too much. And again, I think that as much as it is about rules, it’s about our own misogyny of "are women really are not equal," and that message comes out loud and clear and I think.

Doug’s understanding, that this is a feminist project, was typical among members of D/C.

Additionally, the push appeared to be a push at the group level, as opposed to at the individual level. Members often report that many individuals were uncomfortable with the progressive changes, yet participated in them, nonetheless. Candy, for example, said "all of [the men of D/C] are very, very feminist. Some of the people just look at Alec, because he can be real narrow [on certain things], but… he was one of the people who acted to get the language, who said we have got to get the balance in the language." The understanding of many members is that D/C, as an organization, challenged them to go on this journey with the community, even if they had not initially anticipated seeking these progressive changes.

These changes have been exemplified by the fact that two woman priests are now the primary officiates at D/C masses. Barbara, the head presider at D/C, initially found and began attending D/C through the progressive Catholic umbrella organization Call to Action. D/C had a regular male presider who was moving away. After the male priest left, D/C conducted lay-led masses for a period of time, and at one of these masses, Chris,
the president of D/C, asked Barbara “Why are we having lay-led masses when you’re sitting right there in the audience?” After that, Barbara began to officiate D/C masses. What was most notable to me, as an observer, was that there seemed to be little controversy, at least compared to apparently “bloody battle” over inclusive language. When I brought this up to a focus group of D/C members, including Barbara, Gene suggested that being in an all-male environment left his own misogyny problematically unchallenged, and that other members of D/C felt this way as well. This led to the following discussion on what has happened to D/C since they have brought in woman priests:

Alice: Many times, you know, talking with Barbara, for example, just even our last conversation, she threw out all these women in the Bible and said "What do you think this person might have been thinking?"

Barbara: I said "What do you think Sarah was thinking when Abraham took their son off to be killed?" That's not in the Bible!

Alice: You know, and it was sort of like, in those conversations, yeah, the women don't come through. They don't come through in our parishes. There's different questions, and it's balancing all that out...

Barbara: I was so incredibly touched [when] Dignity [marched in the] pride parade. I felt not only welcomed, but like, "Wow, they care. They do care that we're here, and I'm here!" They [people watching the parade] wanted to hug me. My sister priest said to me "Did you wear your collar?" And I said "Yeah," and my collar happens to be lavender (we laugh), because they wanted me to wear a collar. That was the only appropriate way to speak to a large crowd, and that's the only time I ever wear a collar. From that perspective. But I think the sense of camaraderie in terms of both male and female is the next step, and that's already, quote, been done here, and it's also a scary thing for the men, but that is where we need to be. We need all of us at the altar.

Later in the conversation, we returned to the topic of the Pride Parade and Alice said that this is the first year she has felt secure and confident enough to join D/C in marching,
instead of watching from the sides. Alice presented this event as a moment of great
meaning for her, given the struggles she has had with sexuality and religion. She
suggested that she felt the need to represent D/C in the Pride Parade because D/C has
become essential to how she understands both her faith and her sexuality, organizing her
identity and amplifying her voice. While many members of D/C related to me that they
never perceived any conflict between being gay or lesbian and Catholic, Alice grew up in
a small town that she remembers as being a very intolerant place and, as such, initially
struggled to integrate her Catholicism and her sexuality. In one interview I conducted
with her, she recalled breaking into tears of joy when she first came to D/C many years
ago and a priest looked her in the eye and told her God loved her. “I just had this need to,
I guess, hear from somebody that I was ok with God, you know? And I guess I needed to
hear it from somebody in the Church, that I was ok and that God wasn’t looking at me as
a sinner.” Alice related that it was a long road for her from realizing that she was
attracted to women to embracing a lesbian social identity, but talked about how D/C
shaped her journey:

So I’ve been to the 35th and I’ve been to the 40th anniversary dinners and
those are empowering, like… I wasn’t familiar with Jamie Manson [a
lesbian Catholic activist who was the keynote speaker at the 40th
anniversary], so Dignity helped me become more aware of her. I wasn’t
even familiar with the National Catholic Reporter, now I am looking into
it and selectively, of course, reading different parts of it… So going to
those is important, with the speakers and that. Um, and then Call To
Action, I have become more aware of Call To Action, and so that’s
helping me. I like it when we get together and we’ve gone out after mass
and had dinner, um, when I met you and we all got together. There is the
liturgy, and that is the key piece. But there is also the social part of us, that
has an opportunity to share ideas and the reflections.
In this narrative, Alice highlights how D/C has connected her to progressive Catholic ideas and networks, giving her a space to “share ideas.” This idea was the capstone to an interview that was predominantly about Alice’s fears and insecurities about her sexuality that plagued much of her life, issues that she has worked through, in part, with D/C acting as a supportive community. As mentioned, the culmination of this is that Alice and her partner joined D/C in the Pride Parade in 2012 for the first time, connecting her, through D/C, to a larger, public statement of LGBT solidarity.

Ultimately, Alice’s story speaks to D/C’s role as a facilitating space. The history of D/C has seen the community vacillate between different expressions of Catholicism and LGBT identity, initially deemphasizing sexuality to maintain Catholic orthodoxy and eventually moving to an understanding of themselves as rebel Catholics actively promoting LGBT rights. Throughout it all, however, they have served to facilitate their members’ participation in social, civic, and political life by integrating religion and politics, coordinating the identifications and languages of members, organizing meaning, shared action, and experience, providing emotional grammars that structure feelings with regard specific issues and events, and connecting members to networks of like-minded people.

For DignityUSA, this has recently culminated in the forming of Equally Blessed, an umbrella organization that brings together progressive Catholic groups Call To Action, DignityUSA, Fortunate Families, and New Ways Ministry to promote LGBT equality in the Church and wider society. Members of D/C have participated in the formation of this coalition and widely expressed enthusiastic support for the widening of the network of alternative Catholicism. As one member, Mark, said to me:
The national president, who just left, sent out a newsletter and he said "look, all this upward activity, you know, 'change, change, change church!' It's not working. It's got to go out horizontally, and then we'll have the bottom up. Instead of top-down, it's going to be bottom up. We have to be practical or we're not going to survive." So they started the networking and they found that we already had a welcoming and sympathetic ally in Call to Action. New Ways Ministry was slightly different than us but not *that* different… And so you put all this together and we find that we can participate in other activities as well, in terms of we've taken a strong stance on the sex abuse crisis. And, uh, I think in time we will be taking on other social issues too, things that the church is already, in a positive way, involved in but they could still use some nudges on.

D/C is a group where politics, identity, and faith are actively integrated through shared talk and practice. While D/C, as a group, rarely “mobilizes” in the typical sense of the word, it creates identifications and emotional dispositions in members that allow various forms of civic engagement, activism, and political life to resonate with them. This has the ultimate affect of creating a space where members can participate in various “mobilizations” and other movement-like activity, with D/C as a home base. A conversation with Gene, Alice, and Barbara is worth quoting at length to demonstrate this:

Gene: I think, you know, we're not sitting in anger. We're angry, but the response takes the power of getting upset and the response comes through positive action and emotion, rather than just screaming and yelling and ranting and raving. At least for me. That's what I've seen. I think, you know, we're still a gentle angry people, not just Dignity, but a lot of people in the church. You know the song. But I think, what I feel is that, especially because we have the tools that we have… We strategize when something happens. What's the best kind of response? And the response is strong, it's not weak, it's strong…

Alice: In the periphery are people… who have this energy and they don't know where to put it. So it comes back to organizations like ours… they can come in and become educated about us and become that stronger voice and understand where these other organizations are and, for example, what Dignity is doing, who we're working with. That anger can
be turned into positive energy.

Barbara: I think, from my perspective, anger is the beginning of a transitional phase. I think it also applies to the maturation of the Dignity community. Before I was ordained, I was just so mad at the Church… There was hope at one point because of Vatican II and the hope was dashed. The fact that we can't speak makes us even more angry. Once I got through that fear, that fear of what's it going to be like to be excommunicated, and I've been excommunicated at least 15 or 20 times already (we laugh)!

Gene: You go girl!

Barbara: No, really! (Adopting an exaggerated, authoritative man’s voice) Every time you go to an ordination you're excommunicated! (In a normal voice again) I mean, I'm excommunicated by the fact that I'm sayin' mass! I'm not trying to be funny about it, but I am trying to make a point. The anger, eventually, becomes transmuted as Alice is talking about… It becomes "So what? Let them have their stuff over there." When we had Dignity weekend, Saturday night, we were all together, we had mass, we had babies, we had older seniors, twenty of us went and had dinner.

Gene: It was wonderful.

Barbara: We're a family! So let them have what they have.

There is much to note in this conversation that explicitly speaks to what facilitating spaces do in general, and what D/C does as a facilitating space in particular. First, as suggested by Gene and Barbara, D/C “transmutes” anger into what Alice calls “positive energy.” Gene says that anger is unproductive when it is not directed towards a particular end. Rather, D/C focuses anger into strategizing. While not in this portion of the conversation, Gene indicates elsewhere that what he is referring to is D/C’s ability to shape discourses (through press releases or statements to the press) or organize protests when critical moments push the community to respond. As an example, when Cardinal George compared LGBT activists to the Ku Klux Klan, D/C held a series of
conversations to discuss what their reaction should be. Ultimately, D/C, along with DignityUSA and Equally Blessed, crafted a series of media statements. When Cardinal George eventually apologized, the official response D/C put together used Catholic language to declare victory, saying “a core element in our Catholic faith is the sacrament of reconciliation by which we admit our wrongs, seek and are given forgiveness. We welcome this apology from Cardinal George… We also invite a dialogue with the Cardinal, so that he might better understand and love the LGBT community in all its facets, especially those in his own Catholic Church who continue to be alienated by Church teaching.”

Second, Alice highlights another way that D/C acts as a facilitating group: by connecting people on “the periphery” who are looking for ways to get involved to each other and to resources. Building off Gene, her comment suggests that anger is a sort of free-floating resource that requires a level of knowledge and connectivity to actualize productively by organizing it into a collective force. Finally, Barbara constructs D/C as rebel Catholics, suggesting a reinterpretation of what to do with anger and identification. Anger represents a “transitional phase,” a bridge from being connected to what Barbara is suggesting is a hopeless institution to a more desirable situation: creating a family of choice outside of the confines of the Church.

So why is understanding D/C as a place that "transmutes" anger sociologically important? With regard to D/C specifically, because it shows how a marginalized group constructs specific ways to experience the world as a rebel Catholic. As I have been arguing in this chapter, groups structure our identities, emotions, and networks, shaping our experiences and actions. By providing us with places to talk about beliefs, practices,
and interpretations, groups provide us with the necessary schema and resources to understand, interpret, and navigate the world. We see that in the above discussions about D/C, where members relate how the community helped them convert anger into action, learn more about theology or other progressive Catholic organizations, integrate their spirituality and their sexuality, or find a supportive community.

More broadly, this is about how a group such as D/C acts as a facilitating space by providing these schema and resources. Effectively, D/C takes the disparate experiences of individuals and weaves them together to privilege certain narratives, practices, partnerships, and ideologies at the expense of others. Some members of D/C are converts to Catholicism, others are cradle Catholics. Some members have been out their whole adult lives, others only recently came out in middle-age, others (such as the woman priests who say mass) identify as straight allies. Some members arrive having been a part of the wider LGBT movement, others find the community through other alternative Catholic networks, some arrive with no history of any movement activity. Some come to D/C with a fully formed queer theology at their disposal, others are unsure if Catholicism and being LGBT can be reconciled. Despite these divergent backgrounds, part of what D/C does as a facilitating space is provide members who chose to participate with specific group narratives, practices, connections, and beliefs that represent active participation, at least while in the group context. As D/C's ongoing construction of AGLO as an out-group demonstrates, there are ways to be an "LGBT Catholic" that D/C understands as problematic because they are too conservative. Likewise, as their widespread rejection of "anger" and "ranting and raving" suggests, there are ways to push for change that are ineffective and undesirable. D/C promotes specific ways to
understand the emotions, identifications, practices, and partnerships involved with being an LGBT or allied Catholic. This, ultimately, facilitates specific socio-political messages that are promoted by and resonate with D/C as a community, specific statements and events that draw them into taking specific actions, and specific other groups that D/C feels capable of partnering with. As will be discussed in a chapter five, this means that despite not being a "social movement organization" in the strict sense of the word, D/C nonetheless facilitates mobilization, albeit around a narrow range of issues and in highly specific ways.

Conclusion: Embedded Politics and Group Practice

So how do we understand D/C and NC more broadly? Members of D/C are very comfortable referring to "the Dignity movement," when discussing both local chapter and the national organization. They also will refer to the "progressive Catholic movement," when talking about the arrangement of groups that DignityUSA has formed "Equally Blessed" with. Despite this, they are also comfortable talking about D/C and Dignity more broadly as a religious site where politics and claims-making are a small part of what goes on. Objectively, the degree to which D/C has been "activist" has vacillated, but in ways that do not mirror the predictions of mainstream social movement theory. Rather than mobilizing through their connection to political elites and then entering periods of "abeyance," they spend most of their time directing their energies towards everyday religious concerns and mobilize almost exclusively when they face direct suppression out of a sense of moral obligation to represent LGBT Catholics. Likewise, D/C almost never targets state authorities, instead directing their claims-making towards the church and civil society.
Members of NC, likewise, often refer to other social movements. The prayer in the vignette above discussed the civil rights movement. I have seen many sermons positively reference feminism, the Global Justice movement, immigrant rights movements, peace movements, and LGBT rights movements. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Miranda went so far as to suggest that the Church, writ large, could, and perhaps should, be thought of as a social movement. Despite this, members of NC never referred to their congregation as a social movement, despite a constant stream of active and passionate political talk circulating through the community.

A movement-centric approach, such as the Dynamics of Contention model (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), would have difficulty explaining D/C and NC because they would not fit its definition of what a social movement is. These are not groups that make claims and mobilize against the state. Likewise, approaches that move backwards from an existing movement to identify sites of mobilization such as “free spaces” may miss D/C and NC as well, as it is unclear what "movement" either group should be counted as a part of. Undoubtedly, D/C is part of DignityUSA, as well as part of the LGBT rights movement, but it is not integral to these movements in the way that the Black Church gave rise to the Civil Rights Movement in Morris's (1986) account, nor how Belmont House sustained the Feminist Movement in Rupp and Taylor's (1987) account. Likewise, NC has members that participate in a number of different movement groups, but none of them rest on the congregation in any fully obvious way. Finally, unlike the types of communities discussed by Elisaoph (1998), Oldenburg (1999), and Bender (2003), active political talk is encouraged and supported at D/C and NC. In fact,
one of the main purposes of these communities is to provide members a space to integrate various understandings of faith and politics.

If we shift our thinking on social movements and civic engagement to an understanding of embedded politics, where everyday life is saturated with socio-political meaning emerging out of expansive discourse (Hart 2002) and generating group identification, heightened emotions, and civic participation of various stripes, groups such as D/C and NC become central to our analysis. I suggest several ways that analyzing facilitating spaces contributes to contemporary scholarship on social movements. First, considering facilitating groups allows us to consider the full range of movement networks. Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Mary Bernstein (2008) suggest that scholars of social movements must recognize that power is not merely held by the state, and that social movements target and recognize a wide variety of institutional powers. This analysis, however, can go further. It is not just power from above that is "multi-institutional," but also power from below. While mobilizing SMOs often represent the most visible power of a movement, they are the tip of an iceberg with a deeply submerged base. Social movements rest on a patchwork of overlapping facilitating groups. A social movement's message resonates because individuals have spaces to learn about, discuss, and absorb them. Mobilization is possible because networks of connected groups circulate information and numbers. In short, political and civic participation is not exclusively about the most visible acts, but also the everyday acts of resistance, rebellion, accommodation, and support, and the social collectives that make these acts possible.

Second, discussing facilitating spaces provides us a pathway into discussing the embedded politics of everyday life. As mentioned, there has been a turn in social
movement scholarship to broader conceptions of movement activity. Starting with the
calls by scholars of new social movements to pay attention to the process of identity
formation (see Buechler 1995; Scott 1990), social movement scholarship has increasingly
accepted a wider range of foci than merely mobilization against the state. James Jasper
(1999), for example, calls for work into the biographies of social movement activists,
while Deborah Gould (2009) posits that emotions are central to understanding activist
projects. The example of D/C, used above, shows how facilitating spaces both shape the
biographies and emotions of members, ultimately shaping their connection to socio-
political issues and movements. Whereas Gould found anger to be corrosive to
participation in ACT UP, the D/C members profiled above discuss how D/C
“transmuted” their anger, facilitating increased, not decreased, participation in civic and
political organizations.

Finally, thinking about political life in terms of facilitating spaces proposes a
potentially fruitful research agenda. What kinds of groups are most likely to become
facilitating spaces? Are some facilitating spaces more likely than others to move
members into mobilization or civic participation? What sustains a facilitating space over
time and what causes a facilitating space to falter or wane? When we think of civic
engagement and political meaning-making as woven into the everyday activities of
people congregating in groups, we open up exciting new possibilities for understanding
how these things function at the level of community.

Appendix: The Other Communities as Facilitating Spaces

In the interest of space, I did not examine all six communities in this chapter. The
selection of NC and D/C was because they were communities that had histories, events,
and stories that illustrated what I was discussing in this chapter well, but any other selected community could have been discussed in this chapter. Every community fulfilled the basic requirements of being a space that was not inherently political but, nonetheless, organized adherents’ identities, beliefs, emotions, and relationships with regard to politics, bringing political meaning into everyday life.

The two communes, for example, JPUSA and RPF, both serve as spaces where members who wish to engage in political behavior have a ready pool of available people to support them. Brendan, a member of RPF, remembers how the community supported him in creating a shop, called the Recyclery, which promoted an environmentalist, politicized understanding of bike-culture. Without the financial and labor support of the community, Brendan suggested, the shop would never have gotten off the ground. Members of JPUSA shared similar stories, about enlisting other members of the community to join them in political activism. In fact, I got the word “facilitating” from Lizzie, a member of JPUSA who works at the community’s homeless shelter who said that moving to JPUSA has “facilitated” her ability to make her faith more of an “external” as opposed to “internal” thing. While not as prevalent, these themes emerged at WSS and MBSC as well. There two groups are congregations, not communes, so the financial and labor support for projects is comparatively smaller than at JPUSA and RPF, but members were often able to recruit each other for various civic and political projects.

Additionally, all the communities were understood as places where one learns about politics, often through the lens of faith. As I will discuss in the next chapter, one member of JPUSA who grew up in the community recounted to me that he was unable to distance himself from social issues such as poverty and racism because people around
him were actively engaging these issues and connecting them to their Christian walk. Whether or not he wanted to be ignorant of these social problems, he suggested, he could not be. They were a part of his life. This theme emerged regularly: the communities I observed were places where awareness was raised, ultimately shaping how people understood social issues, religion, and themselves. Every community has also, at some point, mobilized en masse with regard to a particular social issue. WSS regularly partners with other faith-based organizations to perform community volunteer work, and has also organized and participated in protest events around LGBT rights. In short, all the observed communities act as facilitating spaces for their members. The selection of D/C and NC was meant to be illustrative, not exclusive.
CHAPTER FOUR

“GOD DID IT, HE JUST USED OUR ALDERMAN”:
RELIGION, POLITICS, AND MESO-LEVEL SOLUTIONS TO SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Jimmy and I sat sipping coffee in big, comfy chairs at a small but busy coffee shop, discussing his understanding of who Jesus Christ is. “That's the kind of thing that has significantly changed over the years,” Jimmy said. I asked him to elaborate, and he continued, saying

When I was a child, Christ would save me from sin and hell, and take me to heaven. Today, Christ is so much more significant than that for me… Now I can know of Christ as a person who loves the sinners, and the prostitutes, and the tax collectors, and is always hanging out on the margins. Christ is God hanging out on the margins, with people who are unacceptable to church. Which, for me, is, well, it's a somewhat funny thing to say as a white male living in the city, privileged, and even as a gay man, it's kind of dual faceted. In an urban, white context, that doesn't make me very marginalized at all… But as a gay man in church, it puts me on the margins. As a gay man in a rural area, with my family, it puts me way out there. So sometimes it puts me right in with Jesus, sometimes it puts me far away from Jesus. So that's kind of how I would see Jesus and God.

Jimmy is one of the few LGBTQ-identified members of Reba Place Fellowship (RPF), the previously discussed Mennonite commune spread over Chicago’s far north side and the nearby suburb of Evanston (see chapter two). Jimmy’s story elaborates the complicated ways that religion and politics integrate, as well as demonstrates the degree to which we need an equally complicated vocabulary to understand religion and politics.
together.

After the above comment, Jimmy paused and then explained a particular understanding he has about God, and where that understanding came from.

Another thing [that's happened] since being at Reba; I've always known and believed that God has no gender. That masculine pronouns were no better than anything else, it's just what we use, kind of [by] default. And it seems, well, it's just kind of a silly point to think about- whether it's better to call God "he" or "she," but the reality is that when you use only masculine pronouns for God, you give God these kinds of attributes, and I guess I see God as more "other," this more transgendered mix of feminine and masculine characteristics. Especially in the study of queer theology, as well, that's important. Understanding God as, you know, trans. I read a quote, recently, about a person who, at a bar, was watching a drag queen dance, and she was moving in and out of the light, back and forth, changing from looking masculine to feminine, feminine to masculine, and this person said it was like his view of God, to some extent. Moving in and out, changing, not being something you can pin down. So I guess it's made God bigger. Somewhat more incomprehensible, in some ways more understandable, like not fitting in a box.

In this example, Jimmy actively sacralizes what would typically be considered secular in American Christianity by suggesting that understanding God as “trangendered” and similar to a dancing drag queen has provided him with a more robust theological understanding of the mystery and majesty of divinity. God has become bigger, for Jimmy, through understanding Christ as someone at the edges of society, beyond our human conceptions of gender. Jesus is an inspiration to Jimmy because, as a gay man in the church, he can understand and appreciate the Christ who was “hanging out at the margins.” Likewise, Jimmy references queer theology to suggest that God becomes both more knowable and more unknowable, theologically removing God from the need to have a gender. God is more knowable in this context because Jimmy has models to
understand this: transgendered persons and drag queens. God becomes more unknowable because it separates God from our terrestrial social constructions.

It would be a challenge to pinpoint where “religion” ends and “politics” begins in the above statements. Jimmy uses words and phrases that suggest he has a conception of structural power. He discusses “privilege,” being a “white male,” and what it means to be “marginalized.” He also suggests that it is problematic to associate God exclusively with masculine pronouns. Jimmy uses these concepts, however, to make decidedly theological points about the nature of God. Christ lived at the margins because that is where he could best love sinners and the oppressed, and suggests that experiencing marginalization brings him closer to Jesus. Likewise, by envisioning God as “transgender,” Jimmy makes a theological point, that God is bigger than we humans can comprehend. For Jimmy, religious and secular vocabularies intertwine to explain both the world of politics and the sacred cosmos.

In my study, Jimmy was not alone in drawing on multiple languages, both political and religious, to discuss the world. In fact, most subjects, both during interviews as well as in conversation, regularly blurred these categories. As I moved through my various field sites, I often found myself wondering what the boundaries were between religion and politics within the communities. Feminists have long suggested that “the personal is political,” meaning that politics is not just “out there” in the public sphere, but is also in our everyday, lived experiences, even if not immediately visible (Eliasoph 1998). James Jasper (2006) agrees with this assertion, suggesting a “political theory of social and economic life” in which actors, both individually and in groups, make “future-oriented” strategic choices in everyday practice (4-5). Eliasoph (1998) has found,
however, that the groups she studied often lacked the vocabularies to actively discuss politics in a way that allowed them to break out of individualistically-oriented interaction patterns. Paul Lichterman (2005) found something similar, suggesting that the church groups he observed often had trouble “spiraling out” and connecting their talk and work to larger social issues and potentially allied groups and organizations. Likewise, Andrew Perrin (2006) found that the social and civic groups he examined often had limited “democratic imaginations,” giving them constrained language to talk about possible solutions to social problems.

Lichterman’s suggestion that faith-based groups have difficulty thinking about social problems in non-individualized ways resonates which much work in the sociology of religion that suggests that religious groups, particularly conservative protestants, lack a language to talk about social structure (Bellah et al. 1985; Bender 2003; Edwards 2008; Emerson and Smith 2001; Kniss 2003; Moon 2004). While some researchers have conducted research into structurally-oriented, politicized religion (Warren 2001; Wood 2002; Yukich 2010), these studies are usually specifically looking at particular religious movements or movement organizations, rather than religious communities. Despite this, as Ziad Munson (2008) and Dawn Moon (2004) note, religious communities are places where discussions and debates about politics and the wider society do occur. The challenge is to assess when and how these debates and discussions are happening.

