Boundary Work in Inclusive Religious Groups: Constructing Identity at the New York Catholic Worker*1

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Many religious groups use symbolic boundary work to construct distinctive collective identity. While boundary drawing may be unproblematic for some, it can create conflict for “inclusive” groups. How do inclusive groups construct and solidify identity and commitment? If they use boundary work, how do they manage the conflict between exclusive “othering” and inclusiveness? I show that while members of the inclusive New York Catholic Worker use boundary work to construct distinctive identity, their boundary work takes place largely on an abstract level while they practice inclusion of the “other” in their concrete interactions. Building on Martin Buber’s insights regarding the transformative power of “I–Thou” encounters, I argue that concrete practices of inclusion outweigh boundary drawing in inclusive groups like the Catholic Worker. Group ideologies that encourage practices that cultivate openness to I–Thou relations, such as Catholic Worker personalism, therefore provide an advantage in balancing inclusive identity with boundary work.

Key words: identity; boundaries; inclusion; community; Catholic Worker.

In recent years, boundary work has received a lot of attention in sociological research on identity construction and group commitment (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Pachucki et al. 2007). In line with this general trend, studies of religious identity have also stressed boundary work as central to the processes of religious identity formation and group strength (cf. Dillon 1999; Edgell et al. 2006; Smith et al. 1998). Still, many of the groups using boundary work in...
these studies are more exclusive in their identities and theologies in a way that fits with the practice of othering. For religious groups like Smith et al.’s (1998) evangelicals, a focus on boundary work in constructing distinctive identity would not necessarily threaten other aspects of their identity, as it is in line with their exclusive theologies.2 But what about religious groups that espouse “inclusive” identities and theologies, which seemingly conflict with the othering required by boundary-drawing processes? How do members of more inclusive groups construct and sustain distinctive identity? If they use boundary work, how do they manage the tension between being “inclusive” and the exclusive process of drawing boundaries between group insiders and outsiders?

This case study of the New York Catholic Worker, an “inclusive” religious group with a distinct subcultural identity, demonstrates that boundary work plays a role in identity construction in such groups, despite the inclusive ideals they espouse. However, theories of boundary processes alone cannot fully explain identity construction in inclusive groups. Instead, a key aspect of Catholic Worker life—concrete, deliberate practices of including the “other” encouraged by the group ideology of personalism—moves them past the seeming conflict between inclusivity and the use of boundary work by encouraging what Martin Buber calls “I–Thou” encounters with the “other” ([1923] 1958). While I–Thou encounters are rare in the modern world, they are transformative, making them strong influences on identity and thereby enabling those who experience them to maintain a sense of genuine inclusion of the other. When groups have ideologies that encourage practices that cultivate openness to I–Thou relationships, such as the Catholic Workers’ commitment to personalism, they are therefore advantaged in their ability to balance inclusive identity with boundary work.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: BOUNDARY WORK AND I–THOU ENCOUNTERS

In their study of American evangelicals, Smith et al. (1998) offer an explanation for the persistence and strength of religious groups that builds on a theoretical tradition in sociology of the development of distinct subcultural identity and its role in group continuance and cohesion (cf. Coser 1956; Fine and Kleinman 1979; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Drawing on the insight that conflict with outside groups can strengthen the ingroup, they argue that the main way groups develop strength is through creating distinct identity

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2By exclusive theologies, I mean the belief that one’s religion has “the truth” and salvation while other religions and outsiders do not, a doctrine which excludes outsiders from arguably the most important religious, moral, and human good (McCarthy 2007). However, this is not to say that all groups with exclusive theologies necessarily have exclusive identities or entirely exclusive practices (Becker 1998).
using boundary work. Applying these theoretical traditions to the persistence and strength of religious groups specifically, Smith contends that the content of identity matters in attracting new members and retaining the commitment of old ones and therefore in their persistence and strength as religious groups. Known in cultural sociology as symbolic boundary work, the process involves putting one’s own group in a positive light by making negative comparisons with other, dissimilar groups.

During the past couple of decades, a large amount of sociological research has focused on the role of boundary processes in identity construction. In emphasizing the positives of one’s own group and the negatives of the other, drawing boundaries leads people to value the group, strengthening collective identity and group solidarity (Becker 1963; Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1987; Douglas 1966; Gieryn 1999; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Tilly 2005). Building on these well-established theoretical insights, two recent reviews of research on boundary work highlight some of the main developments and contributions of the past few years (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Pachucki et al. 2007). Isolating the mechanisms involved in boundary work as well as the social embeddedness of identity categories and meanings, research has elaborated on the basic concept of boundary work in order to better understand exactly how it happens and why. While important and interesting, these studies have largely ignored a crucial issue involved in boundary work: it is an inherently exclusive process often engaged in by groups that consider themselves “inclusive,” such as the Catholic Workers that are my focus here. Though at least one study has focused on something akin to this tension (Johnston and Baumann 2007), a lack of research on the topic suggests an assumption among researchers that “inclusive” groups using boundary work are merely hypocritical and are not really inclusive.