Similar to both Moon and Eliasoph, I found communities that wanted to avoid politics. What this meant, however, was not that they avoided political talk, as the groups Eliasoph observed so often did. Rather than avoiding talking about politics, they avoided calling their talk political. Across all six of my sites, at least one person (and usually
many more than one person) would ask me why I was studying them given that they are not a “political” or “activist” group. Jimmy, discussed above, specifically said that RPF did not want the debate about LGBT inclusion to be “political.” When members asserted to me that their groups were not “political” or “activist,” they nonetheless often followed up on this with a list of “political” or “activist” actions taken by the community. For example, Tim, a member of RPF, told me “Reba Place has never been an activist community,” just before saying “…well, we did the Underground Railroad thing back in the 80s, and have been [working with] Central American refugees, and that was a pretty public kind of thing, and Artie has had connections with North Suburban Peace Initiative, I think he helped start that...” and then continuing on about various projects the community has been involved in. Similarly, Ruth, a member of WSS, told me that she “was kind of surprised when you did your dissertation on us” because she did not feel that WSS had any “intrinsic activism” and she “[did not] know what makes [WSS] a social justice place.” Earlier in the interview, however, she told me that she “could only belong to a congregation that had a social justice bent” and that this was what she was concerned with as a person of faith. On more than one occasion, a member of a community would say something to me such as “You know who would be great for your study…” and then list off one of my other sites where, as mentioned, someone had already told me they were unsure why I would study them when they are not activists.

Some of this ambivalence about self-classifying as “political,” “social justice oriented,” or “activist” can be explained, I believe, by Moon’s (2004) finding that politics is thought of as dirty business to be avoided because it challenges what is shared in communities. Likewise, some of it can be explained by Chris Bobel’s (2007) suggestion
that people often have a “perfect standard” by which they understand activist behavior, seeing “activists” as other, more righteous people than themselves. There is more to it than this, however. Some of what is going on, I propose, is explained less by the fact that these groups avoid political talk (they do not), and more by the fact that the political is *embedded in everyday practices, discourses, and behavior* for these participants. Politics is often the normal stuff of life, or just what you do. Recall Miranda’s comment from the last chapter that “of course” there would be political issues raised in prayer at NC and postcards for the congregants to send to politicians in the back. In fact, every single community I observed shared two things to varying degrees: (1) a near constant stream of conversation and action related to decidedly political things, and (2) alternative languages and schema for conceptualizing this behavior that shied away from defining it as explicitly political.

In this chapter, I will examine how the communities I observed talked about and practiced politics, even when they did not call it that. These communities share a “political” take on society in that they actively discuss concepts such as structural inequality, identity and discrimination, war and violence, and consumer culture, but these ideas are understood through a religious lens. Their conceptualization of these issues draws on both political and religious language to connect larger issues with everyday morality, not in an effort to make the structural concerns disappear, but rather to sacralize personal behavior and interactions with greater meaning. I demonstrate three, interlocking points in this chapter:

1) While a focus on personal morality or individual behavior *can* be anathema to wider, structural analysis of social issues, it does not have to be. A focus on personal
behavior can also be a way of making structural issues tangible, especially for religious individuals to whom questions regarding personal behavior are highly salient.

2) Despite this, much of what the various communities do is not seen as “politics,” but rather understood in more nebulous terms.

3) Following from these two points, politics are embedded in our everyday behavior. Politics are a part of the everyday sense-making and world-constructing activities of social actors, embedding politics within wider universes of meaning for groups and individuals.

Ultimately, I suggest that by exploring these points, we may raise questions about what both religion and politics actually are. Politics are, I suggest, embedded in everyday life because we live our political beliefs in places, relationships, practices, discourses, and bodies, even when they are about abstract concepts. Our political beliefs become salient when questions are raised about how these things operate in our life. Additionally, as Stephen Hart (2002) points out, we lack concrete data on how progressive politics and culture integrate. To examine these ideas, I will begin with a discussion of how members of JPUSA talk about and understand politics.

**Connecting Individuals, Communities, and Structures at Jesus People, USA**

While having dinner with several members of JPUSA, the table-chatter turned to the community’s in-house Boy Scout troop. Edward, one of my main contacts at the site, said “I wasn’t a Boy Scout when I was a kid. I was the Christian version of it. I can’t remember what it’s called.”

“Aren’t the Boy Scouts technically Christian?” I asked.
“Yep,” Edward replied. Then, with an ironic smirk, he said “but not Christian enough. We did Bible study in this group.”

The JPUSA member next to me, a jovial man named George, burst out laughing at this. “We have to have a Christian everything, don’t we?”

Everyone at the table chuckled at George’s joke, then a woman named Gwen said “So the Boy Scouts are releasing all those documents on sexual abuse? Did you all see that in the news?”

“Yeah, I did,” George said. “That’s going to be crazy.”

“Sure,” Gwen said, “but can we really trust the media on this? I don’t trust them on anything. Like, they said the Boy Scouts wouldn’t let that kid be an Eagle Scout because he was gay, but how do we know they’re not just focusing on the most sensationalistic aspect of the story?”

Everyone thought quietly for a few seconds, then George replied “You know, this kind of stuff is all fear to me. We’re all conditioned to fear the ‘Other,’ you know? The gay person, the person of another race, it makes it so hard for us to get to know each other and trust people out there. Even the Christian. Like, Kirk Cameron gets up on TV because he’s famous and represents himself as some kind of Christian voice. But he doesn’t represent me. So people see him and think all Christians are bigots, or something.”

This led the four of us into a fairly intense discussion about the structural causes of fear and alienation in our society. We talked about the media, about politicians, and about changes in economic structures that resulted in people being more transient and knowing their neighbors less. No one ever tried to shut down the political tenor of the
conversation, nor did anyone try to force any kind of consensus. There was open but respectful disagreement at all points of the discussion. Eventually, the conversation ended when George politely excused himself to spend time with his son, promising that the conversation could be picked up later. As I walked across the community’s dining room to put away my dishes, a JPUSA member named Lucy jogged up to me. “I’ve got your DVD right here,” she said, handing me a small plastic bag. I had loaned Lucy and her husband Cliff a documentary about the history of the religious right.

“Did you enjoy it?” I asked.

“Enjoy wouldn’t be the right word,” she said, laughing. “It was interesting, but that’s the environment I grew up in, so it hit close to home. Like, my parents were just visiting, and I can’t talk politics with my dad. I had to leave the room at one point. Cliff can, though, because he’s, you know, Cliff.” I smiled and agreed with her that I could imagine Cliff, one of the most even-tempered people I’ve ever met, being able to talk politics with someone he disagreed with without any difficulty. Right then, Alana, a former member of JPUSA who still works at the shelter and was having dinner at a table nearby, saw the DVD case in my hand and asked “What’s that?” When I told her, she looked at me in faux horror and said “No way would I watch that! Even looking at George W. Bush makes me angry.” She then shuddered exaggeratedly to emphasize her distaste.

None of these conversations were out of place at JPUSA. Many of the people I met at the commune thoroughly enjoy talking politics. Walking into the offices as JPUSA’s homeless shelter, Cornerstone Community Outreach (CCO), there are posters with political slogans on the walls next to family portraits and pictures of athletes (for
example, one poster on inequality in the justice system features the phrase “One black man may be president but nearly one million are in prison” above a number of statistics about incarceration). Politics, especially local politics, is a foundational part of JPUSA’s DNA. Long-time members recall moving in to the neighborhood in the 1970s and witnessing for Christ on street-corners by passing out their newsletter, *Cornerstone*.

Fondly reminiscing about her early days with the community, JPUSA member Elaine told me “At that time, what we did was, typically, in the morning we'd have devotionals and Bible classes. Then we'd have lunch, and then we'd hit the streets and do witnessing. We'd pass out the *Cornerstone* paper.”

In the early days, this focus on evangelism was the norm. JPUSA took the attitude that if struggling people came to Jesus, their life would turn around. This suggests a community ideology in line with the typical evangelical worldview, which tends to focus on personal behavior as both the cause of and solution to social problems. By the 1980s, though, while some of their former Jesus Movement cohort were turning towards a more libertarian-conservative viewpoint (Shires 2007), JPUSA was undergoing a shift to a more structural analysis of social issues (Gordon 1984). Here is an exchange I had with Pastor Neil about what happened to JPUSA as they confronted poverty in Uptown:

Neil: It would have been in ‘78, ‘79 that we intentionally moved into the Uptown area which, at that time, was a very impoverished area. A lot of very poor people lived in this area.

Todd: Was that part of the intention for moving here?

Neil: It was very much a part of the intention of moving here… When a community is struggling from lack of peace and, kind of, gang activity, to have the Jesus People move into your neighborhood is a welcome thing… But to a developing community, and to a gentrifying community, eventually you don’t want that commune around anymore, because maybe
they are doing services for people that you don’t really find attractive or that you want moving into your neighborhood. So when we moved into Uptown, I mean, right away people were coming to our doors looking for food... That would have been in the mid 80s when the plight of the homeless was becoming more evident. I mean, we opened our doors one winter to, say, about 25 or 30 men who were in the dead of the winter without housing. The Department of Human Services in Chicago would call us and ask us if they could stay with us, and they kind of knew we wouldn’t say “no.”

This story was repeated to me in very similar language by almost everyone I spoke with at JPUSA, particularly by those members who were around when it happened. The story is almost always told in the same way: because JPUSA took the attitude that Christ would not turn away a person who needed shelter, the community began taking in homeless people to stay in the community. Eventually, their lobby and dining room filled up with people seeking refuge, leading to a concern that they would run out of space or resources, or perhaps get in trouble with the city. Elaine recalled a time when a member named Billy had to talk the police out of giving them a citation as they packed 60 homeless people into their small dining room for a meal. “The police barged in,” she said, “and they're like ‘What are you doing, are you having a soup kitchen here?’ And Billy’s like ‘No, we're just having a few of our friends over for dinner.’”

As CCO’s director Sandy explained to me, somewhat self-deprecatingly, JPUSA tends to look for where there is a need and then act, not think about whether or not meeting those needs is feasible. In fact, the most frequently cited benefit of the community not functioning democratically but rather having appointed members who led on different issues, was that it allowed for quick and expert responses to perceived needs, rather than lengthy deliberations. CCO operates, Sandy said, “by the grace of God.” When I asked her what that entails, she smiled as she began relating stories about
desperate times where they were not sure where funding or support was going to come from, only to have it come through at the last minute. After one particularly vivid story where the former Alderman of JPUSA’s neighborhood, Helen Shiller, helped out the community, Sandy smiled and said “See, God did it, he just used our Alderman, in that particular case.”

Sandy’s comment reminded me of an old joke I heard in Sunday school when I was young: a man’s town was flooding and he sat waiting to be saved on his roof, watching the waters rise. A helicopter flew by and the pilot offered to take the man to higher ground. The man declined the offer, though, saying “God told me he’s going to save me, so I don’t need any help!” Eventually, the waters rose and the man drowned. When he got to heaven, he stood before God and asked “I thought you said you were going to save me. I waited faithfully and still drowned. Why did you not help me?” God looked sympathetically at the man and replied “I tried. I sent a helicopter and you refused to get on!” As indicated by Sandy’s comments, for members of JPUSA, as well as members of all of the communities I observed, the sacred and the divine are revealed in the everyday. As with the joke, it was your job to work with what God gives you, recognizing when God’s hand was moving in the world, creating opportunities for action. This means that even mundane interactions are imbued with cosmic significance, suggesting that personal behavior is of great importance.

For example, JPUSA eventually began to discuss opening CCO because of events such as the one discussed above with the police. They were trying to figure out how they could continue to help the impoverished of Uptown without being crowded out of their home or getting in legal trouble. The members who were there when the decisions were
being made, however, rarely present this as a matter of *politics*. Rather, as with Sandy’s suggestion that acting upon perceived needs is their motivation, the decision to open CCO is presented as a moral imperative: something that there was simply no way to avoid doing. Brad, for example, a man who has lived in the community his whole life, recalled being angry at the moral knowledge he had about the world because he lived at JPUSA.

I think one of the things that made me angry most was that I was told *truth* at a very young age, and I understood I was responsible for that truth. I understood at a very young age that I had been told what right and wrong was and anytime I did something wrong I knew it… I mean, as a little kid, if I came home past eight at night I had to walk over the homeless people that were in my lobby. I knew there were people who didn't have homes. I knew there were people who didn't have food, and it was part of my responsibility to help them… And understanding that, wow! I had a responsibility to help people! I couldn't just turn my back on them. Seeing and hearing the troubles they had gone through, I now felt like I have to do something about that.

For Brad, like many people at JPUSA, issues of structural inequality are very real and require solutions that are at least somewhat structurally oriented. These issues, though, are also about sin and the personal responsibility to be a moral person and live in a prefigurative way. The structural and individual levels are often very tangibly connected for members of JPUSA. Some of this results from a mistrust of powerful institutions to do what is right. Here is Brad again, talking about solutions to contemporary social problems:

I would like to see our community taking an active part, not just our community, but neighborhoods in general, taking an active part in supporting each other. I don’t think that our government can fix poverty and crime in any way by making laws any more than some community people standing up and taking an active interest in the people around them… I would like more places where you could gather as communities. Rather than having soup kitchens, you’d have house kitchens. Like, you have an apartment building and 10 neighbors would get together and have
dinner and you’d all kind of pitch in something for the meal, it doesn’t have to happen here, it can happen anywhere. Get to know your neighbors. Your neighbors are struggling with something? Help them out… I guess that’s the idea, people living a little more cooperatively, not necessarily community living, although it’s a type of community living. Just, you know, let’s just cooperatively work together for some basic human rights… Let’s instill a sense of loving your neighbor in each place where you live.

In this explanation, Brad imagines a world where people live and work cooperatively, on a neighborhood level, to address social problems. During my observations at JPUSA, I would often see members passionately discuss social issues such as racism, inequality, gentrification, sexism, and homelessness. They were also very likely to suggest structural solutions to these problems, with many members suggesting affordable housing, prison reform, ending the war on drugs, and universal healthcare as hopes they had for the future. However, as Brad describes above, JPUSA members also tended to imagine very meso-level solutions to social problems that understood individuals coming together to conduct community action as a way to address social problems.

JPUSA’s analysis of social problems complicates work that suggests social problems tend to be understood either structurally or individualistically, with evangelicals and many other religious groups tending towards individually oriented understandings of social problems. In these understandings, personal morality is seen as both the cause of and solution to social problems. With regard to racism, for example, someone with an individualistic orientation towards the problem would suggest that racism is the result of people acting in a discriminatory way. The solution, therefore, is for individuals to not hold racist beliefs. The suggestion in much theoretical work is that these sorts of understandings miss the more important structural nature of social
problems, resulting in an inability for groups with such a viewpoint to enact social change (see Emerson and Smith 2001 for a prominent example). While there is no doubt that this is true for many groups and individuals in the U.S., for members of JPUSA, personal morality is important, but is rarely presented as the cause of social ills. Rather, social ills have decidedly structural causes that can be solved through solutions that connect the individual, the community, and the society.

To further demonstrate this, I’ll draw on comments from JPUSA member Cliff, the husband of Lucy, who was mentioned above. A long-time shelter worker, Cliff is a tall, broad man often clad in cargo pants and a hoodie. Because of his size and stature he cuts a fairly intimidating figure until he opens his mouth and his slow, gentle voice eases out. Cliff and I sat in an empty office at CCO talking about the problems he perceived in the neighborhood and country.

I think the whole prison structure, for instance, the whole war on drugs [is a problem]. And I know in saying that you think, “Oh, you think drugs are good?” No, [but] actually, if you walk down Wilson Avenue, they are going to lock up young black men, not lock up young white men, you know? For marijuana, or even crack, or whatever, because the [laws] have been made just like the laws in the New Testament. They suit some people and they don’t suit others. I think drug laws, for instance, are very similar. When they would bring up Jesus, about the Sabbath, and then he would be, like, healing people on the Sabbath, they say you can’t heal people on the Sabbath, you know? It’s, like, here are these laws, which they can make to bring about their form of justice or law or finance or whatever they want to do.

In this statement, Cliff presents an analysis of racism and structural inequality that uses the story of Christ to privilege those who, as Cliff suggests, are oppressed by unfair laws in the same way that Jesus was. He combines religious language and political language to create a narrative that places power, not personal failings, as the culprit in the creation of
social ills. Later in our conversation, I asked him to talk about how he could imagine things getting better in the neighborhood. Cliff responded

The rich and the powerful in the neighborhood think “If you just do this, this, this, and this, it’s going to be alright.” It’s like with gangs, “if we get more police, there will be less shootings”… Well, we had relationships with all of these [gang members]… The politicians are going to tell lies about it, and they are going to create this myth that some government agency can come and fix the whole situation or that the police are going to come and fix the whole situation. When you start to know the inner workings of the community, you see that it just doesn’t work the way that they think that it’s going to work. More police doesn’t necessarily mean that the violence is going to stop or that the drug dealers are going to disappear.

Cliff went on to explain that the real solution to gang violence in the community was forging relationships with gang members to model a different kind of neighborhood. He made clear, though, that this is not about “personal responsibility.” He jokingly said that when he first moved to the neighborhood, he “thought [he] would tell people they need to leave the gang” when he thought about what solutions to gang violence might be. Now, however, he sees community partnerships across lines of race and class as the real way to deal with social issues. In other words, Cliff is not suggesting that the solution is for gang members to be more responsible but, rather, that the community needs to come together to create a positive environment for residents.

A Similar Perspective: Community, Power, and Injustice

For Cliff, the combination of political language and religious language, structural analysis and personal morality, is the core of Christ’s mission in the world, and to be a true Christian means following Jesus’ example and challenging power structures. While members of JPUSA were particularly inclined to speak in this way, the ability to connect structural problems, community practice, and personal behavior was typical across all six
of my sites. There was no site where members consistently struggled to link these three levels of society. This is not to say they understood them in the same ways across all six sites. Some sites emphasized one over another. For example, Mind, Body, and Soul Church (MBSC) tended to emphasize personal behavior significantly more than JPUSA, while (at least some members of) Neighborhood Church (NC) tended to emphasize structural solutions more than almost any other community. Despite this, similar tendencies could be observed throughout the sites.

For example, when I sat down with Gail, a long-time member of MBSC who works as a social worker, we had an exchange in which Gail actively connected the ongoing legacy of anti-black racism with the history of the Black Church in America, which she sees as having declined in significance. Finally, she discussed how the church should model itself more after Christ, who was a fighter of social ills. Here, Gail presents her take on structural racism:

All those guns, why did they end up in my community? Why do all the drugs end up in my community? Why do I see Caucasians coming into my community to buy drugs? Why do I see the policemen roaming in my community constantly? ... Why do I see them harassing people when there is no need for it? Simply because they can… That's what happens with many of the black men, you see. They may never have been in any trouble but the police harassed them from probably, like, 10 [years old]… It's like, is that an injustice? Absolutely… I think power corrupts. I do. And do they have absolute power? Yes they do.

For Gail, there is no hesitation to define social problems in terms of injustice and power. Similarly to Cliff, she presents a narrative of an unequal justice system that discriminatorily targets black communities and black men. After she said this, I asked her if she saw the church as playing a role in addressing the crisis of racism in the U.S.
answered using a community-based model of church action, suggesting that a decline in the mobilizing power of churches has contributed to social problems.

[The church] used to have a lot of power... but [now] people don't go to church. And so it wouldn't have the power because what people see in the church is the hypocrisy... [and] rigidity, within the church... If you think of the way it used to be, the pastor would say, “Okay, this is who we are going to vote for.” That's who they would vote for because they trusted the pastor. They trusted what was going on in the church. If you think about it, in the black community, that was all they had. They didn't have the education, many of them. They didn't have the places to go like they have now.

Here, Gail expresses a narrative of declining church power, particularly within the black church, with regard to mobilizing the community and enacting political power. Notably, Gail attributes this to problems within the church. She says that this is the result of the “hypocrisy” and “rigidity” that people see in the church. After this, she explained that the church would work better if there could be an open conversation about people’s failings, including the failings within the church. I asked her what could help turn the church into the social force it used to be or could be and she said

I think the church [is going to] have to change. I think we have to [understand] Jesus for who he really is... He did fight social ills, but he didn't do it in a mean and vindictive kind of way. All he did is ask them a question and make them think. To help them try to change their behavior. That's all we can do. I don't think we are even asking the questions. I don't think so. I don't think we address issues. [There are] so many black churches in communities. I would like to see them all join together for a common cause, but that's not gonna happen cause everybody likes to be the chief. Everybody wants to be in charge. If they could all join, that would be some power there. Even as a force to bring change in the black community there would be power if you just gather together and begin a dialogue... And I believe it shouldn't just be that we provide the food. We need to teach you what to do so you can manage when you get the food. Maybe we should have a cooking class to teach you what to do to make it healthy. Even when you have $12, how can you shop for your family? What can you do to manage a budget? In order to make it more valuable to people who are using the resources.
In this wide-ranging exchange with Gail, she moves back and forth, with ease, between assessing social problems in light of structural inequality, community disintegration, and personal pathology. She also integrates secular and religious language throughout her comments. For example, Gail suggests that the declining power of churches has resulted in less organized communities, fostering a lack of collective power in black communities. She sees this as emerging out of the fact that people are currently less likely to go to church, suggesting that problematic moral behavior is at the heart of the social ills she is discussing. However, Gail also addresses structural racism, indicating that African-Americans are the victims of patterns of discrimination. To address these problems, she suggests, on the one hand, community organization (which she sees as unlikely because of individual egos) as well as educating people with regard to how to best take care of themselves and their families. Finally, she connects all of this to a narrative of Christ as a fighter of social ills who uplifted people and changed lives.

What is striking in these comments is that, despite many demographic differences (race, denomination, gender, lifestyle) from Brad and Cliff of JPUSA, Gail presents a strikingly similar take on social problems and solutions to each of them. Structural inequality is a primary cause of social problems, but a suspicion of power leads them to propose meso-level solutions about community building and holistically caring for neighborhoods. This was consistent across all six of my sites. At no site did my subjects, either in public conversation or in interviews, suggest that problems were entirely or even mostly the result of personal failings, yet nowhere was personal behavior completely left out of the equation. For these religious groups, personal behavior was highly relevant
because, ultimately part of being a person of faith means having an understanding of how to engage in moral practices. Additionally, personal behavior was often understood in terms of the wider community. You are who you are as a person of faith, in part, because of your community. Communities were understood as amplifying your voice, holding you accountable, presenting you with a variety of views, and plugging you into wider networks. As such, people I spoke with often presented highly community-oriented solutions to social problems that involved creating supportive networks, representing communities, and investing in the local. These understandings combined the structurally oriented language of the secular and academic left with the individualistically-oriented language of dominant religious discourses to create narratives that focused on community-power as a bridge between the micro and macro levels.

**Staying on the Front Lines: Integrating Multiple Languages**

Returning to JPUSA, Cliff, who was discussed above, presented an impassioned take on the life of Christ where he presented Jesus as a rebel who lived at the margins and stood up to authority.

For the one Christ Jesus, it’s not just like we’re male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, you know? I think I started to realize these aren’t just spiritual concepts, some mystical concepts. It’s actually things that you actually need to apply to your life… Jesus talks about visits to the prisoners and “done unto the least of these.” These are important when I read the Gospels. Of course, it’s like, Jesus rebukes the powerful and, what is it? Matthew 23? Where he describes the Pharisees and, you know, “blessed are the poor in spirit,” the Sermon on the Mount… I wish we didn’t have to deal with politics but you have to deal with politics because, um, the people here, for instance, are hurt by politics continually… [Jesus] was challenging the power structure, he was challenging the concepts, you know? It’s so much more than just him saying “I have good news and you need to be saved and you just need to have a personal relationship,” you know? It’s so much more than that, and so then when, um, when they
killed Jesus on the cross, of course it was like he was continually challenging the way and... lifting up the underdog, the misrepresented.

This understanding of Christ was typical at JPUSA. Members consistently repeated to me that part of understanding Christ is accepting him as a marginal, countercultural figure. Cliff’s comments echo the suggestion made by RPF member Jimmy at the beginning of the chapter that Jesus was a person who was “hanging out at the margins.” As another example, here is Alana, who spent most of her life living at JPUSA and continues to work for their shelter, presenting a similar take on Christ as Cliff and Jimmy:

Jesus is so incredibly perfect for counterculture people, because his whole ministry was to prostitutes and tax collectors and, you know, lepers, the outcasts of society. So when you look at him, you can really sort of see him as the most punk rock of any person to ever walk the face of the earth. I mean, really. “I live in a society full of Pharisees… and here I am doing everything they say not to do, but at the same time I am being a compassionate, loving person.” I think in conservative Christianity, and in mainstream America, it is more about individualism because everybody already belongs. “I was already on the football team, I already had a million friends, I was in my youth group”… American society has set up this world of perfect people who go to college and do everything right and play sports and all these things that we praise in our society, and then there is [this] other group of underlings, all they want in their life is community… Those are the people who come to Jesus People!

This notion weaves together multiple grammars to create a Christ whose words are applicable to contemporary social issues. This is not, I would argue, merely “updating” Jesus to make him palatable to a contemporary audience, as when the Bible is “translated” into modern slang. The point is not to make Christ palatable but to make him applicable. This represents a more thorough attempt to integrate the language of Christianity with contemporary languages towards the end of creating models for living out Christian behavior in everyday practice.
For example, here is Pastor Diana of MBSC talking about how the Bible is only useful insofar as it can provide models for living.

I believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, but I believe that the only way people can get to that is when they can experience the love of God. Then they can experience, engage with the Word of God and get to know Him. But first they have to see God in their situation. And the only way they're going to do that is when somebody is present with them. When someone shows them love when nobody else loves them. When somebody touches them when nobody else would dare touch them. I think that's where it comes from for me. It is because that book [she points to her Bible on her desk] never helped me. Not in the form that it's in. Not the way that people hand it to you when you walk into the church. What helped me was people that came along and touched me. The people that opened doors for me. The people that loved me… And if I can be that person for somebody else, if they get to Christ and the Book, good, but Christ was alive, and he still lives, and people need to know that. A dead Christ does none of us any good, and when we hand people a book that appears to be a history book with a bunch of stuff in it that we don't understand, he never comes alive in our lives.

When I asked Diana to explain what she meant, she said that we make Christ come alive in our lives when we love our neighbors, which she suggested MBSC did by running a soup kitchen and participating in local politics. She presented a very similar narrative to her congregant, Gail, saying that the church has lost its way as a social leader, and they have to engage in community building practices to get back to where they once were. Diana said that the black preacher has become “a sellout.” Church leaders began “to get a piece of the American pie and we [Black Church leaders] could be silenced and not involved in politics.” She said, however, that she does not want to be a sellout. She wants to be on the “front lines.” I asked her to elaborate, and she said

I think that the African-American community is in trouble, we're in crisis, and I think our young men being in jail, even our young women, AIDS is rampant in the African-American community, particularly among women… So I think the church has the power to be that voice to the community, that voice that helps to realize and reclaim and continue to
fight for the freedoms that the community deserves. And so I believe that we can do that, but I believe it takes us being on the front line. So being at MBSC, for me, is being on that front line. I think that so many of us as pastors and preachers, in the church universal, we want to be bishops, we want to have megachurches, we want to preach all over the world, but we don't want to be here for the people. We don't want to go serve in the soup kitchen. We don't want to go up to the school and fight for our members who are suffering in schools. We don't want to get our hands dirty. And I am committed to staying on the front lines.

Like the quotes presented above, Pastor Diana outlines a prophetic Christianity in these statements that integrates political and religious language towards the end of developing models for how to practice right behavior in everyday life. For Diana, it is a moral imperative for pastors and churches to be on the “front lines” of dealing with social ills. Diana’s language in the above quotes suggests the changing of personal behavior, on one hand, and the confronting of structural inequality, on the other. The community is the site where both personal pathology and structural inequality are remedied in daily practice.

There is a saying that “all politics is local politics.” While certainly an exaggeration, like most colloquialisms, the above quotes by members of JPUSA and MBSC hint at the kernel of truth in the saying. All politics may not exactly be local, but understandings about politics and morality are often contextual, about specific people, places, communities, and experiences. Even when politics refer to larger, more abstract concepts such as macroeconomics or inequality, the sorts of things we tend to mean when we say “politics,” and the application of them, is almost inherently local for most people. Few of us have the opportunity to enact politics at the level of policy, let alone federal or even state policy. For most of us, the way we “live” our moral or political is in interactions with others, through evaluations of others, and by the choices we make in our daily lives.
Suggesting that we live out political and moral beliefs in our daily lives, however, is not to suggest that our beliefs and behavior are entirely consistent. Indeed, scholars such as Kathleen Blee (2003), Ziad Munson (2008), Ann Swidler (2001), and Stephen Vaisey (2008, 2009) have demonstrated that beliefs and behavior are not always neatly congruous. I suggest that my data provides a lens through which to understand the relationships between beliefs and behavior: our beliefs require the weaving together of a variety of languages and schemas, potentially meaning that groups and individuals have a wide variety of possibilities for those occasions where they are called on to make moral and political decisions.

What the ability of actors to draw on multiple languages to make sense of the world suggests is that we cannot understand either faith or politics as a single thing. Munson (2008) suggests that events may carry political and religious meaning simultaneously, and that this makes it difficult to fully disentangle the two from each other. I would take Munson’s suggestion a step further and suggest that part of the creativity of both religion and politics is that they provide loaded languages for talking about the social world in ways that are constitutive of identity, boundaries, and community. When Alana says that Jesus is the most punk rock person who ever lived, she creatively integrates sacred and secular languages in a way that make Christ applicable to a wide variety of social situations and useful in countercultural identity construction.

While I argue that the integration of different languages is creative cultural work, I do not suggest that it is not, in some ways, constrained. We draw on collectively held understandings and are, therefore, limited by what already exists, in many ways. Above, Alana is drawing on shared understandings of punk rock as marginal, countercultural, and
anti-authoritarian to interpret the story of Christ. Rather, I suggest that the creativity these
groups and individuals demonstrate is the result of finding ways to draw selectively on
wider fields of meaning to talk about moral and political choices encountered in the
everyday. In the next section, I will explore how languages integrate in ways that shaped
members’ understandings of the world.

**Understanding Politics in Light of God, Community, and Inequality:**

**Comparing Across Groups**

A consistent commonality across all six of my sites was an ambivalence about
referring to what they did as “political.” There seemed to be a series of reasons why this
happened at the various sites. Nina Eliasoph (1998) suggested that people need to,
effectively, talk themselves into having their beliefs, meaning that sites where they could
openly discuss politics were important for the development of civic ideas. What she
found, however, was that people often lacked these sites in their lives. As mentioned
earlier, this was not the case for the communities I observed. These were places where
people actively and passionately discussed politics. Sometimes the sites or participants
seemed to confirm Moon’s (2004) finding that church groups thought of politics as dirty,
divisive business. As an example, here is Jimmy, the member of RPF whose quotes
opened the chapter, talking about the ongoing discussion that RPF is having about
LGBTQ inclusion:

> We don't know what the next steps are [we laugh]. I think there's going to
> be an increased level of honesty on this. Obviously, there are some people
> in our group like myself and Belinda who would want for Reba Place
> Fellowship to be a community that affirms LGBT relationships… Others
> in the group are happy with the way it is but now realize that there needs
> to be conversation, realize that we don't have a consensus, but they are
> happy with where we are at this point. And [we decided] to not go into this
talking about policy, not go into this with the intent to change anything, because that would kind of frame the debate as a more political thing. Frame it as a debate, which we don't want it to be, we want it to be sharing, leading to dialogue, conversation. And having those same things like policy change, talking about policy, it changes the whole dynamic. At this point, although, personally, we [may want change], the agenda is just to begin the conversation, to start with sharing, to be open to dialogue and, beyond that point, as the committee, as the fellowship.

At first glance, it would seem that Jimmy is suggesting the community avoid “politics” in the discussion about LGBTQ inclusion because politics is seen as dirty and divisive. His comments do indicate that this is, undoubtedly, part of why he is suggesting it. However, writing off what is going on here as seeing “politics” as too divisive for inclusion in the community is problematic because, on any number of occasions, I have seen and heard members of RPF actively use political language. For example, at one fellowship meeting, two members passionately presented a talk on “food justice,” strongly suggesting that the community rethink how they spend money and purchase food to a way that was more in line with “God’s economy,” by which they meant an economy that was liberatory and non-exploitative. This included supporting independent business and buying locally.

Likewise, members rarely had a problem actively discussing political issues, both inside and outside of the community. Members frequently spoke with me about environmental justice, peace activism, LGBTQ rights, civil rights, and affordable housing, using explicitly “political” language. For example, here is Brendan talking about how first encountering the progressive Christian commune The Simple Way around the time of the second Iraq War radicalized him as a college student:

Well, it was an obvious case of imperial overreach to me, in that a war like that, that can be taken on by a democracy without the people’s input, without reviewing the facts, without looking at the history of what has been done, and you’ve already engaged in one war, and you had the
opportunity to take down Saddam Hussein in 1991 in the Gulf War, and it wasn’t taken, the tanks were pulled out. The history of it is a lot of what freaked me out… So yeah, I guess I started radicalizing, like, what is the system that allows one group of people who call themselves a nation to go over to another place and slaughter lots of people and then sort of nation build after that in their own image? It seemed like this weird theology was happening, naturalistic theology, and so this counter theology that these Christian radicals were living out and articulating quite well was, I would say, what largely radicalized me. I mean, it was obviously a lot of secular groups that were radical – feminism, once you started into this stuff it is a rabbit hole, and so you have people who are doing the LGBT and Q, and feminists, radical socialism, anarchists and all of these different people, vegans, environmental, they all, they all coalesce around the Iraq War. And so that is where I sort of did most of my, spent most of my college years was in those groups.

Interestingly enough, Jimmy’s experience of coming to RPF, detailed below, mirrors Brendan’s experience of attending the Simple Way and having to rethink what being a Christian meant in light of politics.

The older generation of Reba who were involved in Civil Rights Movements and so on, and the younger generation at Reba, quite a few of them are into, like, anarcho-primitivism, which, again, I had never even heard of before [we laugh]. I had never heard of anarchism as something other than like, the 7th grade boy who's into pissing off his parents by making bombs or something [we laugh]. So that was a big shock for me… It was just suddenly, like, going from this super conservative environment to, not only like, progressive liberals in the city but even more, like, anarchists, who didn't even connect with liberalism.

If RPF members are comfortable talking politics, why not make the debate about LGBTQ issues “political?” The answer lies in the above comment about “God’s economy.” For members of RPF, as with all six of the communities I observed, they shied away from calling what they did “politics” or “activism” less because they were opposed to those things and more because they see what they are doing in terms that are at once both more immediate and more cosmic. It is not that they avoid talking about politics. They talk extensively about politics. They just avoid calling what they talk about politics. What
these groups were doing was not about “politics,” but was about living one’s life in light of very real religious and moral imperatives.

To continue with the example of RPF, Jimmy went on to clarify his above comments on debate over LGBTQ inclusions as follows:

I mean, people in the fellowship really do believe that, you know, you love your neighbor. They love those around them. Everyone believes those concepts, but Reba actually has practice and experience in living that out, I think. It has to be lived out constantly, everyday, in Fellowship life. Everybody in the Fellowship does not agree with each other. That's just the way it is! And not only do they have to spend time together and be under the same roof, they have to be relational and continue on in conversations. So I've had a few conversations with Edith. When it comes to LGBT relationships, like, same-sex relationships, she is not necessarily affirming… And, yet, I've felt respected by Edith. She's the one that's continued to ask me to be on leadership teams and asked me to be involved.

In other words, keeping “politics” off the table is not about downplaying the issue, but rather about the norms the community has in place about how to live their moral values in everyday practice. Jimmy uses the Biblical phrase “love your neighbor” as a way to talk about RPF’s tangible commitment to putting religious values into practice.

A long-time member of RPF named Tom agreed with Jimmy’s assessment, saying “The most important thing about Reba Place is that… it is a local community, so it has always been focused on this neighborhood and… The people who have been at the center of Reba Place have very kind of ad hoc visions.” RPF does not, Tom suggested, assess problems in terms of a “five year plan” or “blueprint,” but rather assesses them on an issue-by-issue basis, with regard to how to mobilize solutions in the local community. When I asked Tom to elaborate on this, he related the following story that he said captured something about the essence of RPF:
I mean, Reba Place, it has been an anarchist congregation in terms of the [decentralized] decision making and the way that things are done but nobody here would have articulated it that way or want to articulate it that way or then try to say, “Oh, well, if we are that kind of organization, then we should be doing this, this and the other. That is not the way that things work around here… It is a lot of this kind of spirituality, of listening to the Holy Spirit, and in being very aware of the vision of things. I mean the story that I always tell is my, it kind of gets to the essence of Reba Place and it is my favorite story about Cecil… we had this big open mic at congregational meetings and anybody can come to the microphone and say whatever they want to say, um, so somebody was arguing against whatever the proposal was. “We cannot do this,” and the argument was, “because that is not the Reba Tradition.” And Cecil was sitting close to the front, and popped out of his chair and he came to the microphone right away and he said, “Now listen,” gets his crooked finger up, he says, “Listen – the Reba Place Tradition is that we listen to the Holy Spirit and we do what the Holy Spirit says. That is the only tradition we’ve ever had, that is the only tradition we ever should have.” And he sat down. And everybody went, [pause, Tom audibly sighs, we laugh]. I mean, it was great, and I think that to me, that is the secret of the place. That there is that feeling that this is not about the vision or blueprint, it is a very moment by moment, week by week thing with these people in this place.

There are two things to note in this story with regard to my primary point. One is that RPF allowed (and continues to allow) anyone to speak at their meetings. They do, as Tom points out, have a very decentralized, anarchist way of conducting business. While there are, technically, “leaders,” their official power is limited and most members have the ability to make proposals or steer the community in some way.

Second, and following from this, Tom suggests that members of RPF would not refer to what they do as “anarchist,” despite its anarchist leanings, because that would

1 It must be pointed out that members often pointed out to me that many people RPF have a great deal of unofficial power which can shape how decisions get made, but the structure of the group does mean that most people in the community can, on some level, speak into the structure.

2 The conversation indicated that Tom was referring to the older leadership with this comment. As Jimmy indicated earlier, many younger members are fairly comfortable referring to themselves as “anarchist.”
imply some kind of ideology. RPF actively avoids being called *either* left- or right-wing, even as they collectively espouse views predominantly associated with progressivism. Rather, as the story about Cecil demonstrates, members of RPF tend to understand what they do in terms that are spiritual and local. They are a community that does the work of the Holy Spirit in a particular place and time. Even when actively discussing politics (the debate that was going on in Tom’s story was debates that RPF had in the 1990s about racial reconciliation and women in leadership), they tend to understand their political work in highly spiritual terms. This is strikingly similar to how Sandy and others talked about the work of JPUSA above. They assessed needs in their everyday practice and moved to act on those needs as people of faith responding to the opportunities to serve that God had put before them.

Up to this point in this chapter I have concentrated predominantly on the two communes I examined. It is worth asking if this collective, meso-level approach to understanding communal responses to questions of everyday morality and politics is an artifact of the structure of those groups. Several members of both groups stressed that communal living made everyday choices and personal relationships more important. Here is JPUSA member Edward explaining his take on this:

> Being forced to be with that same person, like, literally every single day, interacting with them every single day forces you to both confront the [issues] and hostilities in your own life, but also to grow in, you know, basically your social skills and how do you deal with conflict and all of that. So that is sort of exaggerates life and it becomes an illustration to, that you can communicate to other people about like how you deal with these sorts of issues, if that makes any sense to you… I think that is sort of the point with a lot of ascetic practices is that they exaggerate certain aspects of life so that certain life lessons are more obvious.

Despite suggestions from member of both groups that communal living had these effects,
my data would suggest they were a matter of degree as opposed to presence. Members of
all the communities articulated collectivist, community-based responses to responses to
social problems, as well as conceptualized relationships and personal behavior as having
political significance, even when those words were not used.

For example, Rabbi Elliot of Welcome and Shalom Synagogue (WSS) followed
the trend of shying away from describing himself in political terms, saying “to the extent
that I'm an activist, I really have trouble describing myself that way, but I know I look
that way to other people.” Despite this, when he spoke of his own “activism,” he did so in
a way that both tempered it as well as connected it to Judaism.

You know, it's not that I even think of myself as such a leftist! I think of
myself as a very moderate person, but it's just the rest of the world that's
crazy, you know, and radically conservative. It's not even conservative!
These current Republicans are not even conservatives, they're radicals!
They're truly radicals! They want to bring down the country. It's
unbelievable to me… So I don't know. Those early influences, it was the
times, I'm a child of the 60s, it was seeing other clergy, Rabbis and others,
for whom this was just part of what you do. Like, how can you read these
texts and preach these texts and not walk the walk in some way? You can't
just talk about it. You can't read, I mean, at least 36 times the Torah says
"You must not oppress the stranger. You were strangers in the land of
Egypt. You know what it is to be a stranger. You must love the stranger as
yourself." Again, and again, and again, and again. So how can you read
that and just say, well, you know, “I've got mine, so that's all I care about”
[we laugh]. That doesn't seem left wing, that just seems, like, human to
me.

When I discussed this further with Rabbi Elliot, he suggested that “historical experience”
has led Jews to have a “visceral” understanding of civil rights, extending as widely as
sympathy for organized labor, on the one hand, to LGBTQ rights, on the other. This
understanding was extremely common among members of WSS, with almost every
interviewee expressing their understanding that the collective experience of anti-
Semitism informs Jewish theology on civil rights. As mentioned in chapter two, Rabbi Elliot said that he sees Jews as having a highly developed “Civil understanding that people are entitled [to] protection of the law, and that anti-discrimination law should extend to homosexuals. Jews understood that viscerally. This is simply an extension of civil rights… The way we read some of those texts is deeply affected by our historical experiences as people.”

Also common at WSS was the use of the phrase “tikkun olam,” a Hebrew term that means “to repair the world,” which is an animating principle of Judaism. Members regularly related this imperative to me in interviews as something that drives their understanding of how to act in the world. For example, here is WSS member Sandra providing an understanding of how being both Jewish and Gay informs one’s politics:

When you’re gay, it becomes next to impossible to be an apolitical creature. You get up everyday and don't have the same rights that everybody else does. I don't get that. Never understood why that was the case. And it seems to me that it ought not to be that way. For a Jew, if anything exists in the world that is unjust, you're supposed to do something about it. We're not supposed to say "somebody should really do something about that." You're supposed to realize that you're somebody and you ought to be doing something! You're not supposed to say "Oh, it's impossible" and not do anything. That concept is called "tikkun olam," which means repair of the world. I'm sure you've heard of this expression before. So every congregation has some kind of social action or social justice group.

Like Rabbi Elliot, Sandra presents an understanding of collective action as woven into Judaism, as well as woven into being gay. Her comment brings together religious and secular language to connect the personal experience of gay individuals, the structural imposition of unequal civil rights, and the moral imperative of Jews to be “somebody” who “ought to be doing something,” which she connects to congregations conducting
“social action or social justice.” Despite coming from a different religious perspective and discussing a different social issue, Sandra actually presents a similar perspective to the perspectives outlined above by members of JPUSA, RPF, and MBSC. Structural inequality is the cause of social problems, but religious imperatives suggest that individuals have a duty to respond to these inequities in their personal behavior, which is conceptualized as happening at the community level. Across all six sites, the connective tissue which brought together the unequal social structure and the personal, moral behavior of individuals was conceptualized as the collectively acting community.

**Neighborhood Church and the Speaking and Embodiment of Politicized Faith**

Neighborhood Church (NC), offers a particularly vivid example of a community where members have developed sacred languages to talk about secular ideas, and where those languages connect different stratum of society. Sermons at NC regularly make connections between the political, the spiritual, and the personal. One service I attended, for example, featured a member of the community giving a sermon that suggested that the Bible must be read with an eye to the uplifting the marginalized. Here are my field notes from that particular visit:

…Then Ted began to preach. The reading for that day was about Saul, the oppressor of Christians, becoming Paul, the champion of Christians. He tells the story of Ananias, whom God tells to go preach to Saul. Ananias objects, saying "But Saul is an oppressor of Christians." Ted cites Cornell West to say that we have to do a bottom-up reading of the Bible, where we choose to read it from the P.O.V. of the marginalized. He says that Ananais, as a Christian, was marginalized, but God took him and said “go look into the eyes of your oppressor, and let him in.” Then, another member of the church came up to the altar and told a story about a fugitive boy hiding in a rural village in South America. When a death squad comes to find the boy, they tell the village priest that they'll kill everyone in the village if he doesn’t tell them where the boy is. So the priest reads his Bible all night looking for a clue about what to do and finds that it says the
needs of the many outweigh the needs of one, so he gives the boy up. Later, he feels bad about it, and then someone comes to him and tells him that [the little boy] he gave up [was] the Messiah. When the priest is surprised, the person says "if instead of looking in your Bible for the Messiah, you went and looked into that boy's eyes, you would have known." Ted says that this is what we fail to do. We talk a big game but we don't want to look into the eyes of the oppressed and see the Messiah. He says that, therefore, we must always be on the side of the marginalized. In sexuality, we must stand with gays and lesbians; in gender, we must stand with women; in class, we must stand with the poor; in race, we must stand with non-whites. We must overturn all power structures. He then ended with a prayer, said jointly with the woman running the service, in which they prayed for the people of the community to know how to do this.

This sermon used a series of powerful narratives to construct a particular understanding about the place of faith in what can be thought of as political behavior. The narratives present a faith that requires an alternative reading of the Bible or, perhaps, in the case of the story about the village priest, looking for the revelation of God in the wider social world as opposed to simply in the Bible. In this telling, the political and moral choices made by members of the community should be informed by a bottom up theology that privileges the oppressed. Ted does not let the personal behavior of individuals off the hook, however. At the beginning of the sermon, he suggests that the oppressed must "look into the eyes of [their] oppressor, and let him in." We are asked to stand on the side of the marginalized and reach out to those who are oppressors.

This sermon, typical for NC, echoes many of the quotes from other groups presented above. For example, the narrative about needing to look into the boy’s eyes rather than in the Bible to see that he is the Messiah recalls Pastor Diana of MBSC suggesting that a book does no one any good unless we can bring Christ to life in our lives. The understanding of Christianity as a call to stand with the oppressed and overturn
power structures recalls the statements by Cliff and Alana from JPUSA as well as Jimmy about a marginalized, countercultural Jesus who was concerned about contemporary inequality. As discussed above, groups are not integrating Christian and secular languages randomly. Rather, the themes across all the groups I observed suggest that there are patterned ways that languages are combined. These groups tend to draw on existing leftist language as well as particular theological takes to talk about the social world, creating overlapping understandings across the communities.

A particularly vivid example of this combining progressive politics and the language of Christianity at NC came during the congregation's All Saint's Day service. In the weeks prior, members of the congregation had been told they could bring a small memento representing a deceased loved one to church for the All Saint's Day service. The memento could be a picture, a letter, or even just the name of the loved one on a sheet of paper. As the service began, a middle-aged white woman named Elaine who is a prominent member of the community, stepped to the front of the church to lead worship. Behind her stood the large, wooden cross that adorns the altar at NC. Alongside it was the screen onto which words and images are projected during worship. Something had been added to the tableau for this service, however: a large bulletin board that was leaning against the foot of the cross. Pinned to the bulletin board were the pictures and names of famous civil rights pioneers and progressive religious activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, and Dorothy Day. Elaine began to speak, quietly leading a call and response prayer. "Lord, we thank you for all the people you have used to touch our lives," she began. The community read the response that was projected onto the screen next to the cross, saying in unison "Lord, we thank you for your cloud of witnesses." This phrase
references Biblical verse Hebrews 12:1-2, which suggests that those that have gone before us act as an inspirational “cloud of witnesses” for the still living.

Elaine continued, solemnly praying for the dearly departed of the congregation, with each line followed by a chorus of people saying "Lord, we thank you for your cloud of witnesses." After several lines praying for the deceased family and friends of the congregation, a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. appeared on the screen. "Lord," Elaine said, "we pray for Martin Luther King, Jr., felled by an assassin's bullet because he spoke out for truth and justice." The community responded, "Lord, we thank you for your cloud of witnesses." The prayer continued to list off civil rights martyrs, detailing how each was murdered, with the screen displaying their images. Medgar Evans, who was shot in the back by an assassin. Emmett Till, a teenager, beaten to death by two white men. Rev. Bruce Klunder, who died when a bulldozer backed over him as he protested the building of a segregated school. With each name, Elaine's voice grew more strained, and the response of "Lord, we thank you for your cloud of witnesses" grew softer, as if the weight of the moment was muffling the voices of the community. Then, the school pictures of Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, the four young African-American girls killed in the 1963 Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing lit up the screen. Elaine read their names aloud, then began to describe their deaths, saying "Who were killed when a bomb planted in their church..." Elaine stopped short of finishing the sentence as her voice caught in her throat, and she stood, silently, in front of the congregation. The community sat in tense silence for several seconds, and the Elaine began to cry and covered her face with her hand. As if granted permission to become emotional, members of the community around me followed suit. People cried,
put their heads in their hands, and put their arms around loved ones next to them. I felt my own body become taut with emotion as I looked at the pictures of the young girls projected on the screen and heard the congregants around me gently crying. Finally, Elaine proceeded and finished her sentence. "...when a bomb planted in their church detonated."