In the meantime, more general sociological accounts of identity have focused on the changing, relational, time-bound, emplotted character of identity as opposed to the more essentialist, categorical conceptions of identity that prevailed in prior years (Ammerman 2003; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Calhoun 1994; Somers 1994). Such notions of identity have been a significant improvement over past accounts, though they have their critics (cf. Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In particular, newer conceptions of identity have stressed the centrality of narratives in constructing identity, both linguistic and embodied narratives (Ammerman 2003; McGuire 2007; Somers 1994; Yamane 2000). People shape identity not only through the use of words but also in concrete practices that embody their stories. These deeper-than-words rituals and practices can be more powerful in constructing identity than mere words by involving the whole person, "body, mind, and spirit" (McGuire 2007:188). From Catholic Workers in Los Angeles embodying the Catholic mass through serving soup to the homeless (Spickard 2005) to food embodying narratives in certain African American churches (Dodson and Gilkes 1995), this research
indicates that concrete, shared practices and the stories told through them are especially powerful ways for people to construct identity (Warner 1997, 2007).

The idea that concrete embodiment of group stories and ideologies in singing, eating, and other shared practices can be especially transformative, creating deeper meaning than abstract thought, overlaps with important insights from the work of Jewish philosopher, theologian, and sociologist Martin Buber. Though Buber's work has had a significant impact in Jewish and Christian theology and philosophy, it is still relatively unexplored by sociologists (Eisenstadt 1997; Friedman 1964, 1999; Gardiner 1996; Metcalfe and Game 2008). As others have recently argued, renewed attention to Buber's insights would benefit sociological theory as his insights are directly relevant to social interaction, particularly in a postmodern era (Eisenstadt 1997; Moon 2009). More specifically, Buber's philosophy of dialogue, in which he conceptualizes of two basic types of relationships, enhances the conversations occurring in the sociology of religion and elsewhere on concrete, embodied narratives as transformative experiences in constructing identity (Buber [1923] 1958, 1966, 1992, [1947] 2002).

Dividing social interactions into two types—either “I–It” relations or “I–Thou” encounters—he argues that only I–Thou encounters are important enough to truly transform the self. I–It relations are conducted in the abstract and do not recognize the wholeness of the other—they are a rational, cognitive form of “interaction” that Buber sees as increasingly common in modernity. They are not necessarily evil; in many ways, they are necessary for conducting life (Eisenstadt 1997; Gardiner 1996). At the same time, they can never reach the depths of the human person, and therefore of identity, that I–Thou encounters do. Because I–It relations are essentially a monologue in which the “I” analyzes the “It,” using and experiencing the other from the I’s point of view, they do not affect identity as deeply. In I–It relations, “the world only has significance from the perspective of the intentional, self-contained ego, and is manipulated according to a pre-established conceptual schema” (Gardiner 1996:125). Like I–It relations, symbolic boundary work typically involves abstract thought or speech on the part of individuals or groups as they compare themselves with a simplified (rather than holistic) version of some “other.”

In contrast, I–Thou encounters are ones in which the whole person is involved, treating the other person not as an object to be used or experienced but as a whole, dignified person to be respected and loved. “Only when the individual knows the other in all his otherness as himself as [human], and from there breaks through to the other, has he broken through his solitude in a strict

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3While Buber's work is rarely discussed in sociology today, he was a sociologist. He served as the first chair of the Department of Sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and counted several German sociologists as close friends and influences, including Georg Simmel (Friedman 1999).
and transforming meeting” (Buber 1992:38). This type of holistic relation—called “dialogic” because it is seen as genuine dialogue between two persons—refuses to treat the other as a separate object to be analyzed in the abstract. In direct, concrete I–Thou encounters, one is transformed. Buber argues that this is not only true of humans relating to each other but also of humans relating to the divine, or “the eternal Thou” ([1923] 1958). Related to but going beyond the idea of embodiment of narratives, I–Thou relations involve the entire human person and thus have the greatest potential for transforming those involved, changing the ways they see themselves. “Through the Thou a [person] becomes I” (Buber [1923] 1958:28). According to Buber, only I–Thou encounters are true inclusion and genuine love, and they cannot be forced because they are by nature uncalculated and unintentional. However, cultivating openness to such encounters enables them to occur by placing oneself wholly in the presence of the other. In establishing the “We” in the space in between the I and the Thou (the “interhuman”), I–Thou encounters are entirely distinct from the majority of daily interactions in the modern world.

Thus, while boundary work may be an important aspect of identity construction for inclusive groups in creating distinctive identity, its use does not have to mean that these groups are not really inclusive. Following the framework that Buber’s philosophy of dialogue provides, embodied practices of inclusion that attempt to meet the concrete other as a whole person, even if not always successful, can result in I–Thou encounters that affirm one’s identity as genuinely inclusive. In contrast, boundary work is often conducted by comparing one’s own group with simplistic, abstracted accounts of other groups; like I–It relations, it has less potential for transforming the deepest aspects of personhood and identity. Group narratives that encourage cultivating openness to I–Thou encounters can help inclusive groups maintain that identity even if they also engage in boundary work, as the transformative experiences associated with I–Thou relations can trump the exclusiveness associated with boundary drawing.