With this, Elaine said “we pray this in Your name, amen,” indicating that the prayer was finished. Elaine then looked out at the congregation with wet eyes and began to speak again. "We have invited you to bring mementos of your loved ones to this service. If you want, you may now join me up here to pin them to this board at the foot of the cross, so that we can publicly acknowledge our cloud of witnesses." With this, Elaine pulled a small piece of paper from her pocket, a memento of a loved one, turned around, and pinned it to the board at the foot of the cross. The congregation sat in silence for a moment, and then the band eased into a gentle and somber rendition of "When the Saints Go Marching In." Members of the congregation lined up in the aisles of the church and took turns pinning the mementos they brought from home to the board, the names and pictures affixed alongside the names of the other deceased loved ones of community members as well as the civil rights and religious activists displayed on the board. Eventually, the board, laid under the congregation's great wooden cross, was completely covered, and members of NC sat and kneeled in a semicircle around it, praying and crying for the “cloud of witnesses” on the board.

How does this example demonstrate the integration of politics and faith in everyday practice? NC is a multi-racial, multi-cultural congregation that actively and intentionally promotes a theology of justice in their teachings and practice. Building off
of this, in the above prayer event, the community draws lines of identification to progressive religious figures, particularly those that fought for civil rights. This is represented dramatically in the prayer by the association of the deceased loved ones of the community with martyred civil rights pioneers. This casts the civil rights activists as "family," rendering the strong emotions that Elaine and other members of the community displayed sensible in the group context of NC. The prayer also sacralized the anti-racist ideologies promoted by civil rights leaders. By praying for civil rights pioneers as martyrs who gave their lives for a just and Godly cause, NC gives spiritual meaning to the politics of race and equality. The service delineated appropriate identifications and emotions with regard to the social issues of inequality and civil rights in the group context of NC, bringing these issues into the congregation's sacred cosmos and giving members a framework for thinking about these issues. It blended religion, family, and politics in an embodied way, using the symbol of the cross, the physical mementos of loved ones, the emotional reaction of community members, the somber music, and enactment of the prayer to construct a dramatic performance of the community’s ideology.

This begs the question: can we see these sorts of sentiments expressed in the understandings of members? Both of the examples I have used from NC so far to discuss the integration of religion and politics have been public events: a sermon and a prayer. If services at NC highlighted these connections but individual members did not personally connect with them, my suggestion that NC integrates political and religious languages would be a significantly weaker argument. Interviews with members of NC indicate, however, that the talk and practice of NC does matter for how members perceive issues.
Members had certain shared languages for talking about politics that drew on religious themes and imagery to make sense of the secular world.

For example, I had jotted down in my field notes that members of RPF, JPUSA, and (especially) NC tended to use the phrase “powers and principalities” to refer to oppressive social structures, as I discussed in chapter two. Effectively, rather than saying something like “an unequal social structure causes oppression,” members might say “the powers and principalities of this world create injustice.” Members of NC also tended to use the phrase “Kingdom of God,” a great deal, talking about “bringing about the Kingdom of God” or “embodying the Kingdom of God on earth.” After a service at NC I was chatting with three of the younger members of the congregation and one of them commented that when he visits his more conservative parents back home he avoids saying things like “Kingdom of God.” I asked him why and he said “It smacks of post-millennialism to them, which, to them, is basically Communism.” At this we laughed, and I asked them why that was. He said that it was because “building the Kingdom of God” on earth implied a sort of liberal social engineering project to them and that it was language that, in certain Christian circles, tended to mark you as a progressive. I asked if “powers and principalities” was the same way, noting that people at NC tended to use that to talk about oppressive structures. The three members explained to me that it was Biblical language that entered the progressive Christian lexicon through the writings of communalist theologian Jean Vanier. It was, as I had anticipated, another way to mark oneself as a particular kind of Christian, a way to use sacred language to talk about secular politics.
As a final example from NC, I turn to a story related to me by an older, white married couple named Howie and Judith. Howie and Judith are anti-racist activists who participated extensively in the civil rights movement when they were younger. Howie said that they “got involved in a lot of real radical stuff” in the 60s, including going to Black Panther meetings. They felt, however, that something was lacking in all of this. In Judith’s words,

I think we got in over our heads, and I think that was what really drove us back, we really needed to anchor our faith in a real personal relationship with God. And I think that is when we began a more serious exploration of community, that community wasn’t just a household of people, you know, but more and more we began to see that the strongest communities were those that were also church.

Howie and Judith tried out a number of different communal groups (including living at RPF for a long time), but eventually decided that to put their anti-racist beliefs into practice they needed to worship at a Black Church and work on racial reconciliation full time, which put their communalism on hold. They felt that it was important, as anti-racists, to submit directly to black leadership to more thoroughly excise ingrained white supremacy. After the black church they were at closed, they have more recently been worshiping at NC. They related a story about the connections between structural inequality and personal behavior in everyday moral and political practice that is rich enough that I will quote it at length:

Howie: For me, [I would like to see a] greater increase in personal relationships across racial lines, particularly with African Americans and white Americans, and the reason is that, having studied a lot of theory stuff, the things that really sticks with me and really brings it home is when you know people to whom this or that or the other thing happens, when you are riding with people and you know that they are getting pulled over because they are black, when you hear about somebody, a good friend, that got followed around in the grocery store or just got fired
because he was the last hired. I think one of the things that was kind of pretty powerful for us, not at the house we live at now, but in the house we lived at a few years ago, the family next door was a three or four generational family. Very, very dysfunctional African American family, and for a while we just didn’t have a very good relationship at all…

Judith: I tried to get to know the kids, sitting out on the curb, during the block party, asking them “Who is your mom, who is your uncle,” and boy did I get chewed out by the grandmother about not getting in their business.

Howie: And one of the sons, he was in and out of prison all of the time [and] we just kept trying to build a relationship and… something that finally really worked [was] when I started visiting him in prison. Then grandma really started paying attention to us… I think one of the things that just really brought it home to us, why this is so hard for this relationship, was we discovered that the grandmother had seen, as a child, had seen her older brother lynched by a white mob down south. So we think of that as several generations removed from us, but it wasn’t that far, it was right there, she has seen this happen, and that left such an indelible print on her, it was very hard for her to trust any white people.

Judith: Well, that really helped our understanding of why, you know, just like we put black people in categories, she put us in categories…

Howie: So it is that kind of thing that, I think, changes attitudes, that then you are in a position of making any decision about the health care system, or who you vote for, then you can start impacting institutions maybe in certain ways…

Judith: I mean a good test is who puts their feet under your kitchen table?

This powerful narrative posits interracial relationships as an avenue to enact social change. This is not presented as a solution because racism is understood as a result of personal pathology, however, as in the exploration of evangelicals and race in Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith’s (2001) work. Rather, this is understood as a solution because, through developing interracial relationships, Howie and Judith envision a sort of “bottom-up” equality that will begin to affect institutions. Towards the end of the narrative, they reveal that the moral of the story was that you have to make connections
with people so that you can see the world through their eyes, and then when you have the
ability to impact institutions, your changed attitude will be reflected in the decisions you
make. When I asked them to further elaborate solutions, Howie said that there are
effectively three important things. One was seeing the world through the eyes of other
people and developing empathy for their circumstances, a second was social programs
that affect inequality, and the third and most important was people coming to Jesus so
they can “turn their life around.” The intersection of these three things, Howie suggested,
is at the heart of justice.

What Do We Mean When We Say “Religion and Politics?”

The emerging lived religion perspective (Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008)
suggests that we must look at how religion is practiced in the everyday, rather than
exclusively studying the proclamations of elite religious actors, to fully understand
religious behavior. Traditionally, the sociology of religion has focused predominantly on
beliefs. This is both an artifact of the protestant/evangelical focus of the field as well as
our methods that, especially at the macro-level, are most designed to capture stated
beliefs. Religion, of course, is about people’s beliefs, and we see that in the quotes and
stories above, but religion is also many other things, including things that some would
explicitly see as not religious. Religion is practice. It is kneeling before an altar. Religion
is a site. It is a place where these languages and practices are enacted. Religion is
artifacts. It is art and music and books and architecture. And, as demonstrated above,
religion is language. It is using a certain sacred word or phrase to talk about something.
Because religion is all of these things, it may enter social life in ways that our theorizing
is not always designed to capture.
Likewise, politics means many different things to people. To the members of the six sites I observed, politics means debate, it means beliefs and ideas, it means division, it means action, it means a particular standard of behavior, and it means certain kinds of languages. As demonstrated, across the six sites I observed, “political language” was often avoided or eschewed in favor of religious language. This was not because people wished to avoid engaging with social issues, however, but was rather because their political beliefs were woven into their everyday practices. In the same way that proponents of lived religion suggest that we cannot understand religion without observing it as practiced, I suggest that we cannot understand people’s politics without understanding how politics is embedded in everyday behavior, and how what many would call “politics” was perceived by members of the communities as moral imperatives or, even more broadly, “just what you do.”

Likewise, the fact that both religion and politics can mean many things suggests that they combine and recombine in surprising ways. While much research in the sociology of religion has posited that the focus on personal behavior of religious groups, particularly the conservative protestant groups that dominate much sociological analysis, promotes individualistically-oriented solutions to social problems, the above analysis demonstrates that evangelicals are not fated to think this way. JPUSA is officially evangelical, and NC and RPF have strong currents of evangelicalism (RPF, for example, despite being officially Mennonite has many members from evangelical backgrounds and many members described their theology to me as drawing heavily on evangelicalism). Wendy, the proudly evangelical pastor of NC, had a thoughtful take on this, suggesting that the boundaries and stereotypes we have about religious groups are starting to fall
away, meaning that people are looking to reconstruct their understandings of faith.

I think [ideas about evangelicals are] based on these stereotypes that are not necessarily accurate… I think, in very broad sweeping terms, I think sometimes people who are disenchanted with the evangelical church that they might have grown up in and are searching now for an alternative that is not giving up their faith have found refuge in Mennonite theology, because Mennonites have long been, I think, a denomination that [says] "we are a community and we are shaped by the community that we choose, and therefore we make choices for social justice out of our faith convictions." I mean, that has a deep heritage among Mennonites, so it's kind of a way of differentiating. Now, I think, a lot more evangelicals are looking a lot more Mennonite in their theology, so I think maybe those distinctions aren't there anymore, but it's still kind of the way people think about it and the way people talk about it.

The argument that Wendy makes here suggests a blurring of denominational boundaries based on people trying to find communities where they felt, on the one hand, comfortable and, on the other hand, engaged in social justice. Wendy’s assertion mirrors Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell’s (2010) suggestion that people are more likely to switch churches because of their politics than switch politics because of their churches. I asked Wendy to further elaborate on why this change was happening.

I mean, I think the model of right belief and logical proofs of God's existence and logical proofs of the authority of the scriptures and Jesus, historical, is a very modern way of understanding the world and in a postmodern culture, that's just not interesting anymore [we laugh]. I think people are much more interested in things like "how is it that I live a life that is meaningful and authentic and makes the world a better place and makes this a place that I can raise my kids in? How do I live my life?" Those are the questions people ask. At least that's what they say. I think that's true personally. I think that's true here, at this church. That's what draws people here.

In this passage, Wendy suggests that she, along with the other people at NC and, in her assertion, many people in a “postmodern culture,” have moved away from “right belief and logical proofs” as the center of their spirituality. Rather, people are interested in
religion as something that provides, on the one hand, meaning, and on the other hand, practices that reshape the world in positive ways. Ultimately, for Wendy, as for most of my participants, religion was not about beliefs in an abstract sense. Religion was about very tangible imperatives to act in specific ways in specific situations.

To return to the above discussion, then, the participants in my study were not locked into specific ways of thinking about social problems. Social problems were not either understood individualistically or structurally. They were understood both ways. The language of progressive politics, concepts such as oppression, inequality, racism, and power, were used to talk about the very real experiences that people had as they lived their lives. Likewise, the language of religion, narratives of the Kingdom of God, tikkun olam, powers and principalities, and the ministry of Christ, were used to evaluate individual actions with an understanding that structures were the result of the sinful or selfish choices made by aggregates of individuals. Across all six sites, community based responses were posited as solutions to social problems that mediated between the level of personal behavior and unequal social structures. Through communities, our behavior was held to standards of accountability, we amplified our individual voices, and we respond, in a grassroots way, to immediate problems in ways that the “powers and principalities” cannot. In the next chapter, I will explore the creative work of constructing “moral imaginaries,” that tie all of these elements of society together within the group context.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE ACTIVE CONSTRUCTION OF HOW THE WORLD WORKS:
MORAL IMAGINARIES IN FAITH COMMUNITIES

Pastor Diana stepped out from behind the podium, rolled up her sleeves, and started walking down the aisle, preaching a sermon in her impassioned, theatrical style. “Peace doesn’t come from money,” she said. “The money man will jack up the price each time and you’ll just have to work harder to get the same stuff you used to be able to get for half as much. Peace comes from the living God, who made us in community.” Raising her voice, she continued, “The wicked spend their lives climbing a slippery slope. They’ll step on each other to get higher. They’ll push each other down. You’ve seen them do it! They’ll push down a child to get ahead. But can they get anywhere? Can they get up the slope?”

Someone in the church called out “No!”

Pastor, now shouting, responded “No! They can’t! Because they’re weighted down. With stuff. With money. They don’t sleep at night, they don’t have peace, and they slip down that slope and fall into a deep, dark hole.” Lowering her voice to a dramatic stage whisper, she continued, saying “Peace doesn’t come from money. They may be foreclosing on my house, but I’ll sleep well at night. I may lose my job, but I’ve got
peace. Because I spend time with those who love me instead of those who have a knife at the ready, waiting to stab me in the back.” As she finished her preaching, the community applauded and called out “Amen” and “Hallelujah.” I sat among the crowd thinking about the sermon, which touched on themes that were very common at MBSC. Suffering is part of life but is alleviated by community. Money does not bring peace or happiness. If the prosperity gospel teaches that God wants righteous individuals to succeed, MBSC has almost the opposite message: good people will suffer, and that is why you need the support of a Godly community around you, to keep you on the path of righteousness.

Even before Pastor Diana came to MBSC two years ago, however, this sort of rhetoric appears to have been commonplace. Looking through old programs and documents in the church’s archives, I was struck by the twin conceptions of community that recurred in many of the documents. On the one hand, MBSC has a long tradition of talking about civil rights for African-Americans and other oppressed groups. A history of MBSC from the 1980s states that the church building “stands as a concrete monument… to the pride and efforts of ex-slaves and sons and daughters of slave parents whose brute determination to have a place of worship to serve God” led them to build the church, while a proclamation for their 100th anniversary stated “This chain was envisioned 100 years ago by our ancestors who stood in the midst of cancerous oppression to perpetuate the dream and ideology of our Founder, Richard Allen.” The historical documents of MBSC resound with the language of civil rights: facing oppression, claiming identity, asserting dignity.

Within the history as well, however, is an understanding of personal and community responsibility. An undated document details their summer “Ethnic Day-
School,” a “service to the [local] community” that conducted education about the heritage of African-Americans towards the end of providing “greater opportunities for youth and their families to learn and share in their rich cultural heritage and encourage greater understanding of present and future Black life world-wide.” The aforementioned historical summary also stated

MBSC has a long and proud history of service to the… community and has played an integral part in the religious, social and cultural life of the city. In response to a sincere concern for our aged community, MBSC sponsored the erection of the [MBSC Senior Building] a… housing facility for senior citizens [that is] racially, socially and economically integrated.

Church bulletins are packed with suggestions to join the local NAACP chapter, come to local town hall meetings to discuss inequalities in the school system, or help the church partner with an organization that is building a chapel for a women’s prison. One day, as I left the small room at the church where the archives are stored, I looked up to see a sign that had been hung prominently next to a doorway. The sign had a picture of the church building surrounded by a sea of hands positioned to look as if they were holding the church in place, with the phrase “OUR GOD, OUR CHURCH, OUR RESPONSIBILITY” circling the picture.

Part of being a church, or any moral community for that matter, is making sense of how the world works in a way that provides members of the community with understandings that can be used to navigate, explain, connect, and perhaps even mobilize. Every community cannot care about, confront, or even recognize every possible social issue, so moral communities create shared representations of society that narrativize and explain how the world works, creating sense-making maps of ideologies, stories,
histories, practices, and visions for the future. Pastor Diana’s story, above, creates a dramatic representation of the wicked and the righteous, drawing on imagery borrowed from Psalm 73, the reading for that day. The wicked are those who cut each other down for money but find no peace, while the righteous are those who face suffering but also find comfort in a moral community. Perhaps most importantly, Pastor Diana’s story vividly connected the community to wider universes of meaning, suggesting that personal experiences and troubles are connected to wider social inequality. The narrative bundles together oppression and righteousness, casting them against the equally bundled concepts of earthly success and corruption. The church, however, does not suggest that its members take oppression sitting down. Rather, members are called to think both about the rights that they have as citizens, as well as African-Americans who have historically been denied civil rights, while also thinking about what the responsibilities they have to their community are. Ultimately, the community of MBSC confronts a social world that is rife with racial and class oppression, where a loving but stern God cannot guarantee comfort, but can provide moral guidance. Yet, just as God told Moses he would not enter into the Promised Land, and just as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, in his final public speech, “I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we as a people, will get to the promised land” (Dyson 2000: 2), facing earthly suffering does not excuse one from the responsibilities of acting as a bridge into a brighter future for one’s community.

In the above passage, we see the elaboration of MBSC’s moral imaginary. A moral imaginary is a group’s shared stories, practices, performances, identities, and ideas, comprising a collectively held representation of what is good and true, as well as what is
bad and false, suggesting desirable collective action and possible futures. In short, it is the collectively held representations that connect the everyday behavior of individuals and groups to wider universes of meaning. Moral imaginaries highlight what a community sees as important, dividing society up into connected parts and representing these parts back to the community. These parts move from macro-level abstractions such as ultimate reality (God, meta-ideologies, humanity, nature), to broad conceptions of “society,” to meso-level understandings of communities and institutions, and eventually to micro-level suggestions about individuals and families. For example, a hypothetical group’s moral imaginary may choose to emphasize the connection between families and the local community, suggesting that the quality of the community is a result of actions taken by families, while downplaying the connections between the community and the wider society. This particular moral imaginary may also suggest a certain temporality as well as a certain orientation towards social change, for example: “because families do not do as good of a job raising their children, we have seen a decrease in the quality of the community, a downward trend that will continue unless effort to change it is undertaken by families to change course.” I turn now to a discussion of relevant literature that I see the concept of moral imaginaries building on, then return to the concept to lay out the specific components of it, explaining how it elaborates upon current research.

“Imagination” in Social Life

What does it mean to understand “imagination” as an element of social life? Sociology has had a long, but somewhat submerged, relationship with the concept of the
“imaginary” and imagination. C. Wright Mills (1959) notably posited that most people in society lacked the “quality of mind” to understand the connection between the individual and society that is at the center of the “sociological imagination” (4). In this work, “imagination” references the ability of an individual to actively draw connections between different levels of society. This suggests an understanding of imagination that posits a creative empiricism through which one forges imaginative links between various kinds of data. “Imagination,” in this sense, is not at all “unreal.” Rather, Mills uses the term to refer to creative theoretical projections that are very much grounded in what is empirically discernable.

Social philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (1975) also featured the concept of imagination prominently in his work. Like Mills, Castoriadis saw what he called “the social imaginary” as a creative force, but he took a much larger view of its place in the social world than Mills. Castoriadis suggests that the “social imaginary” “creates for each historical period its singular way of living, seeing and making its own existence” ultimately providing “articulations and distinctions of what matters and of what does not” (quoted in Thompson 1982: 664). Whereas, for Mills, imagination was a technique for connecting levels of society, Castoriadis sees it as the “central imaginary significations of a society” and “the laces that tie a society together and the forms that define what, for a given society, is ‘real’” (Thompson 1982: 665).

1 While the term entered the social sciences largely through Jacques Lacan’s use of the term “imaginary,” my concern here is not with his psychoanalytic understanding, which is vastly different from how I am conceptualizing the concept, but with the ideas history within the discipline of sociology specifically.
Charles Taylor’s (2004) understanding of social imaginaries shares much with Castoriadis’s view. Taylor defines social imaginaries as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (23). Taylor stresses that social imaginaries are not theories about society but, rather, common sense understandings that enable social participation, embedded in practice. Similar to Castoriadis, Taylor suggests that all people in a society share a social imaginary. Drawing on Benedict Anderson (1983), Taylor suggests that the social imaginary is, in effect, the representation of society that allows members to participate in civic activities such as voting. Michael Warner (2002) follows a similar line of thinking, suggesting that the concept of a public, where people who are strangers are nonetheless able to conceptualize each other as a collectivity, represents a social imaginary, the nature of which shapes our very conceptions of what we consider human.

Conversely, David Smilde (2007) and Andrew Perrin (2006) both discuss imagination in terms of constructing ways to deal with problems. Smilde calls the process of “[getting] things done by creating concepts” “imaginative rationality,” suggesting that people accomplish this process though “combining and attaching existing, usually well-known images to inchoate objects of experience” (Smilde 2007: 52). For Smilde, imaginative rationality represents a dynamic and creative agency where individuals solve problems and then “reflectively evaluate the success of these projects” (52). Perrin, likewise, views “democratic imaginations” as how someone understands “what [she or he] can imagine doing: what is possible, important, right, and feasible” (Perrin 2006: 2).
These democratic imaginations are collectively held, but not as widely as Taylor or Castoriadis’s understanding of social imaginaries. We are not dealing with society-wide, shared representations but, rather, with how people “talk politics” within group settings. Perrin draws on work by Nina Eliasoph (1998), William A. Gamson (1992), and Melissa Harris-Lacewell (2004) to suggest that talk about politics is not idle chatter. Rather, how people are able to talk about the political aspects of the social world in group settings shape how they learn what it means to be a good citizens, as well as what they are capable of doing to enact social change. Perrin follows Eliasoph in arguing that because these understandings are the property of groups, people may wear different “hats” in different social settings, meaning they will talk about politics in divergent ways depending on what the group’s democratic imagination entails. Francesca Polletta (2007), however, suggests that the participants in Perrin’s study were not particularly “imaginative” in their democratic imaginations, often resigning themselves to repeating familiar strategies such as voting, signing petitions, and boycotts. Perrin suggests that when someone doubts her efficacy or ability to enact change in a corrupt system, her democratic imagination will be stymied.

What can we draw from these works when we consider them together? There are two primary questions these various theorists address: where is imagination held and what does imagination do? With regard to where imagination is held, we might place Castoriadis, Taylor, and Warner at one end of a pole, Mills at the other, and Perrin and Smilde in the middle. For Castoriadis, Taylor, and Warner, the “social imaginary” (all three use that term specifically) represents something held by an entire society, binding that society together. Our society’s social imaginary is what allows us to conceptualize
ourselves as connected to strangers and to share common practices and understandings of
the world. The social imaginary, in this understanding, functions in an almost
Durkheimian way, similar to Robert Bellah’s (1967) concept of civil religion, as a
transecdent shared reference point for an entire people. For Mills, on the other hand, the
“sociological imagination” (here an “imagination” and not an “imaginary”), is something
individually held by a particular person who can make astute connections between
different elements of society. Perrin and Smilde split the difference between the two, with
Perrin suggesting the “democratic imagination” is held by social groups and represents
social actors views on what is capable and desirable for them to do with regard to
political behavior and public morality and Smilde seeing imaginative rationality as a
general quality that people have, the particulars of which are filled in by their milieu (in
the case of Smilde’s study, evangelicalism).

With regard to what imagination does, the theorists are less easy to group. As
indicated, several of the theorists suggest that a collectively held imaginary enables the
existence of society. Additionally, we can see how imagination is understood to construct
disparate people into collectives (Taylor and Warner), define what is real and what
matters (Castoriadis), understand how things “fit together” (Taylor and Mills), and
suggest possible actions with regard to specific problems and questions (Smilde and
Perrin). What connects these ideas? First, they involve projections beyond what is
immediately knowable or experienced by an individual or group. These projections
connect strangers to each other or tie different constituent parts of society together,
imagining how social elements are related. Second and following from this, they rely on
everyday theorizing, folk-wisdom, background knowledge, or common sense about how
the world works. This common sense is generally perceived as at least somewhat creative, in that it is endowed with the ability to produce new practices or ideas through human agency. Finally, the collective, rather than the individual, is generally posited to hold this common sense. After Mills, each of these theorists suggests that while individuals may be “imagining,” they are doing so with materials that are held either by social groups (Smilde and Perrin) or whole societies (Castoriadis, Taylor, and Warner).

Combining insights from these theorists suggests that “imaginaries” are held at multiple levels of society. While there is certainly a broad social imaginary that enables our society, Perrin also demonstrates that different social groups within it have varied democratic imaginations. Rather than see these ideas as divergent, I suggest that society is founded, in part, on imaginaries nested within imaginaries. While citizens can undoubtedly draw on a social imaginary that connects them to other citizens of their country (or even other people beyond their country’s borders), different social groups also undoubtedly disagree on what is real, what is true, what is important, and how all these things fit together. This suggests that within a broader social imaginary are more specific and focused constructions of how things work. How we think and talk about society, how we imagine the various parts fitting together, in the terms I’m using here, shapes why and how social actors engage in the behavior they do (Bender 2003; Eliasoph 1998; Lichterman 2005; Perrin 2006).

I suggest that while we can understand imaginaries as society-wide foundations of social participation, it is more fruitful to understand them as the ways that specific groups and communities (albeit groups and communities of varying size and boundedness) represent the social world while in the group setting. This suggests that there are many
imaginaries, that they are dynamic, and that they are potentially sites of struggle, both internally and externally. Likewise, the kind of imaginaries I am concerned with here are not merely enabling of social action, but posit a need or desire for collective action through an orientation towards social change. Imaginaries, in this sense, are about conceptions of what should and could be, and how groups and individuals ought to and can actualize social change. Put simply, I conceptualize imaginaries as being paradigmatic statements about public morality.

**Tying the Stands Together: The Concept of Moral Imaginaries**

Social groups acting collectively to bring about desired social change must construct what I call a *moral imaginary*. Moral imaginaries are the collectively held representations that connect the everyday behavior of individuals and groups to wider universes of meaning, ultimately suggesting a moral imperative to act. When, for example, a social movement protests on behalf of oppressed or marginalized groups, there is a moral imaginary at work that (1) constructs and connects the social actors in question, (2) delineates what is and what is not important to understand with regard to the issue, and (3) suggests courses of action and imagined outcomes. In this section, I will explore the basic ideas in the concept of moral imaginaries.

First, while culture may play into the tactical repertoires of social movements and civic organizations (Snow et al. 1986), we must push beyond strategic rationalism to understand how meaning is both generated by everyday life and practices as well as shapes everyday life and practices (Gould 2009; Jasper 1997; Klawiter 2008; McGuire 2008; Wenger 1998). Individuals encounter the social world predominantly through their participation in groups, organizations, and institutions, so by anchoring our
understandings of meaning and practice in the everyday, we bring our theorizing closer to the actual experiences of our research subjects, a practice of both empirical and political importance.

Second, group practices, including talk, shape how people relate to and experience the world (Eliasoph 1998; Epstein 1991; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Fine 1979; Gamson 1992; Lichterman 2005; Wilcox 2009). Likewise, the practices that we participate in collectively are both how meaning is created (Wenger 1998) and how that meaning is “carried” in our everyday lives (Taylor 2004). To fully understand how individuals experience the world in the everyday, we must pay attention to how group life sensitizes them to understand, appreciate, and envision the world in specific ways.

Finally, the meaning-generating practices that individuals and groups participate in are drawn from a wide variety of sources and are enacted in a variety of ways, both constraining and enabling agency (Kniss 1997; Moore 2008; Polletta 2004; Wilcox 2009; Wood 2002). This is because the public sphere represents not a single, unified entity, but rather a site of competing and conflicting stories, visions, and practices that may be appropriated to be part of the shared understandings of social groups. As such, the ways that a particular group blends various cultural elements together, ultimately creating a moral imaginary for their adherents, shapes how they conceptualize where social action is necessary and how they should go about conducting it.

Following from this, I suggest that the moral imaginaries concept has several key components.

1. *Moral imaginaries are collectively held and overlapping*. While moral imaginaries certainly exist within the heads of particular individuals, their primary origin is social.
Much research demonstrates that group and community life shapes the social meaning used by individuals to create identities and biographies (Blee 2003; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Wenger 1998; Wilcox 2009). The building blocks of moral imaginaries, therefore, are collectively held. While individuals may participate in multiple groups that each shape the way they experience, participate in, and understand the world (see Klawiter 2008; Sewell 1992; Wilcox 2009), individuals ultimately draw on shared knowledges to construct their understandings. For example, someone who wants to “save the planet” will, most likely, draw on understandings of how to do this (becoming a vegetarian or vegan, recycling, riding their bike more and driving their car less, blockading a development project) that are collectively held by various ecological groups. As such, moral imaginaries are likely to overlap, interlock, and bleed into each other like a series of Venn diagrams. The moral imaginary of an ecological group that understands “saving the planet” through “going vegan” and biking instead of driving may overlap with a different group’s moral imaginary that represents car culture as a product of rapacious capitalism. This does not mean that moral imaginaries must be perfectly internally consistent, merely that their collectively held nature means that they are likely to overlap with each other, suggesting wider patterns.

2. Moral imaginaries construct and represent both the group and the social world around it. Clifford Geertz (1973) famously said that culture was the “stories we tell ourselves about ourselves” (8). While this is too vague to be an analytically useful definition of culture, it actually captures a key element that I am suggesting about moral imaginaries. Part of what groups and communities do is tell a story of “who we
are” and “how we do things” (Edgell Becker 1999: 13) to themselves. This is more than a “collective identity.” It is a series of interlocking narratives and practices that construct the place of the community in the social world and suggest issues, allies, opponents, values, emotions, and actions. Classic interactionism in sociology suggested, in opposition to behaviorist psychologists, that part of being human is orienting ourselves to the social world based on the meaning we ascribe to things (Blumer 1986). Yet sociologists examining structure and power have often failed to fully incorporate this early insight into their work, struggling to understand why people act against their structural interests. I assert that an imagination of how the social world works and where one’s social group or groups fits into it directly shapes how people experience social structure. As an example, two working-class individuals may attach very different meaning to losing their jobs, thus experiencing job loss very differently, if one of them draws on a moral imaginary that posits “capitalism” as the ultimate source of economic problems and the other draws on a moral imaginary that posits “government” as the ultimate source of economic problems. These different moral imaginaries will then suggest different issues, emotions, allies, opponents, values, and actions with regard to social circumstances. This is not to minimize structure. Structure may shape the moral imaginaries that a particular group or individual has access to or which ones may resonate with them. What it is to say is that our understanding and experience of social life is shaped by

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2 This is not to suggest that either or both of these moral imaginaries are more or less accurate. A moral imaginary may line up very well with empirical data or it may line up very poorly with empirical data. Regardless, it will shape how those who hold it understand and experience the world.
how we represent who we are and how the world works in our moral imaginaries. In other words, when we name and tell stories about powers and issues, we render them visible, and when we refuse to speak their names, we hide their workings.

3. **Moral imaginaries posit an orientation towards change by narrativizing the past and suggesting possible futures.** Moral imaginaries suggest a trajectory, including both a history of “why things are this way” as well as delineating possible futures (see Katovich and Couch 1992; Polletta 2006). Additionally, moral imaginaries posit a set of specific feelings about the represented trajectory, what I’ll call “an orientation towards change,” as well as suggest specific kinds of social action to resist or create the possible futures. For example, when someone says that society has become increasingly amoral and violent because we have removed God from the public sphere, they are narrativizing a specific imaginary of the past that suggests several things: (1) society is in a problematic downward moral trajectory; (2) faith was previously allowed in the public sphere in a way it no longer is; (3) these two facts are connected; and (4) to stop the downward moral trajectory we must bring faith back into the public sphere. An orientation towards change is how a group or community understands their moral imaginary in context, as well as imagines how the moral imaginary may be operationalized into social action.

4. **Moral imaginaries are about everyday, embedded politics.** Groups and individuals undertake everyday moral action with an imagination about how the world works. For our behavior to be labeled moral or political, it requires us to "imagine out" into society, placing it within wider understandings, traditions, schools of thought, and practices. This does not mean that moral imaginaries are inherently “strategic,” nor
“rational” in the sense usually used by social movement researchers. Rather, it means that imagination is required to give our various behaviors and practices moral and political meaning. It also means that similar behaviors and practices can be undertaken for very different reasons. For example, someone may refuse to shop at a store because that store uses sweatshop labor to make its clothes. A different person may refuse to shop at that store because of comments that the company’s CEO made about politics. These are similar actions, but undertaken with very different moral imaginaries that attach different meaning to the behaviors. Our moral imaginaries structure and shape how we live out our beliefs in a prefigurative way.

Moral Imaginaries at the Observed Faith Communities

In this chapter, I will explore the moral imaginaries of the faith communities I observed, while also demonstrating that the different ways the communities construct and represent morality within community shape the way they conduct collective action and wrestle with social issues. In fact, even when conducting similar action or dealing with the same social issue, the moral imaginaries constructed by the communities, the understandings of how things fit together and what elements matter with regard to moral action, mean that they approach issues with very different logics. To start, I will explore how WSS, D/C, and RPF confront issues around sexuality in different ways based on how they imagine politics, morality, and community in different ways. Following that, I will examine how JPUSA and MBSC serve food to people in need with very different logics emerging out of how they imagine service.
“All Inequalities in Church and Society”:

The Moral Imaginary of Dignity/Chicago With Regard to LGBT Issues

As discussed in previous chapters, D/C is a small, LGBT-identified Catholic community. Their primary function is performing an inclusive mass, predominantly said by a woman priest, for their adherents each week. Aside from that, D/C also organizes volunteerism and activism, along with social events. They are connected to the wider organization DignityUSA, but generally have autonomy in deciding how to run their chapter. In this section, I will examine how D/C constructs a moral imaginary and how that shapes the way they approach and conduct action around the issue of LGBT rights.

D/C’s moral imaginary revolves around their understanding of their God-given rights as Catholics, on the one hand, and their responsibility to be a voice for marginalized Catholics, on the other. As such, they construct an understanding of society in which the main players are connected, in some way, to these two foci. Additionally, D/C conceptualizes themselves as an outside the box, renegade Catholic community, shaping the way they represent both their past and their future as well as imagine connections to other groups and organizations. There are two main authorities that D/C feels they are in dialogue with. One is the institutional Catholic Church, and the other is the ultimate truth of God, who is understood to be loving and inclusive. Likewise, D/C is concerned about the LGBT community and other marginalized groups, but imagines these groups through the lens of Catholicism. For example, D/C’s feminism, as discussed in the last chapter, is predominantly understood with regard to the woman priest movement. The government, both local and federal, plays a minimal and nebulous part in their imagination of how the world works. While they are not silent with regard to the
government, they do not collectively or individually refer to the government with any frequency when discussing their understanding of how the world works. For example, members may pray for worker’s rights, peace, and “for wise decisions to be made by our leaders in Washington” during services, but these prayers represent some of the only vocal instances of government-oriented talk. Rather, D/C tends to understand their social connections in terms of their LGBT-Catholic identity, and recognize salient institutions accordingly.

For example, members understand heterosexism and homophobia to be widespread social problems, but predominantly talk about them and mobilize around them in regards to the Catholic Church. D/C is, in other words, a group with a tightly focused moral imaginary with regard to this particular issue. As stated in their official literature, they envision and work for a time when Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Catholics are affirmed and experience dignity through the integration of their spirituality with their sexuality, and, as beloved persons of God, participate fully in all aspects of life within the Church and Society. (http://www.dignity-chicago.org/)

This passage highlights how the members of D/C think about the salient aspects of their work in the world. While they openly recognize themselves as part of a wider LGBT rights movement, represented through activities such as marching in the Chicago Pride Parade, a history of AIDS activism, and organizing volunteer events to work with homeless LGBT youth, the predominant way they imagine their work is with regard to the issues facing LGBT Catholics.

Because of this, D/C understands who they are through the lens of participation (or the inability to participate, more accurately) in the Church. For example, one of their
main statements of belief is “we are Catholics by Baptism and by God’s will, and no one can deny our place as God’s children” (http://www.dignity-chicago.org/). Members often repeated this logic, with one prominent member telling me that he cannot understand LGBT Catholics who renounce their Catholicism over the Church’s teachings on sexuality. When I asked him to elaborate, he said that LGBT Catholics who leave are effectively accepting the Church’s labeling of them as a “sinner.” “They let the Church define them,” he said, “but I want to define myself!” With regard to rights, then, D/C suggests that God has provided them with the right to be fully participating Catholics while participating in same-sex relationships, yet this right is denied them by the human institution of the Church (see also, Dillon 1999). By organizing into DignityUSA, broadly, and D/C specifically, they are able to defend these rights. In the words of D/C member Alice, when “the church is trying to push that person away from the table, we help to be that voice.”

Additionally, the way that D/C narrativizes their past focuses predominantly on their split with the official Church after the aforementioned 1986 letter. During both a panel put together to discuss the community’s history for its 40th anniversary and a focus group I conducted, this came up as the defining moment of the community’s history. Additionally, members consistently discussed how separating from the institutional church has meant they are able to stand in dissent to church teachings on sexuality and other issues. For example, here is longtime D/C member Bill talking about what the point of D/C was in its early days. Prior to this, we were discussing how, in the 60s and 70s, there were very few safe places to be “out,” which shaped how he understood D/C’s mission. Bill went on to say,
At the time, Dignity was the only game in town. Then, Cardinal Bernadin preempted us by starting [official Catholic gay and lesbian group] AGLO… I never went to [an] AGLO mass. It was clear from the beginning that that was of no interest to me. I think my sense was that most of the people who remained at Dignity were probably more radicalized, unwilling to acknowledge the authority of the Magisterium, the official hierarchical position. [D/C’s] primary mission is to exist as a model of what the Church ought to be: accepting of individuals without regard to sexuality. The Church needs that desperately. Even though the hierarchy refuses, for the most part, to acknowledge it. And I think the secondary mission that flows from the first is the idea that you can be reconciled, you can find that the Church has a place for you… That there was something in the Church that made it worth remaining connected.

Notable in this quote from Bill is the idea that D/C is a radicalized version of what the Church should aspire to be, while also stressing the degree to which he perceives D/C as redeemers of the Church. Members often spoke of the institutional Catholic Church as something that was to be simultaneously deconstructed and respected. Put simply, members of D/C, and D/C as a whole, have a “love-hate” relationship with the institutional Church. For example, here is Mark discussing his feelings on then Pope Benedict:

You know the film Fiddler on the Roof? In one of the early scenes, the people in the little town in the Ukraine, they say "Rabbi, do you have a blessing for the Czar?" And he says "Yes, I have a blessing for the Czar. May God bless and keep the Czar, and keep him far away from us." My feeling on the pope is the same thing… But in terms of social justice, the church is good for helping the poor. You know, the St. Vincent DePaul society. The calls for justice for the Palestinians, these are things that, as critical as I was and am of John Paul II, formerly, and now Benedict, they aren't entirely evil. They have done a few things that I agree with. The outreach to Muslims, the reconciliation with Jews and the Church's complicity in the Holocaust, which Pope John XXIII, he had a proven track record, going back to WWII, he saved the lives of thousands of Jewish children in the Balkans when he was the nuncio of Istanbul, Turkey. He was highly respected by the Jewish community back then, and even more when, as Pope, he was starting the process in the Vatican council of pulling back on anti-Jewish teachings and the idea that if you belong to the Church you can't be saved. Now, the downside of this is that
Benedict seems to be drifting back towards that, and for that I'm very critical.

In this quote, we see Mark move back and forth between discussing what he appreciates and what he dislikes about the previous and current Pope and, by extension, the official policies and teachings of the Catholic Church. His comments suggest that he appreciates the teachings of the Church and the actions of the Pope when they move towards greater inclusion but, overall, he continues to have many critiques and concerns about their beliefs and policies. Likewise, he understands the place of himself and, by extension, other LGBT Catholics as similar to Jews facing prejudice in Tsarist Russia, creating parallels of oppressor/oppressed with another historical time. The point, here, is that the institutional Church looms large in how members of D/C imagine their moral universe. Their understanding of how components of society fit together exists in dialogue with the often silent partner of the Catholic Church.

There is, however, for D/C, a fixed point of moral authority that exists outside of the Church: the divine will of God. Even this fixed point of moral authority, however, is understood through the lens of Catholic identity, which means that members of D/C often deploy Catholic language or Catholic social teaching as a tool to be used against the institutional church. Here is Barbara, the woman priest who says mass most often at D/C, discussing her understanding of the relationship between Catholicism, on the one hand, and God, on the other.

I am a Roman Catholic but I do this for social justice more than anything. My spirituality is much broader than Catholicism... I believe that the Church is committing the sin of misogyny against women. I think that women are being summarily dismissed... Jesus Christ, the anointed one, who came and said, "I am the way, the truth and the light" and, I keep going back to that but that's what it is. Everyone has dignity. He hung out
with prostitutes. He hung out with the women. He hung out with the lepers. He hung out with the marginalized people, you know? And it’s not that you have to be marginalized to hang out with somebody, but it’s about the fact that what he was saying was each one of us has dignity because we are all sparks of God. And that dignity, you know, is informed by conscience. Our baptism gives us rights and responsibilities and, if you want to look at it from the Christian sense, we have an informed conscience, [which] is [the] key to being happy. If you look at the conscience as a body, would you strap someone's arms behind them and tie them, and not let them use their arms? Or not let them use their breath? You have to allow them free choice. It’s the same thing with abortion and with birth control. I'm not saying that I would have an abortion or whatever, but I'm saying that you have to afford women the dignity of that right to choose.

In her study of Dignity and other pro-change Catholic groups, Michele Dillon (1999) argues that these groups draw on Catholic language and teachings to deconstruct the institutional Church, recognizing dogma as a social construction. We see some of what Dillon found above in Barbara’s comment. Barbara uses the phrase “informed conscience,” a term with institutionally Catholic undertones³, as well as the Catholic imagery of the conscience as a “body,” echoing the theological idea of the “mystical body of the church”⁴, to promote the very un-Catholic and foundationally feminist ideas of access to birth control and legalized abortion. This was a fairly common way of speaking about sociopolitical ideas at D/C: members would use Catholic language and concepts to discuss generally progressive political ideas, repurposing Catholic language towards a variety of ends.

Because D/C imagines their orientation towards issues, their history, and their sphere of influence predominantly in terms of Catholicism, their moral imaginary has

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³ See, for example, here: http://fatherdennis.blogspot.com/2008/12/role-of-conscience-in-being-catholic-on.html

⁴ See here: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10663a.htm
shaped the way they approach social issues. For example, the primary way that D/C engages in protest activity is through direct confrontation with the Church, and then almost always centered on a particular Church statement or event. As an empirical example, I will turn to D/C’s response to the 2003 Vatican letter entitled “Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons.” The letter concludes

The Church teaches that respect for homosexual persons cannot lead in any way to approval of homosexual behaviour [sic] or to legal recognition of homosexual unions. The common good requires that laws recognize, promote and protect marriage as the basis of the family, the primary unit of society. Legal recognition of homosexual unions or placing them on the same level as marriage would mean not only the approval of deviant behaviour, with the consequence of making it a model in present-day society, but would also obscure basic values which belong to the common inheritance of humanity. The Church cannot fail to defend these values, for the good of men and women and for the good of society itself. (Ratzinger and Amato 2003)

D/C’s response to the condemnatory letter was twofold. They (1) released a written response detailing their critiques of the letter and, (2) organized a protest event outside of the Holy Name Roman Catholic Cathedral in Chicago that they called “A Public and Prayerful Gathering in Support of Gay and Lesbian Families.” D/C’s archives thoroughly detail both responses and I will draw on these documents to discuss how the moral imaginary of D/C shaped how they conducted these actions.

In their public response\(^5\) to the Vatican letter, D/C outlined five “reflections” on the content of the document. The first statement was that “The Church's current official teaching does not take into account the lives and experiences of GLBT Roman Catholics,

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\(^5\) The document is called "A Response from Gay Roman Catholics on Unions between Homosexual Persons" and it was released on August 20, 2003. All quotes referenced here are taken directly from this document.
who, as baptized women and men, are full members of the church.” They go on to assert that taking the lives of LGBT Roman Catholics seriously would demonstrate both to the “joy and holiness” of same-sex relationships as well as their “positive contributions… to civil society.” Front and center in D/C’s response, then, was a refutation of Vatican’s suggestion that same-sex relationships are “deviant” and hurt the “common good.” D/C does not challenge the notion that marriage and the family are the basis of society but, instead, suggest that the lived experience of LGBT Roman Catholics support this idea, albeit in a more inclusive way. In other words, D/C does not contest the understanding of how the family fits into society put forward by the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, they object to the notion that same-sex relationships should be excluded from this understanding, while continuing to position the family as the basis of civil society.

The second and third points D/C makes with regard to the letter turn on information presented in the document about LGBT persons. Point two is that “the current teaching relies on outdated approaches to sexuality, gender and the natural law that do not take into account the most recent advances in the human sciences and in moral theology.” D/C suggests that the Vatican’s notion that the widespread sanctioning of opposite-sex marriage across time and geography is problematic given that the cultures of the world have “universally sanctioned racism in various forms, human slavery and the degradation of women, often through the institution of marriage itself.” They conclude by suggesting “The church must examine what the Holy Spirit is telling us about the diverse nature of God's love through the witness of GLBT persons.” Following this, their third point is that the Church applies “the human sciences… falsely or disingenuously” by claiming studies show that child-rearing in same-sex led households “creates obstacles in
the normal development of children.” While D/C claims that “every study measuring the development of children raised by same-sex couples shows that there is no difference in the development of these children in relation to their counterparts who have opposite-sex parents,” they conclude their point not by citing any of these studies but, rather, by saying that the “statement is simply mean-spirited and willfully ignores the reality that gay and lesbian parents can, and do, raise their children in homes that are every bit as safe, nurturing, and loving as their heterosexual counterparts.”

This bridges into D/C’s fourth point, which is that “church teaching is unnecessarily vitriolic.” D/C objects to the “use of the words 'evil' or 'depravity' in relation to homosexual relationships [as] unacceptable, especially when [they] also refer… to relationships among baptized members of the church.” The final point they make appeals to the “barrier between church and state” to suggest that there is a difference between civil unions, which the Catholic Church should inherently not object to, and church marriage. With the exception of this final point, these statements share a common theme, which is that they rarely challenge the understanding presented by the institutional Church about how elements in the world fit together. Rather, the creative project that D/C undertakes is not to replace the moral imaginary presented by the Church, but to expand it. The family, for D/C, is a place that is “safe, nurturing, and loving” and relationships are a place of “joy and holiness.”

The second response D/C had to the 2003 letter was a protest they called “A Public and Prayerful Gathering in Support of Gay and Lesbian Families” outside of Holy Name Roman Catholic Cathedral in Chicago on October 11, 2003. The press release D/C put out about the event stated
We will call on the Church in a public prayer to repent for injury done to gay and lesbian persons and our families through words and actions. We will respond to the Vatican's recent document against same-sex unions with a statement reflecting the moral truth of gay and lesbian relationships. We will celebrate the presence of God in our families and our lives—lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual and transgendered—through prayer, blessing, and song… Please bring two copies of your own message, to be delivered to the Chicago Chancery and to the Vatican, describing how the presence of gay and lesbian people in your life has contributed to your relationship with God. [We do this to] give witness to the whole moral truth that gay and lesbian persons can and do create intimate relationships that are loving, life-giving and life-affirming. To give witness to the whole moral truth that gay and lesbian persons can and do create families that provide loving, stable, safe, and nurturing homes for children. To call on society to engage in honest dialogue on civil recognition and protection for gay and lesbian families.