In what follows, I demonstrate the ways in which New York Catholic Workers construct and affirm their distinctive identity as personalists, faithful catholics, and nonviolent, simple citizens. In doing this, they use symbolic boundary work, comparing themselves with three main outgroups: institutionalized social service agencies, the institutional Roman Catholic Church, and mainstream American culture. Then, I discuss the ways in which the narrative of Christ-like personalism encourages them to cultivate openness to I–Thou encounters with outsiders, leading them to share food, space, and spirit with the concrete “other.” By conducting boundary work on a more abstract, I–It

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4The description of Workers’ practices as functioning to open them to I–Thou encounters is my analysis of their practices—they do not use this terminology to account for what they are doing through these practices.
level while practicing inclusion on a more concrete level where the potential for transformative experience is possible, Catholic Workers are able to maintain and affirm a distinct yet inclusive collective identity.

THE CATHOLIC WORKER

The Catholic Worker movement was started in New York City in 1933 as a newspaper of the same name by Dorothy Day, a radical activist and recent convert to Catholicism, and Peter Maurin, a Catholic thinker and former French peasant. The paper, which sold for a penny a copy (and still does), provided extensive coverage of union activities, the struggles of the urban poor, lynchings in the South, and other social issues. The purpose of the paper was to provide an alternative to the Communist Daily Worker by presenting Catholic social teachings in a form readily accessible to and affordable for workers. Along with concern for justice for the poor, the paper advocated positions of pacifism, voluntary poverty, personalism, and anarchy. The paper’s circulation grew, in just two years, from 2,500 to 110,000 (Murray 1990). Along with working on the paper, Dorothy Day began sharing her New York City apartment with homeless guests, and in time these efforts evolved into a “house of hospitality,” where there was a soup line and a place for those committed to the Worker philosophy to share food, drink, clothing, and shelter with others. Thus, from the beginning, Worker communities—perhaps the New York Catholic Worker in particular—have focused on hospitality, welcoming the rejected, and including the outsider.

As of 2010, Catholic Worker houses and farms exist in approximately 175 cities and towns around the world (www.catholicworker.org, January 18, 2010). The communities survive through private donations. Most refuse to accept any government funding and see themselves as very different from a run-of-the-mill social service agency. Because there is no centralized administrative arm or organization in the Catholic Worker movement, communities often vary significantly from one place to the next. However, most houses have three major activities: hospitality to strangers (which often involves

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5For more on the history and ideology of the Catholic Worker as a movement, see Coy (2001), Day (1952), McKanan (2008), Murray (1990), Summers-Effler (2004), and Thorn et al. (2001).

6Catholic Worker communities studied in some recent scholarly works—for instance, Allahyari's (2000) study of the Worker in Sacramento and Spickard's (2005) study of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker—differ significantly both from each other and from the New York Worker, the focus of this study. For instance, the New York Worker eschews technology, labeling its newspaper by hand and discouraging the use of cell phones and computers among its residents. It is also purposefully disorganized and un-institutionalized relative to other communities. It should not therefore be assumed that, because Allahyari's study depicts an institutionalized social service agency with an Executive Director, for example, that all Worker communities share these qualities.
living in voluntary poverty with the poor), direct nonviolent protest against social injustice and war, and the publication of newspapers or newsletters (Murray 1990). The Worker prides itself on diversity and prophecy, welcoming outsiders while offering what it sees as a better, distinct vision and way of living. The movement is not an official part of the Catholic Church, though its identity is largely Catholic. A few houses are officially interfaith, and most houses welcome people of different religions, though the majority of communities maintain a Catholic identity (McKanan 2008).

An important strand of thought shaping Catholic Worker history and philosophy is that of personalism, a philosophical movement whose height in popularity occurred around the time of the Catholic Worker’s beginnings. Catholic Worker co-founder Peter Maurin was an avid reader of several personalists, particularly French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier. The roots of personalism can be traced back to the ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas as well as Immanuel Kant’s conviction that human beings have dignity and value as ends in and of themselves, rather than merely as means to other ends, and that the human person should therefore be valued and treated with dignity.

Personalism became important to the Catholic Worker for several reasons. First, Peter Maurin’s personalist contemporaries such as Mounier were building on a long tradition of personalist thought within Catholic tradition, even if these thinkers did not always categorize themselves as personalists. For Catholic Workers, building a community based on ideas that go back to Aquinas and yet have also been espoused by some modern Catholic leaders (e.g., Pope John Paul II) was one way to affirm their deep connections to Catholicism. Also, the philosophy of personalism meshed well with the anarchist strands of thought popular among 1930s New York radicals like Dorothy Day, as both stressed each individual person’s right and responsibility to make his or her own decisions without being forced to do so. The importance of personalism in the Catholic Worker’s founding influenced things like the eventual decentralized shape of the movement, practices in local Worker communities such as having few rules, and the emphasis on treating each guest as a person of value, regardless of his or her beliefs and actions (Thorn et al. 2001; Zwick and Zwick 2005).

Since the local is so important in Catholic Worker history, organization, and ideology, my research focuses on one local Catholic Worker community rather than the movement as a whole, using the qualitative case study approach (Cadge 2004; Feagin et al. 1991; Ragin 1992). In September 2005, I began participant observation at the two houses of hospitality in New York City—

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7Some characterize elements of Buber’s work as falling under the category of personalism. However, most of Catholic Worker thought on personalism builds on Catholic sources. I chose to focus on Buber’s work rather than on Catholic personalists because of the explicit connections to sociology in his work as well as the fruitfulness of his I–It/I–Thou distinction as a category of analysis.
Maryhouse and St. Joseph House—which together make up the New York City Catholic Worker, continuing until May 2006. During that time, I worked and attended events at the two houses for between ten and fifteen hours a week. My activities included helping cook dinner, serving lunch, doing dishes, mopping the floor, attending mass, attending Friday Night Meetings, and coming to any other special events the community had during that time. In addition, I conducted many informal interviews with people in the houses, and I conducted formal, in-depth interviews with 13 of the full-time and part-time volunteers.

St. Joseph House is a house where primarily men live, though there is a floor for women. They have a soup line four times a week, a clothing closet, and hold other events for people inside and outside of the house. Volunteers who live in the house also prepare lunch and dinner for people who reside there. Maryhouse is a house primarily for women and children, though several men live there as well. They have a lunch for women of the neighborhood five times a week, give out clothing, and host “Friday Night Meetings”—a time when the larger community gathers for meetings on topics of interest. Both houses celebrate the Eucharist once a week, in addition to attending mass together at their nearby parish on Sundays. No one is required to attend mass, though many do.

Approximately 60 people live in the two houses, most of whom originally came to the Catholic Worker out of financial need—approximately 10 to 15 full-time volunteers live in the two houses at any one time. Most of these volunteers have a college degree or more (though many originally came from working-class backgrounds), are white, and are Catholic. There are many regular part-time volunteers who are considered part of the larger Catholic Worker community even though they do not live in the houses—these volunteers are slightly more diverse than the live-in volunteers are. Aside from volunteers, the people living in the house come to the Worker for a variety of reasons and stay for various lengths of time—some for a few weeks until they “get back on their feet” and others for the rest of their lives. Most come from working-class backgrounds, and several are Catholic, though most are not. They are much more racially diverse as a group than the full-time volunteers are.

Despite these general groupings of people who are at the Worker on a daily to weekly basis, there are overlaps in terms of categories. There are several

8While a farm in Marlboro, NY, is technically also part of the New York Catholic Worker, my ethnographic research indicates that in practice it operates as a separate—though related—community. St. Joseph House and Maryhouse, however, are so interdependent as to make it difficult to study one without the other.

9From here forward, when I refer to “the Catholic Worker” or “the Worker,” I mean specifically the New York Catholic Worker, not the Catholic Worker movement as a whole. Likewise, when I discuss “Catholic Workers” or “Workers,” I am specifically talking about those who are a part of the New York community.
“full-time volunteers” who do more work outside of the house than in it (e.g., doing anti-war organizing) or who age until they are no longer physically able to work in the house. Likewise, there are “residents” who, while initially coming to the community out of need, develop attachment to the Worker and its philosophy and are integral to running the houses. In their studies of the New York Catholic Worker, both Aronica (1987) and Murray (1990) define categories of relationships to the Catholic Worker community. While parts of each of their schemes are appropriate to current circumstances at the New York Worker, they are incomplete characterizations of the community I encountered for the reasons just mentioned. Thus, instead of using a complex categorization scheme, I define “Workers” and “community members” as people who identify as Catholic Workers and share a commitment to its collective identity and vision, regardless of why they originally came or whether they live in the two houses. Everyone who does not fit into this category, for the purposes of this study, is an “outsider,” as they do not share Catholic Worker identity.

FINDINGS: CONSTRUCTING DISTINCT AND INCLUSIVE IDENTITY

“The Catholic Worker is Not a Company”: Boundary Work and Identity Construction

Despite its identity as an inclusive community focused on hospitality, much of Catholic Worker identity is constructed through drawing boundaries between itself and relevant outgroups. Though Workers have many outgroups, the main ones are institutionalized social service providers, the institutional Roman Catholic Church, and what they see as “mainstream secular American culture,” signified by its consumerism and militarism. In drawing boundaries with these groups, they construct a distinct identity as personalists, faithful Catholics, and simple, nonviolent people. Importantly, though, this boundary work occurs largely through comparisons with abstracted, simplified accounts of the other, or on an I–It level. In drawing boundaries with these outgroups, Catholic Workers are not simply pointing out that the I–It relations of others (e.g., social workers) need to be improved and made more personal. Rather, they are actually engaging in I–It relations themselves through their boundary work, simplifying the “other” and distancing themselves from it. Later in the paper, I demonstrate how the Workers are able to counteract the exclusive, dehumanizing effects of their boundary work through concrete practices that encourage I–Thou relations.