The press release highlights, once again, D/C’s very Catholic-oriented moral imaginary. Gay and lesbian relationships are a source of “moral truth,” and the goal with the event is to deliver this message in the form of personal testimonies by Roman Catholics to both the diocese and to the Vatican. The specific message, in fact, that D/C wants to send to the hierarchy is that the presence of gay and lesbian people contributes to Catholics’ “relationship with God.” The argument presented here is, at most, tangentially about civil rights. Only in the final sentence does D/C address the question of “civil recognition and protection for gay and lesbian families.” Their primary concern with this protest event is not to highlight a civil understanding of rights for LGBT persons, but rather to highlight the inherent spirituality and morality of same-sex relationships and present them as part of the wider body of the Church.

In fact, the use of a public mass as a form of protest is demonstrative of the degree to which a commitment to the languages and symbols of Catholicism shape how D/C engages in social action and claims-making. While D/C has both participated in and
organized more traditional protest events, such as marches and picketing, these events have tended to focus on specifically Catholic targets. For example, D/C picketed a local Catholic retreat center after they refused to let D/C have an event there (members fondly recall nuns who lived at the center bringing them homemade cookies as they protested, an act they read as a statement of quiet solidarity). In the 2003 Prayerful Gathering, D/C appropriated one of the central symbols of Catholicism, the mass, said outside of a prestigious local church, towards the reformist end of highlighting both their marginality and their deeply rooted Catholicism. To further push this tension, one member explained to me that they had a single Catholic mother read the prayers at the protest mass to stress her marginality as well. By defining a family as the union between a man and a woman and the children the two of them have together, the explicit message of the event was that the Vatican left out many devout straight Catholics as well as LGBT Catholics.

The mass itself began with the following prayer:

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ… as God's baptized children… We gather to ask forgiveness in the name of all the baptized- leaders and faithful- for our failure to listen, welcome and embrace all Christian families. We gather also to pray for a new day in our church, when all people, regardless of sexual orientation, whether partnered or single, divorced or remarried, may take their rightful place in the assembly of the faithful. As we gather then, let us call to mind our failure to love, our failure to speak and our failure to welcome.

The prayer unabashedly counts those speaking it and listening to it as part of the mystical body of the Church by calling them “God’s baptized children” as well as asking for forgiveness for the Church. It is telling that the prayer was phrased this way: rather than make a demand of the Church, which would imply that they were on the outside, they instead asked God to forgive the Church, implying that they are on the inside, while
simultaneously highlighting the ultimate authority of God over the Church. The prayer also connects lesbians and gays to “all people,” including other groups denied a “rightful place in the assembly of the faithful.” Later in the mass, the presider prayed for fellow travelers in D/C’s missions, specifically highlighting other progressive Catholic organizations DignityUSA, the We Are Church movement, and Call to Action, as well as “all involved in diocesan ministries to the GLBT community for our parishes in Chicago and throughout the world.” Finally, before saying the Lord’s Prayer, the presider highlighted the understanding of the community as renegade Catholics by beginning with “As God's daughters and sons, Disciples of Jesus, we dare to pray as he taught us,” slightly altering the normal words that proceed the prayer in a mass by using the word “dare” to highlight the community’s claiming of Catholicism from a position of marginality.

To summarize, D/C’s moral imaginary revolves around their position as rebel Catholics. The authorities that matter in their construction of the world are the Catholic Church that has rejected them and God, whom they see as the final source of both moral authority and benevolence. Because these are the two authorities they imagine themselves in dialogue with, they connect themselves to other groups based largely around their relationship to the wider Church. Other progressive Catholic groups as well as other groups and individuals marginalized by the Church are understood as allies. Groups that are not, in some way, related to Church are rarely discussed in the context of D/C. Because of this, D/C conducts social action around their chosen issue, LGBT inclusion, in a way that highlights their Catholicism and targets the institutional Church. Other political viewpoints, such as feminism, are also understood through the lens of
Catholicism. This is not, for D/C, a matter of strategy. Members stressed over and over to me that they have often lost members or been further marginalized by refusing to take more conciliatory positions towards the Church or official Catholic doctrine. Rather, this is about the collective self-authoring of an authentic religious identity within the community’s moral imaginary (see Avishai 2008). As D/C president Chris stated, “We're the authentic voice of gay Catholics in the community… I think the presence and the voice, that [people in the community] know that we exist as the voice, Catholics challenging the Cardinal.”

“To Heal The World”: The Moral Imaginary of Welcome and Shalom Synagogue With Regard to LGBT Issues

As an LGBT-identified Synagogue, WSS also confronts issues around sexuality, like D/C. Their moral imaginary, however, constructs a very different world than that of D/C. Because of this, WSS approaches the issue differently and conducts social action in a very different way. This is more than just drawing on different faith traditions, although that does play a part. WSS’s moral imaginary connects being both Jewish and LGBT to a wider variety of social issues than D/C does, ultimately pushing them towards conducting different sorts of social action as well as understanding their social action in different ways than D/C.

For WSS, as discussed in chapter two, both Judaism and being LGBT are understood in terms of marginality, justice, and civil rights. Members regularly reiterated to me that both Jews and people who were LGBT viscerally understood being marginalized, closeted, and denied rights. Unlike D/C, however, they do not have an immediately obvious outgroup (AGLO for D/C) or rejecting authority (the institutional
Catholic Church for D/C) they are in dialogue with. WSS is officially recognized by the Union for Reform Judaism, has good relationships with a sister congregation that does not identify as LGBT, and enjoys the support of numerous LGBT Jewish organizations within the city. Likewise, members of WSS express pride in what they perceive as Judaism’s generally progressive attitude towards LGBT rights and inclusion. On my first visit to WSS, I noticed a pamphlet on the table discussing LGBT rights in Israel and a member, seeing me look at it, proudly explained to me that Israel has been forward thinking with regard to sexuality for a long time. Likewise, WSS members have often expressed to me that while some Orthodox groups or particularly right-wing Jews may be anti-LGBT, for nearly all Reform Jews and many Conservative Jews, sexuality is not a particularly contentious issue.

These comments recall Rabbi Elliot’s statement in the previous chapter about Jews understanding civil rights for LGBT people, and rights more broadly by extension, viscerally. As discussed in that chapter, Rabbi Elliot understood the oppression and anti-Semitism that Jews have faced as sensitizing them to the plight of others. Here’s another member of WSS, named Sarah, echoing what Rabbi Elliot said:

For me, the fact that WSS has some political stuff in regards to civil rights, and it's Jewish, [that] works well with me. But also, that's just Judaism itself. That's why there's so many phrases like tikkun olam, heal the world, you know? You know, that's like the whole line from Hillel, “who am I, if not for me? If not now, when?” That line, that's very much central to Judaism. Or great figures like Rabbi Heschel or Maimonides, um, and the eight levels of charity. Heschel, of course, with civil rights and Martin Luther King.

Likewise, here is a younger member of WSS, named Megan, discussing her understanding of what it means for WSS to be a “queer community” as well as how
queerness connects to Judaism (previously discussed in chapter two). Megan, who is bisexual, was explaining to me that when she found WSS she was feeling alienated from her queerness because she had been in a long-term relationship with a man. When she stumbled upon WSS, she was enamored with the idea that it was both LGBT and Jewish. As she explained,

I did join WSS in this idea that it would be this queer community… there is this huge percentage of WSS that are older gays and lesbians, and they have this history with them, and I have the most immense respect for them. Margot, especially, she was, you know, right there in the thick of it, during the gay rights movement and I am immensely grateful for what she did because it’s easier for me to go around going “Yeah! I’m Gay!” And it’s nice to have that grounding because I think a lot of young gay people don’t have that. They are just kind of out, proud, and crazy but they do not appreciate that they are out and proud and crazy because there were these people before them. And, I mean, it does tie into being Jewish in a way. I think Jews had it the same way where there were times when they could not be out and proud… I think there is a very clear connection between being gay and Jewish in how we adapt through history.

Consistently, members of WSS expressed similar conceptualizations of Judaism as broadly about social justice in interviews. This was understood, as Rabbi Elliot and Megan said, as relating to historical experience as well as to Sarah’s suggestion above about Jewish teaching and theology being particularly well suited to a justice-oriented analysis of society. These beliefs are enacted regularly at WSS’s weekly Shabbat services, which often feature prayers, sermons, and rituals explicitly centered on social justice. These practices widely imagine connections between the members of the community and other social groups that face marginality or oppression as well as construct a vision of who the out-groups of the community are, usually conservatives and those against equality and civil rights.
For example, here is Rabbi Elliot again, discussing his understanding of the historical connection between Jews and Catholics.

The experience of Jews and Catholics as immigrants, the immigrant experience, the labor union experience, this is where we got to know each other! In Europe, Jews were afraid of Catholics. In America, although there are people from the previous generation who say "Oh yeah, you know, the Catholics from the Church down the street, they used to beat us up and call us Christ killers." Yes, there was all that stuff, but politically, in this country, Jews and Catholics got to know each other in the big cities as activists.

This sort of “association by politics” was a fairly common understanding of other religious groups at WSS. Sarah said that WSS was friends with any group who was “okay with Jews and gays.” Another member, Alan, said that he was a fan of the Episcopalians because they were progressive on LGBT issues. A member named Sandra, who was a Buddhist prior to converting to Judaism and still considered herself somewhat of a “Jew-Bu,” felt that Judaism and Buddhism had a common belief in care for the world, which she understood in terms of political and social action.

Indeed, WSS was a place where explicit political talk was often woven into everyday conversation. As mentioned in chapter two, members often spoke about labor history or said prayers during Shabbat services for immigrants or the environment.

During one sermon on economic justice, for example, Rabbi Elliot said “It is impossible to read the Torah and believe that a society that strives for justice and holiness can embrace unregulated and rapacious capitalism, or any other system that privileges the few and cuts off hope for the many.” The members of the congregation around me, young, old, and in-between, nodded in approval. Rabbi Elliot went on, saying “I’m not talking about Karl Marx, here, though many Jews have!” As he said this, he held up a
micrographic image of Karl Marx made up of the first chapter of *Das Kapital* translated into Yiddish. “See,” he said, as the congregation laughed, “some Jew spent a lot of time on this picture of Uncle Karl!” As he brought his sermon to a close, he called up a member of the congregation, a young African-American woman who was completing her conversion to Judaism that night. She and her partner, a young, Jewish man, attend services at WSS regularly and are a vital part of the community. Rabbi Elliot asked the young woman to recite part of an essay based on the work of Edmond Fleg that she had selected to summarize why she wanted to become a Jew. Smiling, the young woman held a sheet of paper up to read and began to recite:

I am a Jew because in every place where suffering weeps, the Jew weeps.
I am a Jew because at every time when despair cries out, the Jew hopes.
I am a Jew because the word of Israel is the oldest and the newest.
I am a Jew because the promise of Israel is the universal promise.
I am a Jew because, for Israel, the world is not yet completed; humanity is completing it.
I am a Jew because above all the nations and Israel, Israel places Man and his unity.
I am a Jew because above humanity, image of the Divine Unity, Israel places the Divine Unity and its Divinity.

In this example, it is telling that the woman is both a convert to Judaism and in a straight couple, yet attending WSS. One thing that surprised me about WSS was the number of converts and straight individuals who attend. There are straight couples who come regularly, and single straight members, many of whom attend WSS every week or, conversely, split their time between WSS and another synagogue. Consistently, these members, who were to a one progressives, told me that they attended an LGBT synagogue despite being straight because they appreciated the politics of WSS.
The sort of casual referencing of moral and political ideas discussed above is typical at WSS and helps construct the community’s moral imaginary. I already discussed one Purim celebration at the community in chapter two, where Esther stand-in Madonna and Mordechai formed an Occupy Shushan movement to take on Ayn Rand and Haman. The Purim celebration the year earlier was similar, with Esther and Mordechai taking on Anita Bryant who had teamed up with Haman and a group of Mormons to pass Proposition 8 style legislation in Chicago. The community assumes a certain amount of socio-political knowledge for participation as well as certain socio-political stances taken by members. Another example of this comes from a Shabbat service, conducted in honor of Transgender Day of Remembrance, a holiday to honor those who have been harmed or killed because of prejudice against their gender identity. The service featured a transgender member of the community giving the sermon in which she discussed her participation in trans-positive activism. The members of WSS laughed and applauded as the speaker related her story. The speaker highlighted connections to supportive individuals, including mentioning an African-American woman who told her that she was “finally getting her stuff together” when she got her surgery and a straight family member who began to say things like “back when you were a little girl” instead of “little boy” to show solidarity with her. Through these examples, the speaker explicitly constructed allied identities for others to claim. The speaker ended by saying a prayer that asked God to “bring everyone into the light,” a line that sacralized transgenderism, while the community responded to each line with “Lord, cloak us in your brilliance.”

After the transgender speaker, another speaker, who had been invited from a local activist group, gave a presentation about the plight of undocumented workers. The
speaker suggested that this issue should have particular resonance for Jewish and LGBT individuals, especially on Transgender Day of Remembrance. The logic she presented was that both Jews and LGBT people understand the importance of claiming one’s identity in the face of oppression and the denial of rights. The speaker then connected the histories of Jewish and LGBT identity to undocumented workers, saying that undocumented workers are a group that cannot claim their identities in the face of oppression and, as such, the fate of undocumented workers should be of particular concern for people of the LGBT community. The Rabbi and several members of the community then asked how they could help get involved, with the speaker providing suggestions for various activist opportunities to members.

At the end of the service, it came time for members of the community to recite the Mourner’s Kaddish, the prayer said by those who have recently lost a loved one or by those who are marking the anniversary of a death, traditionally spoken in the presence of the congregation. Rabbi Elliot stood in front of the congregation and, as he explained the purpose of the prayer in the typical language used at WSS Shabbat services, announced that prior to reciting the prayer, he was going to read aloud the names of transgender individuals who had been murdered because of their gender identity. He began to do so in a low and serious voice as the temple fell to pregnant silence, aside from the names being read quietly by the Rabbi. After Rabbi Elliot had said about four or five names, one of the members of the community let out an audible sob and worshipers around her joined in an embrace with each other, pulling her close to them and acknowledging her sadness. The mood of the temple grew more solemn with each passing name. Heads bowed low and hands wiped tears away from closed eyes. Prior to the saying of the Mourner’s Kaddish,
the Rabbi typically invites those members of the community who are observing the death of a loved one to stand and recite the lines of the prayer in unison. On this day, the Rabbi did not provide the community with a choice: “Today,” he said, “we will all stand up and say the Mourner’s Kaddish in solidarity with our transgender brothers and sisters.” The community rose to their feet and loudly, in a unified voice that echoed off the high walls and ceiling of the temple, said this traditional prayer, now imbued with new and urgent meaning.

While this particular Shabbat service dramatically demonstrates how WSS constructs their moral imaginary, it is one of many examples, albeit a particularly explicit one. For WSS, being Jewish and LGBT are connected through an inclusive understanding of oppression and justice. Members of WSS that I have interviewed are extremely uniform in understanding Judaism as a force for justice and equality in the world. As mentioned above, several members specifically referenced the Jewish concept of tikkun olam, “to heal the world,” and suggested that this concept is a call for Jews to actively engage in justice work. WSS also explicitly casts a wide net with what “justice” means, actively constructing connections between Judaism, LGBT persons, and other marginalized groups or movements for justice. As discussed above, members of WSS have explicitly talked about their connection to immigrants, labor activists, environmentalists, Marxists, and Occupy Wall Street. This list is, additionally, partial, and based predominantly on the references above. For example, I have also seen members of the community publicly express solidarity with peace movements, both in America and in the Middle East, with striking workers in Wisconsin when the anti-union bill was being proposed in that state in 2011-2012, and with other, local, faith based
community groups. While WSS is very *explicit* about how they imagine their connection to other marginalized groups, they are less explicit in how they imagine oppressive forces. Part of this stems from the need to be at least somewhat non-partisan, as an official religious organization. As such, it is rare that specific politicians, for example, are mentioned. Despite this, WSS constructs “conservatives” and “right-wingers” as the generalized out-group that stands against the forces of justice and equality (recall Rabbi Elliot’s comments about Eric Cantor from chapter two).

How does WSS’s moral imaginary shape the way they conduct social action? The community tends to conduct social and activist actions that stress both their Jewish heritage as well as their connection to the LGBT community, while simultaneously attempting to connect these identities to other sites of oppression in society. For example, WSS participates in a coalition on immigrant rights. When I asked Rabbi Elliot about the coalition, he explained that part of the appeal of the group for WSS was that LGBT immigrants face specific challenges in doing things like obtaining entrance to America for their partners. When a representative of the coalition presented the community with this logic, he said, they immediately decided to join and begin sending delegates to meetings. Likewise, when I asked about important projects that members had participated in through WSS, many specifically mentioned WSS’s partnership with Food and Faith, an organization that distributes food and toiletries to homeless individuals on the streets of Chicago. There are several appealing aspects for members of WSS is this partnership, including the presence in Food and Faith Rabbi Chaim, discussed in chapter two, who has actively pursued relationships with WSS as well as the fact that one of the main serving locations for Food and Faith is in a neighborhood with a high percentage of homeless
LGBT youths. During the orientation session for a serving session with Food and Faith, for example, Rabbi Chaim was presenting statistics on homelessness to the volunteers from WSS. When Rabbi Chaim asked if people knew of specific reasons why youth may wind up homeless, members of WSS wanted to discuss a lack of family support for one’s sexual orientation and gender identity as a leading cause. Rabbi Chaim accommodated, and discussed the data on this with the volunteers. As we drove to the site, members of WSS told me that of all the sites Food and Faith served, the one we were going to was their favorite to participate in because of the tangible connection to marginalized LGBT youth. One member said “I really feel like this connects to our community.” This is reflected in the actual serving of the food, which has a party-like atmosphere, with members of WSS casually chatting and joking with the long line of clients who came to receive food and toiletries. We see here how WSS’s specific concern with connecting various kinds of inequality and oppression to the marginality that has been faced by both LGBT persons and Jews given form in the interest the community takes in serving LGBT homeless people and understanding homelessness as, potentially, a result of prejudice against LGBT persons.

This construction recalls WSS member Sarah’s comment as she participated in service with Food and Faith, quoted in chapter two. Sarah said “this is probably the best liberal crowd I could hope to be in on a Wednesday night. I’m sure there are some Republicans somewhere talking about how great pepper spray is, but we’re sitting around talking about how awful police brutality is, and we’re doing it while we feed homeless people!” Sarah was not incorrect: those of us participating were standing on a street corner discussing politics from a progressive standpoint. For the members of WSS, the
community is a social space that actively connects the concerns of the LGBT community to Judaism both through joint practices such as the above discussed prayers which brought transgender individuals into the sacred cosmos of Judaism, deeming them special, as well as through active cultural work which define both Judaism and an LGBT identity in terms of both marginalization and social justice. As such, to imagine and live out faith at WSS, to project faith out into society and to embed faith into social action, is to participate in collective action that actively highlights these connections. To “heal the world,” tikkun olam, is most critical when it addresses the needs of the overlapping circles that WSS sees as the twin pillars of its moral imaginary, Judaism and the LGBT community. Faith can then be embedded in social practices both internal, such as the saying of prayers to elaborate the congregation’s collective identity, and external, such as partnering with Food and Faith, that operationalize what it means to be a community member at WSS. Driving this point home, when I asked Rabbi Elliot, about what was unique about WSS, he replied:

A lot of Jewish congregations probably would say that they're core reason for being is what used to be called Jewish continuity. We have to preserve the tradition, pass it on to the next generation… and that's not the primary mission of SWS… We really have to be about standing visibly for our understanding of Judaism. What Judaism is about. Not the preservation of Judaism, but the standing of what we think Judaism stands for, in a very public way. There may be people who disagree with what we think Judaism stands for, but that's what we have to be about. That's as it affects the LGBT community but also as it affects the wider Jewish community, but also as it affects all the concentric circles around us. Chicago, the world, if you want to be really ambitious. That's what we have to be about.

WSS’s moral imaginary constructs a Judaism that is explicitly tied to inclusion, equality, and social justice. As Rabbi Elliot suggests, this has widespread ramifications for how the community conceptualizes their connection to “all the concentric circles around [them].”
I will now turn to discussing Reba Place Fellowship (RPF) before returning to a wider comparison of D/C, WSS, and RPF with regard to how their moral imaginaries shape how they talk about and confront issues around sexuality.

“My Heart Says Ouch”: The Moral Imaginary of Reba Place Fellowship with Regard to LGBT Issues

RPF is a community that has only recently begun to confront issues around same-sex relationships, but looking at how they have done so reveals a great deal about their moral imaginary. Traditionally, RPF has been non-affirming of same-sex relationships, seeing them as sinful, and had an LGBT-exclusive position. Some people I have spoken with about the community, in fact, remember them as being particularly unyielding on this issue back in the 1980s. When I first started attending RPF as an observer, I did not know what people’s positions on the issue were, nor what the history of the community was with regard to LGBT-issues, so I did not initially breach the subject. While I was curious about it, I was not interested in forcing the issue if it is not something the members themselves do not discuss.

My first inclination, however, that something was in the air came at a picnic I attended with members of the Fellowship. The picnic was thrown by the community for a women’s shelter that RPF has a connection to so that women from the shelter and members from RPF could interact and get to know each other. I was sitting at a table with some younger members of the community I had gotten to know through my observations and the conversation turned to talking about picking a church to raise children in. One of the members of the community turned to me and said “So if you and your wife were going to raise your children religiously, what sort of church would you raise them in?”
felt all the attention at the table turn towards me as she asked this question. My initial assumption was that my religious beliefs were being scrutinized. I responded truthfully, saying that my partner and I came from different religious backgrounds and had not decided how we would raise our children yet. The member continued, listing off various denominations and specific churches in the area and asking “What about something like that?” after each suggestion. After I gave my opinions on several of the churches and denominations she mentioned, she paused and said “You should consider raising a child in an ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) like my husband and I do. We really like our church because there are a number of interracial families and gay couples who attend. That’s the kind of environment we want to raise our children in.” She then asked how I felt about the idea of raising a child somewhere like that. I quickly realized that what was in question was not my religious beliefs but rather my political beliefs with regard to race and LGBT rights, issues that many members of the community are passionate about. Figuring this out, I responded truthfully again, that a diverse church that affirmed same-sex relationships would be preferable to us. I could feel the tenor of the conversation change after that and, as many of the younger members of the community began more frequently discussing their feelings about being LGBT-affirming Christians with me.

Additionally, RPF hosted a conference for the faith-based peace activist organization Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). Several members and friends of RPF are active with CPT and the two organizations share a similar theological outlook on nonviolence and social action. The keynote speaker of the conference was actually the pastoral educator who trained Sally, RPF’s head pastor, and she introduced me to him
before his talk. During his speech, he made regular references to the church needing to be inclusive to LGBT people, suggesting that the church had waited too long to deal with this issue. At this point, my curiosity was piqued, and I sought out someone who could explain the community’s stance to me.

While interviewing a young member of the community named Kimberly, I asked her if there was anywhere she would like to see the community grow or change. Her response was “One thing, and I am sure you have heard this, our policy on homosexuality, I think, is hurtful and outdated.” I asked her to discuss this further and she said that “the official policy is that homosexuality is a sin, and you can be part of Reba as long as you do not act out in a homosexual relationship, so you can be homosexual as long as you are abstaining, and/or taking a vow of chastity, or whatever.” She did indicate, however, that many people were not in favor of the official policy.

Two years ago, I started thinking about this and realizing I didn’t agree with Reba’s stance, and so I started asking some of the old people, like, what is Reba’s stance? And they said, ‘Here is what it is on paper, it is not ok.’ … I feel like the older generation, the first generation, [felt homosexuality was wrong] and then people started joining, and so I think it is probably, like, 60% are against it and 40%, and this is just the older tier, 40% are fine with it, and I am using older here as over 40 and up. And then among the young people, well the only people you are talking about are the people who really feel like homosexuality should be allowed.

We discussed this further and Kimberly suggested that this represented a shift both within the community and within Christianity more broadly. She saw this change, as she indicates in the above quote, as predominantly inter-generational, but also at least somewhat intra-generational, as older Christians meet more LGBT persons. I asked her how she felt about the issue and becoming visibly emotional, she replied
I would love for it to be that homosexuality is not a sin, and is just a situation, and that you can make the decision whether or not you think homosexuality is a sin. If I was gay and it think it’s wrong, then it can be wrong for me, but if you are gay, and you feel that it’s right, then you are welcome to be gay, like, outwardly so that we could all live together in that. You could have a boyfriend or you have a husband and that could be fine in RPF, and [you would] know that, like, you are as much a child of God as I would be. Because I am allowed to have a loving marriage, why should you be denied of that, and why are we partaking in that? Like, I don’t know, it is unfair… There are two people in the community who are gay and living gay lifestyles… and one was discerning it and then decided that he didn’t want to be celibate and then the other, I don’t think it has crossed his mind to be celibate. And so, yeah, cause if you say aloud that you think homosexuality is wrong, you are saying that to our brothers. Like, “I think that you are wrong”… I can’t say that without my heart saying “ouch.”

Shortly after I discussed this issue with Kimberly, I sat down with Jimmy, who had become one of my main contacts, to talk about the issue. Jimmy is one of the gay members referenced by Kimberly above, something I was unaware of as I got to know him. Eventually, he asked me if I wanted him to explain the situation to me. Jimmy is a young man from a small, conservative town who was attracted to RPF because he was interested in communal living, Mennonite theology, and peace activism. He had struggled with his sexuality from a young age, including going through “ex-gay” therapy. By the time he decided to join RPF, he had decided that he was a gay man who was being called by God to be celibate. Here is Jimmy’s recollection of this:

I wanted to be in a place where I could be single in the community and I could live out a celibate life, maybe thought about taking a vow of something, cause I had, you know, I viewed my attraction as unacceptable to follow up on… There’s nothing about celibacy that should be second class or, you know, anything less. I believe that. But, you know, celibacy is a calling, as well, and I had assumed my calling to celibacy was me being attracted to men. That’s what I had said and, of course, that fit really well with where Reba was and is currently at… Actually, over time, you know, most of the young people at Reba are very LGBT affirming and they really want the community to be an affirming community to LGBT
people whether they're single or in relationships. And I resisted that a lot, and I think the resistance was there before that time. Not wanting to consider. I had never read a book on queer theology because I was afraid I would be, you know, too far, especially [because] the church has always been so important to me. I couldn't imagine making a choice to disconnect from the church. And the thought of going to a church that was very affirming, I guess I viewed with some skepticism, like I did before, when I was much more conservative.

Jimmy, however, despite reservations emerging out of his conservative upbringing, began to read up on queer theology and borrow books from friends to try and understand how he could connect being a gay man to being a devout Christian. During this time, Christian activist Tim Otto, who, in Jimmy’s words, “identifies somewhat with being gay”, visited RPF. Jimmy and Tim talked at length about the issue, and Tim recommended to the community that they have a discussion about LGBT-related issues. Jimmy recalled becoming emotional when Tim said this, saying “I wanted to let out a cheer. My emotions had way preceded where I was at on that, which was interesting, I wanted to celebrate that. And then, throughout the summer, it happened pretty quickly. I started to read more queer theology and affirming theology and having conversations.”

The end result of all of this was a decision by the leadership of RPF to have a discussion about same-sex relationships and LGBT inclusion in the community. I touched upon this issue in the last chapter. The community has attempted to make the discussion less about specific policy changes or “politics” and more about experiences, relationships, and personal sharing. The logic of this is that there are many different opinions and theologies with regard to sexuality at RPF and the ultimate goal of the discussions that emerge out of this should be to respect people’s wide variety of viewpoints so that members can continue to be in fellowship together. Remember the
comment from RPF member Tom in the last chapter that RPF tends to operate by “listening to the Holy Spirit” and focusing on the “moment by moment, week by week” work of being “with these people in this place.” This understanding, that confronting social issues requires following the voice of the Holy Spirit in the local context, has extended to handling of LGBT issues. First, they assembled a small group, featuring Jimmy along with several other members, which would serve as the leadership team on this issue. Then, they divided the community up into small cells, each of which was supposed to spend time discussing and sharing about the issue. The leadership team stressed that these conversations were, as Jimmy said in the last chapter, not to be political, but rather to be about personal experiences and feelings. Finally, after the leadership team collected reports from each of the smaller discussion groups, the whole community would come together for a meeting about the issue.

When the meeting finally happened in the summer of 2012, each member of the leadership team began with prepared remarks about where they were on the issue. The first thing that was stated was that the community is and should be in agreement that what they are discussing pertains to RPF, on the one hand, and Christian theology in general, on the other. Sally, RPF’s pastor, said that the whole community agrees that civil rights should be extended to all people and that this issue is not up for debate. Effectively, the community began by bracketing off a political discussion, agreeing that the Fellowship takes a progressive stance in the political realm, and shifting the understanding of what matters in the conversation to the communal and spiritual realm. In the prepared remarks, Jimmy stressed his hope and his excitement that the community was discussing this issue. One member suggested that the Church (writ large) needs to spend less time working
about LGBT-issues because the real threat to the Church is heterosexuality. If Christians are not willing to come down on people who are having sex outside of marriage or committing adultery, then why should they be so concerned about same-sex relationships? In other words, the Church needs to worry about the vast majority of straight Christians who are understood to not be living up to Christian ideals before condemning the much smaller percentage of LGBT Christians for their behavior. Another member suggested that there is an underlying theological issue, citing Paul’s assertion that it would be preferable for Christians to remain single but it is better for them to get married than not if they feel they cannot remain single. She proposed an equivalency for this to same-sex attraction: perhaps it is better to stay celibate, but if you cannot, it would be better to be in a monogamous same-sex relationship than not. This suggestion generated comments of approval from members of the community, who seemed to approve of the theological equivalency the member suggested.

Eventually, the floor was opened up for a wider conversation with all members of the community allowed to participate. The discussion moved in several directions. One member suggested that he personally finds homosexuality disgusting, but immediately added “But I also find heterosexuality disgusting as well.” The community burst into laughter at his comment, but he continued, saying “No, I’m serious. If I’m not involved, why am I thinking about it? It’s your business, not mine.” Several members spoke up to agree with the idea that the sexual activity of others is none of their business. A long-time member jokingly added “You know, I find broccoli disgusting, but I would never suggest that means other people can’t eat it or that my disgust is somehow the Word of God.” Members nodded approvingly at this comment. A young woman in the community raised
her hand and commented that most people in the community do not know this, but she is bisexual adding that this makes the issue very immediate for her. She said that LGBT inclusion is “a justice issue” and should be treated as such. Jimmy asked “Are you suggesting we should participate in activism?” The young woman responded “Yes, if that’s what it takes.” Several members of the community reacted with approval to this comment. Finally, Pastor Sally suggested that the community is ultimately in agreement about the issue with regard to civil rights but in disagreement about this issue with regard to theology, which means that, ultimately, their policy will have to change to better reflect the diversity of opinions in the community. Consensus is important for Mennonite communities, and the current lack of consensus means something will have to be done. As a step toward figuring this out, the leadership team passed out a questionnaire about LGBT-issues to assess where members were.

In these examples, we see RPF’s moral imaginary at work in how they deal with the issue of same-sex relationships. First, the community bracketed off the civic realm, but not entirely. RPF is not indifferent to the state. They are peace activists and regularly participate in activism around issues such as inequality and civil rights. As such, it is not that they do not imagine the state mattering at all, but rather that they do not feel the need to discuss the place of the state. They could agree immediately and with no discussion that civil rights are not on the table. This represents two important details in the moral imaginary of RPF, both discussed in the last chapter. One is that RPF construct themselves as a Christian third-way that is neither liberalism nor conservatism. While some of the younger members identify strongly with some political identities such as anarchism and neo-primitivism, the vast majority of community members identify, first
and foremost, as Christians who are trying to ascertain the “Kingdom” way to do things. Secondly, as Tom mentioned in the last chapter, RPF’s main focus is on what they feel the Holy Spirit is telling them to do in the local community, with each other and those around them. Recall Kimberly’s statement that if they say LGBT people are not excluded, they are saying that to their “brothers.” For RPF, the most important thing to understanding the community’s moral imaginary is understanding the high premium they place on prefiguratively living one’s beliefs in personal relationships with each other in community. Bracketing off civil rights was not done because civil rights do not matter. On the contrary, the community, as indicated, believes strongly in civil rights. Rather, it was done because the community imagines their moral behavior as centered around the local community and the relationships they have with each other. As another example, there has been an ongoing debate while I have been observing as to whether they can best show solidarity with poor individuals around them by choosing to live at the poverty line (which is their current policy) or by shifting to eating locally and organically, which is understood to be supporting of workers, immigrants, and local economies. Similar to what was discussed in the last chapter, these solutions imagine addressing social problems at the meso-level, by turning to group action and creating strong moral communities in an effort to, ultimately, change society.

Dignity/Chicago, Welcome and Shalom Synagogue, and Reba Place Fellowship Compared

How does examining these three communities and how they deal with LGBT-issues shed light on the idea of moral imaginaries? The three communities are all confronting the same issue, LGBT rights and inclusion, but understanding it in such
radically different ways that it becomes, effectively, three different things.

1. D/C uses Catholic language and theology to imagine LGBT issues as primarily connected to questions of family and sexual morality within community. This is because they predominantly construct their imagination in dialogue with the institutional Catholic Church and their understanding of God. This leads them to conduct social action that directly confronts the Church and highlights their immutably Catholic identities, albeit in a way that casts them as rebels.

2. WSS draws on concepts within Judaism, the history of Judaism, and what they understand as wider Jewish support, in both Israel and the Diaspora, for LGBT rights and inclusion, to connect LGBT issues to other social issues such as inequality and immigration. They do this by creatively articulating connections between being LGBT, being Jewish, and participating in other justice-oriented causes such as Occupy Wall Street, the Labor Movement, and environmentalism. This moves the community to address a wide variety of social issues as connected to their core concerns with sexuality and Judaism, including immigrant rights and homelessness.

3. Finally, RPF brackets off civil understandings of LGBT issues as not part of the real discussion the community needs to have because members are, effectively, understood to be in favor of civil rights. The discussion the community needs to have is how to live out a theology of sexuality in their relationships with each other that accurately reflects the viewpoint of the Fellowship while simultaneously creating the space for members to be in community with each other.

Ultimately, I suggest that by imagining the issue differently these three communities are pushed towards divergent social action with regard to how to address LGBT-issues. We
see here how the understanding of issues, the way they are imagined by social actors, shapes the sorts of actions they feel are appropriate to take to deal with them and, beyond that, the understanding of what the issue is, what social field it is exists in, and what matters in thinking about it overall. I turn now to two of the other communities I observed to illustrate this point with a different issue: providing food for people in need.

“You Keep Eating the Bread”: The Moral Imaginary of Mind, Body, and Soul Church with Regard to Inequality

Mind, Body, and Soul Church (MBSC) is a congregation in the African Methodist Episcopal tradition. The entirely African-American church has a stated commitment to fight racism, combat poverty in the neighborhood, and promote the spiritual edification and advancement of its members. At the start of this chapter, I briefly discussed some of MBSC’s moral imaginary, focusing on how the community constructs a history and a theology that connect racism, class struggle, and the local community together into a powerful set of interlocking narratives. In this section, I will further explore the community’s moral imaginary, which centers around twin understandings of community support and personal responsibility, and show how they shape the way the community conducts their soup kitchen.

Pastor Diana, the congregation’s spiritual leader, has a string of advanced degrees and left a comfortable career working for a university because she felt God’s call to become a minister. She delivers MBSC’s sermon from the pulpit each week, alternating between charismatic theatricality and studied textual analysis. Having been raised with very little religion, Diana converted to Catholicism when she married her husband at age 18, but the couple rarely went to church. They were one of the only black families in a
predominantly white town, at the time, and when Diana stumbled across the local AME church, she began to find God.

We were in an all-white community, [and] we now connected with some black folk, and it was kind of cool… I didn't think about God, I thought about fellowship. But, at one point, they found out that I was pregnant and going through this [difficult pregnancy], so they asked to pray for me, and my husband was like “No! That's voodoo” (we laugh). But I went back to church and they prayed for us, and they prayed for us. And we carried the pregnancy through, obviously, and she was born perfectly healthy, and that was the beginning of my faith journey. I wanted to know “who is this God that you're all praying to, that's really changing things? Like, you want me to believe that there's this real God? That this isn't just something you worship in church?” And I really begin to question that… and I ended up in seminary, because I really needed some answers.

After being ordained a minister, Diana was eventually sent to MBSC to serve as head Pastor. Her sermons at MBSC, delivered in a charismatic style that draws on Black Church traditions, construct the congregation as an extended family for its members. She often makes reference to specific problems or struggles that individual members are facing, for example, referencing the car accident a member was in or discussing how a congregant told her she was having trouble giving things up for lent. Pastor Diana does this as part of her ultimate goal of creating linkages between people in the church community, and understands these practices as emerging out of Black Church traditions of communalism.

The messages of Pastor Diana’s sermons tend to be about the need to turn to God, through the church community, and accept personal responsibility for one’s sins and failings. Yes, the road is hard and you will have many setbacks, but ultimately, a focus on God and community will deliver you through hard times. As Pastor Diana delivers her sermons, directly addressing members of the audience about their own problems and
detailing how God led them through their hard times, she stresses these tripartite concerns of personal responsibility, community, and faith. Recall the sermon presented at the start of this chapter in which Pastor Diana suggested that a focus on the people around you instead of on money and “stuff” would help you sleep better at night because you would know your soul was pure. As another example, in one evocative sermon, Pastor Diana told the story of Christ wandering in the dessert for 40 days while Satan tempted him by telling him to turn stones to bread so that he could eat, an invitation Christ ultimately refutes. Pastor Diana began to make jokes about this story during her sermon, saying “You or I, we would have eaten the bread after a week,” negatively comparing the behavior of a normal, sinful person to that of Christ. Then, switching the tenor of her sermon to pointed and serious, went on to say “So when you’re wondering, and you come asking me ‘Pastor, why am I going through this, I don’t deserve it,’ just remember: you keep eating the bread!”

In addition, the community engages in practices that stress their heritage as African-Americans by participating in traditions of the Black Church. This includes practices revered in the Black Church such as gospel singing, effusive and vocal worship, a prominent role for ushers, and altar calls, as well as the promotion of socio-political issues and collective identity work of concern to African-Americans. For example, during one service a young person in the community read a poem she had written in front of the congregation that contained both imagery about historical oppression faced by African-Americans as well as snippets of sung black spirituals woven into the text of the poem, emphasizing both the socio-political and aesthetic aspects of African-American identity as they are constructed at MBSC. Several members of the church have mentioned the
importance of the socio-political, culture, and aesthetic elements of identity that define the group style of MBSC. A conversation between one member of the church and myself on the topic went as follows:

Angie: You know, I've visited white churches and they're so different from our churches, so I don't know if it would be easy to intertwine, because I know, in our church, our church is very vocal, and I've gone to some of the white churches and they're totally quiet... I mean, you sit there and then when you say something like "amen" the person sitting next to you, you know, wonders "what's wrong with them?" But I'm more comfortable in a Black Church because, no matter what the church is, whether it's Baptist or whatever, mostly Black Churches are about the same. They do the same things. But, now, there are some white churches that I think are vocal, too, it's just that I have not been there.

Todd: Would you be happy if a lot of white people started coming to this church?

A: Yeah, that would be fine.

T: Would it bother you if that changed the church's dynamic in some way?

A: Yeah! I want it to say the same. It's what gives me the feeling that you, you know, I don't know if I would get the same thing out of it.

This also reflects the comments made by MBSC member Gail in the previous chapter about race, politics, and religion. For Gail, the Black Church was the center of African-American life but the paired forces of institutional racism, on the one hand, and internal ego, on the other, had displaced it. Her solution was for Black Churches to come together to regain their proper place in the community as well as begin to educate people in their congregations. Members of MBSC construct a moral imaginary that draws on these understandings: racism and classism are real forces, but through personal responsibility, a celebration of black history, and a concern for the community, these forces will not prevail.
Can we see this moral imaginary put into social practice at MBSC? The most visible and prominent way MBSC engages in social action is through their soup kitchen, which serves a semi-regular clientele of about 80 people each week. As clients enter the basement of the church, they pass a desk, staffed by volunteers, and are given a number. They sit in a darkened area of the basement that serves as waiting area until their number is called. After that, they head into a bright room with several long tables where they first stand in line to receive lunch and then sit down anywhere that is available to eat. The soup kitchen represents a chance for members of the community to put their moral imaginary into practice each week, and observing it demonstrates how the understandings of the community become embedded in social action.

Similar to when WSS partners with Food and Faith to serve homeless individuals on the street, the soup kitchen at MBSC has a celebratory atmosphere. It often feels more like a private room at a restaurant that has been rented out for a social gathering than soup kitchen. Each week, clients and volunteers catch up, swap news, tell jokes, and reminisce about old stories as they eat food that has been prepared by the volunteer team. As discussed in chapter two, the interactions between the volunteers and the clients represent a mixture of authority and friendliness that reflect the messages of personal responsibility coupled with communalism that factor prominently into the moral imaginary of MBSC. The volunteers, predominantly middle-aged and older women of the church, run a particularly tight ship, rigidly enforcing the rules. For example, the women have very specific guidelines about where clients can eat and where they can store their belongings. One of the main sources of contention between the clients and the volunteers is that the volunteers will not let clients bring their bags of belongings into the dining
room, instead making them leave them in the waiting room. This has resulted in some fairly heated interactions between volunteers and clients. One man, for example, grumbled “I grew up in the 1950s, and this isn’t the 1950s anymore. People will steal your stuff now” as two volunteers told him he could not eat unless he left his oversized backpack in the waiting room. “I grew up in the 1950s too,” one of the volunteers responded, “and I’ll keep an eye on anyone who might want to take your bag while you eat, so don’t you worry.”

The most frequent source of disagreement between the volunteers and the clients, as mentioned in chapter two, is hats. Men are allowed to wear their hats in the waiting room but are required to take off their hats as they enter into the dining area. This rule is judiciously enforced by several of the volunteers and some of the clients are particularly resentful of it. The interactions between them, however, reveal the deep complexities of the relationship between the volunteers and the clients, as well as how the volunteers embed the complicated theology of community support/responsibility into practice at MBSC. Volunteers continuously say “rest your hat” to male clients who either forget or willfully ignore the rule. On most days, some of the clients in question will talk back to the volunteers. For example, one exchange between two volunteers, Evelyn and Bonnie, and a client went like this:

Evelyn: You there! Take off that hat!

Client: (With feigned outrage) What!? (Turning and yelling to Bonnie, who is in the other room) Miss Bonnie! You see this abuse? You see this abuse out here?

Bonnie: (With her face set in mock anger) Yeah, I see it. You probably deserved it!
Evelyn: (Laughing) You know he did!”

Client: (Taking off his hat and continuing to feign outrage) Okay. Okay. I see how it is, here. I see how it is.

On a different day, a volunteer named Carl said “hat off” to a young man as he walked into the dining room. The man responded with “we ain’t praying right now!” Carl’s eyes grew large in shock and he stood up and said “We ain’t praying? Are you serious? It doesn’t matter! This is a church! You will show some respect!” The client then sullenly took his hat off and went into the dining room. Carl turned to me and said, laughing ironically, “we ain’t praying? That was a new one!”

Often, these short confrontations change tone quickly from authoritarian to playful to concerned and back, all in a few short sentences. On one occasion, a volunteer’s sharp “rest your hat” to a male client was immediately followed with “so how’s your mother doing?” As mentioned, the soup kitchen at MBSC often has a festive atmosphere. Among both the volunteers and the clients, it is a time to catch up with each other, trade news and information, gossip, and reminisce. Faith, community, and race are often salient in the conversations in ways that make it hard to untangle the three from each other. Local politics are often a hot topic, with the trial of disgraced Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich taking up several days of conversation when it happened. In one exchange, a volunteer said to clients and other volunteers, as she sadly shook her head, “How is he [Blagojevich] going to say he came from nothing when his parents worked so hard to put him where he is? That’s just shameful.” The others in the conversation agreed that to call what he came from “nothing” was an insult. On a different day, clients and volunteers in the waiting room discussed how difficult it is to
secure a space in the local park for picnics or social events. One client said “Even if you
*did* get the park, the po-po would come out and break it up as soon as they saw black folk
coming to the picnic, so why bother?” This comment was met with laughter and
approval, with other people in the conversation saying “true, true” and “that’s right.”

The volunteers often treat the clients with a sort of familial closeness that fits in
with MBSC’s emphasis on personal responsibility, community, and faith in God. The
volunteers from MBSC stress a sort of authoritarian respect for status and community at
the center of what they do at the soup kitchen. When I asked one volunteer what would
make the world a better place, she responded with

There's something to be done with our kids. Kids are not like the kids from
when I was coming up. The kids now-a-days are not afraid of anything or
anybody, and I don't know what happened there… Maybe if they pulled
their pants up (we laugh), if they didn't get into drugs, because that's what
causes a lot of the problems. They get into drugs and then they start
robbing people. And it seems like young people now-a-days don't have
any respect for anybody. They don't respect authority, they don't respect
their parents, or relatives, and it hasn't always been like that. I don't know
how it changed so drastically.

This understanding of respect and responsibility as a cornerstone of social life and life
within community are shared by the volunteers in the soup kitchen and reflected in their
treatment of clients. Rules, such as the ones detailed above about the hats and where to
leave your belongings, are rigidly enforced, but shared connections between both
volunteers and clients, such as social networks and personal experiences, are also
stressed. The talk among volunteers with regard to clients mixes judgment and sympathy,
with volunteers often saying that they hope clients will make better choices in life, but
also talking about them as good people who are down on their luck. This draws on the
wider history of the Black Church more broadly and the AME Church in particular. As
Pastor Diana stressed to me, MBSC is strong in its connection to the AME Church (in fact, the soup kitchen was drastically understaffed one day because so many volunteers had gone to the national AME Convention). Members routinely brought up the story of Richard Allen, the founder of the AME Church being pulled off of his feet and told he was not fit to kneel at the same altar as whites. They also report with pride that the founding of the AME Church grew out of Allen’s refusal to submit to the authority of white bishops. The theology of the AME Church, however, has long stressed a twin concern with communal opposition to racism and individual responsibility towards the end of economic uplift (McKanan 2011). MBSC draws on these twin conceptions in the creation of their moral imaginary.

The complex relationship between volunteers and clients at MBSC’s soup kitchen embeds the faith community’s moral imaginary in social practice. When we compare it to the work of WSS with food and faith, for example, we see noticeable similarities and differences. The two groups address different communities, with WSS targeting the LGBT community while MBSC serves a predominantly African-American clientele, yet both serve clients whom they understand as within their group boundaries. At MBSC, the topic of race was often salient, and factored into shared understandings of community and social action. Additionally, they conceptualize the work in different ways. Members of WSS see their work as “healing the world,” and engage in the practices they do as a way to embed this concept in practice. At MBSC, in contrast, there is little talk of “healing the world,” or anything similar. Rather, the understanding is that personal and communal relationships and responsibility are the emphasis in service. This is actualized by the interweaving of rigid rule enforcement and open judgment of clients while also bringing
them significantly closer than is done when WSS serves; clients at MBSC are treated, effectively, with a familial closeness in which both authority and community are stressed. This reflects the greater emphasis on family and personal responsibility that is emphasized in the moral imaginary of MBSC, compared to the more macro- progressive moral imaginary of WSS. In the next session, I will examine a similar comparison that occurs within a single organization: JPUSA’s nonprofit organization Cornerstone Community Outreach (CCO), as well as compare how JPUSA’s moral imaginary pushes them towards conducting social action with a very different logic than MBSC.

“We Can’t Expect Anything But Compassion From You”: The Moral Imaginary of Jesus People USA with Regard to Inequality

Run by Jesus People USA (JPUSA), a Christian commune in a Chicago’s Uptown neighborhood, CCO is a non-profit organization that serves as a homeless shelter and food pantry. Most (but not all) of the employees of CCO are current or former members of JPUSA, and the community’s involvement drives the work of CCO. For example, the community members sign their paychecks over to the JPUSA, ultimately helping to cut down on operating costs and allowing them to conduct considerably extensive projects. As detailed in the last chapter, JPUSA has a highly structural take on social issues, seeing individual troubles as the result of systemic problems such as racism and inequality. Likewise, the community’s “misfit” identity strongly fosters an ethos of forgiveness and non-judgment. These two elements of the moral imaginary of JPUSA mean they handle serving the poor in a very different way than MBSC does.

JPUSA acts as the spiritual and ideological compass of the work conducted by CCO. JPUSA’s story serves as a case study of how social context can shape the beliefs
and actions of a faith community. When JPUSA emerged out of the larger counter-cultural Jesus Movement in the early 1970s, their predominant mission was evangelism and they embraced a sort of abstract conservatism. As JPUSA member Jon Trott (2005) wrote, “like many ‘good’ Christians, we tended to equate conservative politics with conservative morals” (Part 7). This quickly began to change, however, as JPUSA’s neighborhood began to gentrify in the 1980s. “It became increasingly plain to us that as a community called to serve the poor, we had to take a stand against the speculators and wealthy interests aligned against Uptown's poor,” Trott suggests, and this meant realigning the community’s politics to focus less on street evangelism and more on social and structural change, as well as direct service to those in need in the neighborhood (Part 7). Out of these evolving concerns, JPUSA began to partner with local homeless shelters, as well as open up their building’s lobby and dining room to homeless individuals who needed a place to sleep and eat. CCO employees and long-time JPUSA members Sandy and Elaine explained to me that JPUSA was not particularly concerned with the pragmatic “how” of serving the homeless at the time. Rather, they saw that there was a need and began to address it as best as they could. As their lobby began to bulge at the seams, however, it became apparent that this model was untenable in the long run. Out of this, CCO was born and, today, CCO houses hundreds of homeless individuals as well as serves over a hundred community members through their food pantry each week.