The Catholic Worker versus institutionalized social service organizations. One of the most common things a new volunteer at the New York Catholic Worker community encounters is an explanation of how the Worker is different from
other groups that serve the poor. For example, the first or second time I went to the Worker to volunteer, I had the following interaction concerning social workers:

A thin man in his eighties who I haven’t met yet walks by, putting away dishes on a nearby shelf. Jonathan introduces me to Peter, saying “Grace is a journalist.” I say, as non-confrontationally as possible, “actually, I’m a graduate student in sociology.” Jonathan responds, “you know, Dorothy [Day] never liked social workers.” At this point, Peter piped up, saying that wasn’t exactly the case. I attempt to further clarify things, saying that I’m a sociologist, not a social worker, and they are actually pretty different. Peter acknowledges the difference, but goes on to make his argument about what he sees as Dorothy’s actual feelings about social workers. He says, “it wasn’t that Dorothy didn’t like social workers—she just did things differently from them. Instead of trying to ‘fix’ people or telling them how they had to change, she believed in helping people and accepting them and their needs, trying to meet their needs. So, she just didn’t see the social workers’ way as the best way to reach out to people.”

Community members are careful to distinguish between what they see as the Worker’s more personalist, egalitarian way of serving the poor as opposed to the impersonal, bureaucratized, undignified nature of social service agencies and nonprofit organizations. Talking with community member Dennis one day, he made this point very clear to me. He told me about a nearby coffee shop, saying that women there would leave their handbags on the table while they ordered, and that sometimes their credit cards would disappear. Afterwards, the police would come to Maryhouse, assuming one of the people frequenting the soup line had stolen the card. The police would always tell community member Chris, “one of your ‘clients’ stole this lady’s credit card.” Dennis said, “they [the police] think that they are clients, like what a social worker has, clients. They think that Chris and the others work here, that they are paid to be here. The Catholic Worker is not a company—the police are just wrong! Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong!” He did a little dance and pointed each time he said the word “wrong,” as though pleased to set the police straight.

Catholic Workers see their form of service to the poor as more authentic, more dignified, and more Christian than typical nonprofit forms of alleviating poverty. By directly serving people and refusing to bureaucratize, the Catholic Worker is not able to serve the same quantity of people that a nonprofit might be able to serve. However, they pride themselves on the personal relationships they form with those they serve, attempting to retain the dignity and humanity of both parties. They root these concerns not only in anarchism and personalist philosophy but also in Catholicism. The Christian “works of mercy”—central to the Worker’s vision since its inception—are posted on the wall in artwork throughout the houses. Rooted in the teachings of Jesus found in Matthew 25, the Catholic Worker newspaper regularly lists the “works of mercy” as giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, offering

10 All individuals’ names are pseudonyms.
hospitality to the homeless, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and burying the dead. They stress the importance of doing these things personally, arguing that in the gospel story of the feeding of the multitudes, Jesus told his disciples “You give them something to eat” (Mark 6:37, NRSV 1989, my emphasis).

In their writings, their interpretations of scripture, and their talk, Catholic Workers draw boundaries between themselves and more institutionalized services to the poor, constructing their distinctive identity as Christian personalists who serve the poor in a more human, dignified way. However, their boundaries are largely drawn in the abstract. While they often compare themselves with “social workers,” “companies,” and “nonprofits,” these are discussed in terms of abstract groups of people or generalizations about individuals. In conducting boundary work, they engage in I–It relations with the other, an abstract act of thought, speech, or calculation rather than a concrete engagement with the holistic other.

The Catholic Worker versus the institutional Roman Catholic Church. Though the New York Catholic Worker unequivocally identifies as Catholic, one of its main outgroups is the institutional Roman Catholic Church.11 The community is open to non-Catholics, but the majority of the people who come to live there come because they are Catholic and are seeking a way to live out their faith that they experience as true to Catholicism yet in conflict with some of Church teaching and practice. Workers frequently compare themselves with the Church, emphasizing the ways in which they differ and the ways in which that is a good thing. For instance, during my first week as a volunteer, I spoke with one of the priests who regularly celebrates mass at the Worker. He told me he liked coming to the Worker when he could because he is worried by America and by the Church here which he called “so liturgical.” He said “it is good to see others here and it gives me hope because they are more focused on following Jesus, on peace, on justice.” Thus, even Catholic clergy who are part of the Catholic Worker’s extended community draw boundaries between what they see as the Worker’s more Christ-like form of Catholicism and the institutional Church’s traditionalism and formalism.

There are many people at the Catholic Worker who, though strongly identifying as Catholic, were “at the last stop of the ‘Catholic train’ if it weren’t for the Catholic Worker,” as community member Paige described herself. As she said, they typically come to the Worker seeking a place where they “can find a home and hang on to the Church for all of its goodness” and to “love the church and criticize it.” While Workers contrast themselves with the Church

11At least today, it can be argued that this was less true of the community as a whole when Day was alive, as she urged loyalty to the Church and was more hesitant to criticize it outright. Also, the Workers rarely criticize the Church officially by critiquing it in their newspaper, for example. Nonetheless, almost all are critical of certain aspects of the Church in their daily talk and practice. Along with the decentralized organization of the Catholic Worker movement, local communities vary in this regard.
in a multitude of ways, one of the main ways in which they do so is by focusing on its formalism. One often hears people at the Catholic Worker contrast the Worker to “the hierarchy,” “the institutional church,” and “conservative” or “traditional” Catholicism. As in the earlier story about the priest who called the Church “so liturgical,” Workers view the institutional Church as getting caught up on things that they do not see as central to the practice of Christianity, like whether to bow after communion.

The conservative label does not only refer to a focus on formal liturgical practice. It also has to do with contrasting themselves to aspects of Catholicism that some theologians and sociologists of religion define as “orthodox”—views of scripture and Church authority, views on moral absolutism, views of other religions, and views about God (cf. Smith et al. 1998, and see Ammerman 1997 for a different sociological definition of orthodoxy). Rachel, a long-time community member in her late 30s, explains her Catholicism in a way that exemplifies the views of some Workers on these theological issues:

*I think the Grand Inquisitor would not include me among the ranks of the faithful, undoubtedly. I’m not a black-and-white. You know, faith is relationship between yourself and God primarily and then yourself and the community. And as long as I’m not harming the community, it’s none of anybody else’s business to tell me whether or not my faith in God is right. I mean, I believe that. Your works and your behavior will indicate whether or not you’re a truly faithful person, in terms of, you know, you don’t want somebody in your faith community who’s gonna be trying to really hurt or harm people. So as long as that’s okay, then it’s none of your business whether I think God is a woman or not. You know, that’s not very “Catholic.”

In presenting her religious identity this way, Rachel could be seen as either very Catholic or not very Catholic, largely depending on whom you ask and how they define what it means to be a “good Catholic.” Similarly, many of the practices of the Worker could be interpreted as both transgressing Church teaching and a more “Christ-like” version of Catholicism in their emphasis on inclusivity. For instance, many Workers substitute inclusive language in the liturgies in weekly masses and daily vespers (evening prayer). Also, communion in Catholic Worker masses is typically open to all who wish to partake, rather than only being offered to baptized Catholics.

In practices such as these, Catholic Workers stress what they see as the inclusive nature of the Christian message, while contrasting themselves in some ways with the official Church, which they see as overly focused on exclusive formalities.12 Retaining what they see as central to Catholicism while

12Like Dillon’s (1999) pro-change Catholics, Catholic Workers justify challenging certain aspects of the Church while retaining Catholic identity and relationship with the Church primarily by pointing to a specific Church doctrine—the teaching of the primacy of conscience. With roots in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, the doctrine indicates that if, after informing oneself about an issue as much as possible, one’s conscience points to a solution that differs from official Church doctrine, the conscience should be followed above all, even if it is in fact in error.
drawing boundaries with the institutional Church and “black-and-whiters” who subscribe to church teachings in an absolutist way, Workers create a distinctive identity as Catholics but not “Catholic.” Still, these boundaries are typically drawn in abstract, monologic ways that stereotype both the Church and its more absolutist followers rather than being comparisons with whole, concrete individuals.

The Catholic Worker versus mainstream America. Lastly, Catholic Workers draw boundaries between themselves and “mainstream secular American culture,” represented by what they see as its violence and consumerism. Catholic Workers have long written against war and all forms of violence in the pages of the Catholic Worker newspaper. They ground their beliefs in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount as recorded in the book of Matthew, where Jesus instructs his followers to love their enemies and “turn the other cheek” rather than violence to others.

In addition to writing against war in the newspaper, community members are involved in various anti-war activities, which largely focused on issues surrounding the U.S. war in Iraq and the “war on terror” during my research. Through their acts of reaching out to those who are supposed to be their enemies, they stress their common humanity as “children of God,” opposing themselves to a secular form of American culture that argues that religion should have nothing to say about American military policy. Rather, Workers argue that as Christians they should be ready to sacrifice themselves nonviolently as Jesus did, instead of harming others.