JPUSA’s moral imaginary is broad, but their socio-political understandings of faith revolve around a prefigurative Christianity where the faithful are called to live out the radical mission of Jesus in their personal lives and relationships. Once again, however, this is not a moral individualism that posits the rational or righteous individual
as the center of the social world. Rather, as discussed in the last chapter, JPUSA asserts a moral communalism that takes structural understandings of social problems into consideration while proposing meso-level, community-oriented solutions. At JPUSA’s “Wilson Station” website, for example, one can find articles on gang violence, the racism of the prison system, and poverty, which connect these structural issues to faith without minimizing the role of structural inequality. Recall JPUSA member Glenn Kaiser’s comment that that “sin IS the core issue” with regard to social problems, which he then tempered by saying that “white and yes, simple-minded Christians” do not wish to deal with racism and structural inequality. Ultimately, then, JPUSA’s moral imaginary understands structural conditions, such as racism, inequality, and corruption within the political system, as the cause of social problems, and community action and support as the solution to them.

How are these beliefs put into practice at CCO? I will focus here on the food pantry. As you walk into the food pantry you see several long tables arranged in an L shape, piled high with non-perishables, produce, and meat. The clients sit in rows of chairs in the middle of the room, with usually well over a hundred waiting by the time the line starts to move. Chris, a jovial middle-aged man who has lived at JPUSA for several decades and who manages the food pantry, is usually running around giving last minute instructions. Most days he wears a t-shirt with an ironic religious slogan on it, for example, “Jesus Loves You, Even if I Don’t.” Volunteers and staff members prepare to hand out the food as people come through the line. The regular volunteers are predominantly older African-American women and the staff is a mix of black and white, young and old. Some of them are former clients of CCO who have since found housing
but stayed on as an employee or volunteer with the shelter. When the line begins to move, the volunteers’ main job is to let each client know how much of each food item they are allowed to take and make sure they take no more than that. This is usually determined by Chris based on a fairly intuitive read of how many people are in line and how much food they have for the day. Despite this, the amount of food individuals receive is a moving target. Chris has a tendency to come over to a volunteer, lean in close, and make comments such as “Give them two cans each. Two or three. Or maybe four. You know what? Just give them whatever they want,” or to point to someone and say “she has three kids, so make sure she gets some cereal. She’ll need that.” Chris is affable and good-humored, energetically walking around and chatting with the clients and volunteers, usually cracking jokes as he does so. Like many employees of CCO, particularly the JPUSA community members, Chris tends to positively evaluate clients and, as such, give them the benefit of the doubt in most disputes. This affects the way he, and other members of CCO, treat clients, and can be directly contrasted with how many of the volunteers treat the clients. The volunteers and non-JPUSA staff members are significantly more like to argue with clients and chastise them for their behavior, and significantly less likely to accommodate their requests. For example, a non-JPUSA member volunteer called Chris over to arbitrate between her and a client. The client wanted to take extra of a particular kind of food and the volunteer was loudly chastising her, telling her she couldn’t take that much. When Chris came over, both women began talking excitedly at him, with the client saying that she could really use the extra food for her family and the volunteer telling Chris that she was trying to sneak it off the table and was being disrespectful. After hearing both of them out, Chris eventually sided with the
volunteer and disallowed the client to take extra food. I was standing immediately next to this interaction, and Chris turned towards me, leaned in so only I could hear and said with a sigh “That was not fun. You can put that in your article!”

As detailed, the moral imaginary of JPUSA, which emphasizes a particularly progressive reading of the teachings of Christ, leads them to an understanding of poverty as the result of structural inequalities such as racism and sexism and an understanding of service that stresses forgiveness and non-judgmental treatment. In JPUSA’s socio-political understanding, individuals can sin and fall, but the sin of an individual pales in comparison to the sins of a social system that allows so many, particularly women, racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and the poor, to fall through the cracks. Recall the statements from the last chapter by JPUSA members such as Cliff, Brad, and Alana. Cliff said that “Jesus today would be concerned about… the whole prison structure [and] the whole war on drugs” and talking about how laws today are “just like the laws in the New Testament. They suit some people and they don’t suit others” leading police to “lock up young black men, not lock up young white men.” Compare statements such as those, typical for JPUSA members, to these statements, made by a CCO volunteer who has never lived at JPUSA and just attends once a week to help out with the shelter.

Here I am, volunteering from my church, giving you food, and you're screaming and yelling? No. And cursing? No. That shouldn't be. And when these people come here and register here, they should say 'we have rules here. You follow the rules or you go elsewhere’… What would a better Uptown look like? How about we get rid of the trash on the corners! That's what they're doing. Hanging on the corner. I hate referring to people as trash, but it's what they're doing out there. Drugs, and what have you.

We see, in these two statements, two radically different approaches to understanding service. Cliff and other JPUSA members construct an orientation towards service that
combines the teachings of Christ with a progressive reading of contemporary social issues, focusing on structural inequality. Laws are designed to suit the powerful, in Cliff’s example, white people. We do the work of Christ when we “lift up the underdog” and “challenge the power structure,” in this case, by fighting against inequality. The volunteer, on the other hand, has a significantly more authoritarian take on service, where clients must earn the right to be served, and it should be possible to take it away. Likewise, the issue of drugs is not seen as a result of structural inequality but is seen as something partaken of by people who are “trash” and must be dealt with harshly.

This was dramatically illustrated to me when I went with CCO workers to a luncheon thanking the security team for their service. The CCO security staff contains no members of JPUSA, and the CCO workers who were taking them out were almost exclusively members of JPUSA, save one person who had been a long time CCO employee but never lived at the commune. The conversation at lunch revolved around trading stories of shelter work, such as discussing particularly unruly clients or memorable situations. Eventually, however, the security team began to joke that they had a difficult time enforcing rules because someone from JPUSA would overturn all of their punishments. For example, if a security guard would tell a client that they were not allowed at the shelter for a week because they caught them drinking, they would often see that client back at CCO two days later and the client would tell them that one of the Jesus People said they could come back. Eventually, one security guard said "I don't want this to sound like a slam, but Cliff and Sandy, you're Jesus People! We can't expect anything but compassion from you. I'm not saying that's wrong, I just don't always agree with it. I’m not a Jesus Person." Then Auguste, the CCO staffer who is not a community
member, said he agrees that there should be no ambiguity around the barring of clients and the security guard said "Yeah, you and I think alike on this!" The security team and Auguste spoke completely differently about the clients, in fact. They were joking, for example, about getting rid of particularly problematic clients while JPUSA members were talking about how beautifully they decorated their personal areas in the shelter for Christmas.

These people all work/volunteer with the same organization but have highly divergent understandings of the work they do that lead them to engage in practice differently within the organization. As discussed above, members of JPUSA tend to be very accommodating when dealing with clients. Chris and the other JPUSA members are rarely challenging to the clients, even when they are forced to be confrontational with them. When new volunteers come to CCO, they are given an introductory orientation by CCO employee and JPUSA member Elaine who explains how structural inequality perpetuates poverty to the volunteers by using contemporary examples from the city, and sometimes even stories from former clients about waiting for years to get into subsidized housing or being unable to find a job because of minor legal infractions. Long time volunteers, security team members, and non-JPUSA staffers tend to be more authoritative with clients and more willing to treat their problems as a result of individual pathology. It is not that volunteers do not see structural inequality. In fact, they are often very capable of discussing concepts such as racism and discrimination and applying these ideas to the lives and circumstances of clients. Rather, unlike JPUSA members, these concepts are not a salient part of their go-to understanding of service. Instead, their moral imaginary tends to focus the individuals they see as responsible for social pathologies. Because of
this, they take a more authoritarian position towards the clients than do members of JPUSA.

Comparing more broadly across CCO and MBSC, we see a similar pattern. JPUSA and MBSC have moral imaginaries that overlap in many ways. For both groups, structural inequalities, such as racism, cause social problems. For both groups, individuals can fall and need the support of a community to get back on their feet. Finally, for both groups, power corrupts and, therefore, you cannot necessarily trust elites to solve problems; rather, social ills are confronted at the community level. Where their moral imaginaries differ is in the degree to which they understand personal responsibility and individual uplift as central to how to address social problems. For JPUSA members, addressing structural inequality at the community level is the beginning and end of dealing with social problems. Individuals are, therefore, significantly absolved of their personal failings. As such, JPUSA members are remarkably tolerant of personal pathology and forgiving of individual failings, leading them to be incredibly accommodating to clients. For MBSC, personal uplift and responsibility are highly salient elements of the moral imaginary and, as such, individuals who misbehave, so to speak, are not given a free pass. Rather, they are chastised and expected to pull themselves up.

The differences between how these communities imagine individual culpability was immediately apparent to me because JPUSA’s moral imaginary overlaps to a greater degree with my own. As a middle-class, academic sociologist, my understanding of social problems is highly structural, fitting in with how JPUSA understands them. As such, I tend to relate to JPUSA members’ handling of clients. While members of MBSC
can also talk thoroughly about structural inequality, their emphasis of personal failing falls outside of my sociological understanding, leading me to be uncomfortable when they would treat clients harshly. On one occasion, a volunteer at MBSC turned to me and told me to head into the dining room to chastise a man who had brought something into the room he was not supposed to. I agreed to do it, but was relieved when another volunteer, perhaps sensing my hesitation to scold a grown man, said “Don’t make Todd do that, I’ll go do it.” She then went into the room and made the man take his bag out to the waiting area.

In these instances, we see how, even when conducting similar social action, groups with different moral imaginaries approach the action with different logics that lead them to perform it in different ways. While MBSC and JPUSA have much that overlaps in their moral imaginaries and both serve food to individuals in need, the behavior of the group members as they conduct these actions and the underlying assumptions they make about the behavior of those they are serving demonstrate a divergence. Just as with the communities discussed above that were confronting LGBT issues, the moral imaginary posited by the community shapes what matters, what fits together, how to understand social issues, and how to confront social problems.
CONCLUSION

THE WORLD IS NOT YET COMPLETED:
TOWARDS A CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY OF MORAL ACTION

On March 15, 2013, Ohio Republican senator Rob Portman reversed his long-time oppositional stance on gay marriage, saying he now supported marriage equality. Portman had been an opponent of same-sex marriage, he said, until his thinking began to change after his son came out to him as gay. In an op-ed with the Columbus Dispatch, Portman (2013) said that his son coming out “prompted [him] to consider the issue from another perspective: that of a dad who wants all three of his kids to lead happy, meaningful lives with the people they love.” One could easily see this as a cynical political calculation. Likewise, the satirical newspaper The Onion joked “Let’s hope his kid has a tough time finding affordable health care,” suggesting that this shift represented the senator’s inability to empathize with those not immediately connected to him. The Onion’s joke, though, points to something deeper. While we are often cynical about the choices politicians make, seeing them as pure strategy or political maneuvering, ultimately, even for politicians, social issues become real when they are embedded in their everyday lives.

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1 http://www.theonion.com/articles/gop-senator-flips-on-gay-marriage-after-son-comes,31683/
Returning to Senator Portman, in the op-ed explaining his position reversal referenced above, the senator drew on very specific languages to make his point. He began by saying that “the government shouldn’t deny [two people] the opportunity to get married,” rhetorically casting same-sex marriage as a “small government” issue, aligning himself with the libertarian wing of the Republican Party. Continuing this line of logic, he later asserts that

We conservatives believe in personal liberty and minimal government interference in people’s lives. We also consider the family unit to be the fundamental building block of society. We should encourage people to make long-term commitments to each other and build families, so as to foster strong, stable communities and promote personal responsibility.

Senator Portman also discusses religion extensively, saying that his “position on marriage for same-sex couples was rooted in [his] faith tradition that marriage is a sacred bond between a man and a woman,” drawing on very public language used by Christian groups to oppose same-sex marriage. Pivoting in his use of Christian language, however, Senator Portman goes on to say that he reconciled his faith with his support for same-sex marriage by considering “the Bible’s overarching themes of love and compassion and [his] belief that we are all children of God.”

Finally, towards the end of his op-ed, Senator Portman approvingly quotes Ronald Reagan, an unimpeachable hero for many conservatives, repurposing his words for the issue at hand.

Ronald Reagan said all great change in America begins at the dinner table, and that’s been the case in my family. Around the country, family members, friends, neighbors and coworkers have discussed and debated this issue, with the result that today twice as many people support marriage for same-sex couples as when the Defense of Marriage Act was signed into law 17 years ago by President Bill Clinton, who now opposes
it… The process of citizens persuading fellow citizens is how consensus is built and enduring change is forged.

While it is an oversimplification, albeit a catchy one, to say that “all great change in American beings at the dinner table,” it is not untrue to say that the dinner table represents a site where politics are discussed, debated, and made tangible for many people in U.S. culture. Beyond the dinner table, though, it is also the classroom and the workplace, the coffee house and the church, the bedroom and the chat room. We cannot understand politics and, by extension, other political practices such as social movement mobilization, without seeing how politics is embedded in the everyday and understanding the imaginative work that people do to connect the quotidian to wider universes of meaning.

**What Does Culture “Do” at the Six Research Sites?**

I have shown that the six progressive religious groups I observed serve as sites that facilitate political action by shaping the identities, emotions, and discourses of members; integrate political and religious languages in ways that suggest a moral imperative to act; and construct moral imaginaries that connect the everyday behavior and experiences of members to wider universes of meaning, ultimately shaping social action. In a different piece (Fuist forthcoming), I suggest that there are three ways that “culture” has been understood as operating in social movement theory. These ways are: (1) rendering particular sites fruitful for mobilization (Polletta 1999; Leach and Haunss 2009); (2) serving as resources that assists in collective action (Bernstein 1997; Kniss 1997; Williams 1995); and (3) providing wider contexts that shape movement activity (Fine 1995; Swidler 1995; Williams 2004). This is not a typology of theories, but rather represents the analytic building blocks of theory. The most fruitful work, I argue,
emerges out of thinking about how these building blocks combine and interact with each other. For example, framing (Snow et al. 1986; Snow and Benford 1988) and narrative analysis (Braunstein 2012; Polletta 2006) combine thinking about culture as a resource and culture as a wider context by suggesting that how a frame or narrative mobilizes people is dependent, in part, on the cultural environment. Likewise, Morris’s (1984) work on the black church and the civil rights movement suggests that culture both acts as a site to mobilize out of but also provides cultural resources that can be deployed in mobilization. The challenge for scholars trying to understand collective action, then, is to think about how to best integrate these analytic elements into theoretical perspectives that tie them together in illuminating ways.

These communities show how culture can render a “site” a fruitful location for movements to mobilize out of by providing them with languages, skills, dispositions, relationships, and emotions that can be directed towards political action. Even when the communities themselves do not mobilize, their members are often equipped for political action through involvement in the community. This is not limited to providing members with social networks or material resources for participation, but is also a matter of culturally preparing them by providing them with discourses that shape their understanding of and emotional response to issues, collective identities that connect them to particular groups or ideas, and shared practices that can be drawn on for socio-political action. In other words, the meaning-making practices of these communities provide resources that can be marshaled towards the end of collective action. When D/C conducts an inclusive prayer service outside of Holy Name Cathedral or members of RPF participate in civil disobedience to protest housing inequality, they are drawing on rich
traditions of renegade Catholicism and direct action protest that have been embedded in the shared practices, relationships, and identities of the communities. The cultural connective tissue of these sites manifests in a number of ways. For example, members tell stories about other members and about the community, including Jimmy and Kimberly from RPF telling stories about the radicalism of other members or Megan from WSS talking about being inspired by the LGBT activism of older members. The sites also integrate political and religious languages in a way that provides discourses that shape how members understand social issues and problems. These languages are not created whole cloth, but are drawn from wider discourses about religion and politics, suggesting that they are not random, but patterned by the wider social context.

In other words, by thinking about how the three analytic building blocks of theory in culture and social movements I suggest above inform our view of these six communities, we can see how each one serves as a site with a dense system of meaning that facilitates socio-political action as well as how each provides cultural materials, drawn from wider discourses, that can be put towards sense-making and collective action. This is done through the dual process of, on the one hand, drawing from the collectively held discourses that shape how groups and individuals are able to conceptualize their talk and action and, on the other hand, embedding meaning in the ordinary, everyday practices of the communities that makes these wider discourses real, tangible, and relevant. It is this dual process of connecting, through active cultural work, the everyday and the extraordinary, the tangible and the abstract, and the immediate and transcendent, that is at the heart of what I call moral imaginaries.
Moral imaginaries represent the world-building and sense-making activities of groups and individuals that we must understand if we wish to make sense of their social action. While they are collectively held, individuals draw on them to make sense of their beliefs and practices. Returning to Senator Portman above, we see how he draws on collectively held discourses from Christianity and the Republican Party about small government, morality, the family, personal responsibility, and love, to situate his feelings about his son and his evolving stance on same-sex marriage. It is telling that, even if we take a cynical view and assume that the senator’s change on this issue is a political machination in the wake of changing public opinion, he still felt the need to draw on shared discourses that connected his personal experience to wider meaning in his explanation of his shift.

Effectively, part of what it means to be a moral person is to do active cultural work to couch our social action in shared understandings of what is good, what is true, and what is beautiful. Like Senator Portman, RPF began to shift their understanding on issues of sexuality because of personal connections to LGBT members in their immediate lives. As Kimberly from RPF said, “if you say aloud that you think homosexuality is wrong, you are saying that to our brothers… that is one of the main reasons that I think that homosexuality is okay, because I can’t say that without my heart saying ouch.” The internal debate, then, combined discussion on personal experiences with sexuality with language about theology and civil rights in an attempt to map out a pathway to moral action that connected the desire that RPF has to “love their neighbors” to their progressive understanding of civil rights, and their Christian faith. This pattern was common across all six sites: personal experience combined with wider discourses in an
active process of imaginative world-construction that highlighted what it means to be a good person in a given context.

Towards a Cultural Sociology of Moral Action

Years ago, I worked for a short-staffed non-profit organization for near poverty wages. On particularly difficult days, I would often think about quitting, but whenever these thoughts crossed my mind, I would repeat to myself “this job lets me sleep at night.” How much activism has been conducted in the name of “being able to live with myself” or “letting me be able to sleep at night” or “knowing I was making a difference?” While some action is undertaken with a strategic means/ends calculation, even strategic action often has a moral imaginary undergirding it, as the example of Senator Portman above suggests. As such, how can we understand the complicated way that morality informs our social action?

Thinking about moral imaginaries moves us away from a focus on “strategy” or “rationality” and towards a cultural sociology of moral action. It allows us to take seriously the world-construction and sense-making that social actors do in their day-to-day lives while avoiding assuming that all political action must, to put it bluntly, look like politics. Much sociology, particularly in the sociology of social movements, is stuck on strategy and, by extension, rationality. Theoretical understandings that focus on agency traditionally tend to posit social actors that are ultimately strategic in their orientations. Culture, in these theories, is often assumed to be part of a strategic endeavor. For example, most of our “cultural” concepts in the sociology of social movements, such as framing and collective identity, understand meaning as a resource to be intentionally deployed in the process of strategic mobilization (see Bernstein 1997 for an example). By
doing this, we effectively take concepts that get at meaning and expression and fit them into the box of goal-oriented rationality. As I suggested above, thinking of culture as a resource in strategic action is only one of the ways we can see culture as working in social movement theory. This over-focus on strategy limits our ability to understand everyday meaning-making and moral action. I do not suggest that social actors are not strategic. They undoubtedly are. Rather, I suggest that not all, or even most, action should be understood as purely strategic. Some action is dual purposed, strategic and something else. Other actions are decidedly not strategic.

An understanding of culture and action as multifaceted emerges out of some of the earliest thinkers in the discipline, such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Despite this, these ideas have not always been incorporated into contemporary theorizing about collective action, politics, and social movements. The transition from the collective behavior and mass society theories of the 1950s and 1960s, which assumed protest and “collective behavior” to be irrational, to resource mobilization and political process theories that privileged rational, goal-oriented action, have locked us into placing mobilization, rationality, and strategy at the center of our understanding of collective action. Within the sociology of religion, as well, the long debates around marketplace theories, rational choice, and church growth have placed goal-oriented, calculative behavior at the center of the subfield. For Durkheim (1912/1995), however, a religious group did not necessarily represent a calculation. Rather, sociability, the shared social experience that members had together, what Durkheim called collective effervescence, was its own reward. A religious community may have had a functional role in the social system, but did not inherently represent “strategizing” on the part of its members. Weber
(1978) notably understood a variety of types of social action, including goal-oriented, traditional, value-rational, and emotional. In a wide ranging piece, James V. Spickard (1998) draws on Weber to suggest that there are three ideal-typical kinds of rational social action: (1) teleological, the “means-ends” rationality that Weber meant by “goal oriented action” and that rational choice theorists have in mind; (2) deontological, what Weber called “value rational action,” in which action is taken in relation to a transcendent ideal or belief; and (3) cathekontic, which emphasizes the social relations people have with each other. As Spickard suggests, all three types of action represent “rational” behavior, but similar actions can be conducted with divergent logics, only some of which are “strategic” in the purest sense of the term.

The concept of moral imaginaries, presented in this dissertation, ties Spickard’s different types of action together, privileging the idea that action can be undertaken for divergent reasons. Rather than assume that actors are inherently strategic, action is taken for a variety of reasons and, to understand these reasons, we must examine the sense-making that undergirds them. This requires understanding how the groups and spaces that social actors exist in shape their view of the world; how their understandings of politics, morality, and what is sacred are embedded in everyday practices and relationships; and how social actors do the cultural work of “imagining out” from their lives to wider universes of meaning. Jasper (2011), drawing on Weber, points out that the satisfactions of action, from the joy of fusion to the assertion of dignity—become a motivation every bit as important as a movement’s stated goals... Means become goals, and goals—once attained—become the means for further action. Means and ends often fuse. (296)
An understanding of morality is a statement about what is good, beautiful, and true, as well as how we should act in the world and what we should feel about our actions and the actions of others. These feelings, as Jasper points out, are an end in and of themselves. The feelings that one gets from connecting with others in moral community, from behaving in a way that is understood to be good, or to hold knowledge that is understood to be the truth, is a powerful motivator for social action.

For the six communities I studied, morality was not a “strategy,” per se, and was rarely a rational calculation. D/C has regularly lost members every time it chooses to move further away from the institutional church by switching to inclusive language or connecting with women priests. JPUSA members consistently told me that their community’s actions were taken because there was a felt need, not because they had a plan. RPF’s “only tradition,” as Lucius said, is listening to the Holy Spirit, a process that is often slow and painful, but one that members would never think of changing for something more efficient. In all of these cases, the imagined connection between what the members of the communities are doing and wider universes of meaning that draw on the community’s faith tradition shape their understanding of social action.

After I watched the young woman at WSS read the poem by Edmond Fleg that featured the line “for Israel, the world is not yet completed; humanity is completing it,” I drove home, mulling over that particular line. The phrase “the world is not yet completed” struck me as a beautiful sentiment. It occurred to me that this idea, however, while articulated by Fleg about Israel, was not unique to Jews, nor to WSS. In fact, the world is not yet completed for all of the sites I studied. For WSS, the world is not yet completed because LGBT persons continue to face inequality. For MBSC, the world is
not yet completed because some go without while others have plenty. For NC, the world is not yet completed because people near and far are harmed by war, inequality, and empire. For D/C, the world is not yet completed because the Catholic Church has yet to atone for committing the sins of heterosexism and misogyny against its own members. For RPF, the world is not yet complete because we have not truly found a balance that we can live in with God’s creation. For JPUSA, the world is not yet completed because violence, racism, and inequality continue to plague our neighborhoods as the powerful stand complicit. Part of being in a moral community is collectively imagining what the finished world will look like and what steps are necessary to get there. A cultural sociology of moral action requires us to examine the active imaginative work that we do to finish our incomplete world. Through this, we can better understand the sense-making that groups and individuals participate in that shapes how they conduct civic action, participate in community, and fight for a better world.
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