One community member, Helen, had taken several trips to Iraq in recent years, and had befriended an Iraqi man who later came to the United States for school and lived at one of the houses for a short time. One day while we were serving lunch, she told me about an effort in the United States to ring a bell 100,000 times in remembrance of what some have estimated to be 100,000 Iraqi lives lost in the war up to that point. She said, “it was my dream to get a message on the news in Iraq, so that people would know about the 100,000 bell tolls, so they would know we care, that we’re sorry for their loss.” In related activity, in 2005 several community members began a shared ritual of weekly Friday fasting in solidarity with the prisoners on hunger strike in the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay (echoing the practice of fasting on Fridays in the Catholic tradition). This ritual culminated in the trip of around 20 Catholic Worker activists from around the country (including five from the New York community) to Santiago de Cuba in December 2005, where they walked to Guantanamo in an attempt to visit the prisoners and make evident what they saw as the injustices of the prisoners’ plight. They were not permitted to enter the base to see the prisoners, so the weekly fasts continued after the trip and were supplemented by public protests against the prison and the torture they believed was occurring at Guantanamo, protests which often culminated in acts of civil disobedience.
Finally, Catholic Workers also contrast themselves with what they see as the increasing centrality of consumerism in American culture. Instead, they advocate simple living and sharing what one has with the poor—for one’s own good, to avoid exploitation of the poor, and to live in solidarity with the poor. Once, I attended a dinner and mass celebrating the opening of a new Catholic Worker house in the Bronx area of New York City. At the end of the night, the two priests starting the house offered the Workers I was accompanying a pan of garlic soup that was left over from dinner. The Workers protested, warning that they may never get the pan back. The priests responded, “There is no private property here,” drawing a boundary between the Catholic Worker style of life and “the mainstream’s” focus on personal accumulation of material goods. Likewise, at the mass that evening we sang a song whose main lyrics are “The Lord hears the cry of the poor, Blessed be the Lord,” affirming what they believe to be God’s care for the poor despite what they see as the broader culture’s lack of concern about their suffering and impoverishment.

Another common way in which Workers draw boundaries between themselves and consumerism has to do with location. The Worker houses today, though in different buildings from the original ones, are located in the same neighborhood as they have always been—New York City’s Lower East Side, a poor and working class immigrant neighborhood for most of its history. However, over the past couple of decades, the Lower East Side has been undergoing a vast process of gentrification, changing from a poor immigrant neighborhood to a neighborhood increasingly made up of young, relatively wealthy professionals commonly known as “yuppies.” The Workers are quick to contrast themselves with what they see as their increasingly wealthy, consumerist, mainstream surroundings. While not everyone can personally remember a time when things were different, community members tell nostalgic stories of the days when members of the extended community lived across the street from the houses because rent was so inexpensive and they could come volunteer during the day. Now, few people who move out of the houses can afford to live nearby and maintain daily involvement in the community. They also talk about how people in the neighborhood, especially the police, harass them and want them to leave the neighborhood. Workers feel a sense of embattlement against what they see as a materialistic, compassionless culture that now quite literally surrounds them.

13Over the years, the neighborhood has been filled variously with European Jews, Irish, Italian, Ukranian, and Polish Catholics, and—more recently—Puerto Rican Catholics (Riis [1890] 1997).

14The Catholic Worker has chosen to stay on the Lower East Side despite this gentrification because there are still homeless people in the area, many of whom are long-time neighborhood residents who have been evicted due to rising prices. As one of the only remaining groups providing services to the homeless in the neighborhood, they feel it is important to stay for the time being, though there is disagreement on the matter.
In drawing boundaries between their own peaceful, simple way of life lived in solidarity with the poor and what they see as the more mainstream, violent, consumerist way of life around them, Workers construct identity as followers of the God of Peace and “the Lord who hears the cry of the poor.” These comparisons are made with abstracted groups, though—only partial views of the “mainstream,” “Americans,” “the military,” and “yuppies” are typically utilized when these boundaries are being drawn. For example, while they may completely agree during serious reflection that Americans’ views on war and consumerism are diverse, they still utilize simplified accounts of the “other” as a negative comparison group in indicating who they are (peaceful, simple) by discussing who they are not (complicit in violence, consumerist).

Boundary drawing and I–It relations. In drawing boundaries with outside groups, Catholic Workers participate in identity construction processes that research has shown to be central to creating and maintaining a distinct collective identity and group solidarity. Research on the survival of intentional communities indicates that institutionalization plays a large role in longevity (e.g., Bader et al. 2006; Kanter 1972). Despite actively resisting such institutionalization, the New York Catholic Worker has existed for over 75 years as a distinct subcultural group. By constructing a distinctive identity, boundary work has likely played a role in maintaining the Catholic Worker over the years and certainly plays an important part in constructing the Worker as a distinct community today. Still, the boundary drawing that occurs takes place on a largely abstract level, with Workers making comparisons with partial, stereotypical versions of the groups that they are othering, making these processes akin to Buber’s I–It relations. While performing an important function for the Workers in maintaining their distinctive identity, boundary work poses a challenge to their inclusive identity, a challenge that is nonetheless counteracted by their experiences with I–Thou encounters.

Maintaining Identity as an Inclusive Community: The Role of I–Thou Encounters

In her autobiography The Long Loneliness, Dorothy Day wrote one of her best-known and most well-loved passages:

*The most significant thing about The Catholic Worker is poverty, some say. The most significant thing is community, others say. We are not alone any more. But the final word is love. . . . We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. . . . We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes in community. (1952:285)*

A large part of Catholic Worker identity has long been that of a religious community where people not only help one another, but where they seek to live with, know, and love each other in concrete ways, including loving “the other.” The Catholic Worker’s collective identity as an inclusive community of
love is actively constructed and affirmed through various concrete practices, with the ideology of personalism—meeting other people as whole persons, with one’s own whole self—encouraging Workers to cultivate openness to others no matter who they are. These practices of inclusion open them up to I–Thou encounters, enabling them occasionally to experience such encounters with concrete members of the groups they “other” during boundary work, producing transformative moments that result in a deep feeling of genuine inclusiveness. More specifically, these types of encounters are cultivated through concrete, embodied practices of welcoming the whole other—namely, the practices of sharing food, space, and spirit. The empirical evidence presented here focuses on the inclusive practices that cultivate openness to I–Thou encounters rather than on I–Thou encounters themselves because, as Buber himself argued, I–Thou encounters are by definition unobservable since one is not reserving part of oneself for analysis during an I–Thou encounter. However, placing oneself in positions wherein one is likely to encounter “the other” with an open spirit makes I–Thou encounters more likely to occur.

Sharing food as inclusion. At the Catholic Worker, there are many concrete practices of inclusion, but perhaps the most important is the focus on sharing food. As others have shown and suggested, sharing food with other people can be an important ritual, one that brings people together over one of the most basic of human activities, constructing and solidifying religious identity (Dodson and Gilkes 1995; Warner 1997). For Christian groups, the centrality of sharing meals in daily life can be an echo of the shared sacred meal of the Eucharist. Workers often joke about the centrality of food to the community, commenting on how all they think about and do seems to revolve around eating. In other words, meals are not simply one aspect of Catholic Worker life—they are the glue that holds the days together in this community and that holds the people together as well. Meals are not merely a time for solidifying commitment among fellow Workers, though. They are also a chance for practicing inclusion of people who do not share their identity and commitment to the Catholic Worker and the values that accompany it.

The days of Catholic Workers are filled with food. Early in the morning, someone rises to start the soup, which is made fresh each morning for the soup line. Vegetables are chopped, beans soaked, meat cleaned and cooked. A giant metal pot is set up on the industrial-size stove, filled with water, and ingredients are poured in to simmer. Often, the soup maker is too short to actually stir the soup, so he or she must stand on a stool beside the stove to reach into the pot and stir, conscientiously keeping anything from sticking to the bottom of the pot. Once the soup is ready a couple of hours later, people start trickling in. The day’s volunteers—usually four or five people total—gather spoons, bowls, ladles, mugs for coffee, and bread baskets filled with bread. People begin lining up outside of the front door for soup. Then, the doors are opened. People take any open seats at the five tables around the kitchen, and Workers
bring them a bowl of soup and bread. Butter is on the tables where people can help themselves, as are hot sauce and other condiments. Someone walks around with coffee, filling the mug of anyone needing a refill.

Though this may sound similar to other soup lines, things start to stand out as different when Workers come and sit down and eat with the people on the soup line, share a cup of coffee with them, and talk. Workers and soup line regulars know each other by name and occasionally know intimate details of each others’ lives, things that they learn about each other during these times of sharing. This sharing of food, drink, and conversation between group insiders and outsiders—a practice of not only “us” feeding “them” but also “them” feeding “us”—is a practice that affirms the common hunger and humanity of the Worker and the person on the street, regardless of whether that outsider would agree with the Workers about the “right” way to serve other people, to be Catholic, or to live in light of violence and consumerism.

After the soup line and a light lunch for any residents of the house that did not eat at the soup line, preparation for dinner begins. Workers at St. Joe’s cook dinner for the residents of both houses, needing to feed around 60 people. Most of the meals are simple, with entrees such as meatloaf, baked chicken, spaghetti, beans and rice, or vegetable stir fry. A side of rice or potatoes and a salad are almost always part of the mix, though the meal depends completely on what food happens to be available that day—which itself depends largely on donations. While the dinner meal is officially only for residents of the houses, the person “on the house” (i.e., temporarily in charge) sometimes invites other people to the meal, especially if it is someone he or she knows as a regular from the soup line.

Even on the nights when only residents are present, though, the meal can still be seen as an inclusionary practice since not everyone who lives in the house considers himself or herself a Catholic Worker. On a typical night in either dining room, an unlikely set of people are gathered, sitting beside each other, eating, talking, and laughing. At St. Joe’s one might glimpse, a college-educated white female Worker in her early 30s wearing a “Shut Down Guantanamo” T-shirt sitting across from a white schizophrenic high-school educated chain-smoker in his 50s, who moves in and out of talking to her and then talking aloud to himself about something completely different, often something espousing his right-wing political views. At Maryhouse, one could sit with a black Haitian woman in her 70s who is a fan of President Bush and who is eating with a white college instructor Worker in his early 30s who wrote his dissertation on Dorothy Day. Of course, these differences are not always salient, but even when they are, sharing something as elemental as food seems to override them, bringing people from seemingly very different backgrounds together.

In participating in the everyday, concrete, embodied practice of sharing food with fellow residents or people on the soup line who may be members of the groups they “other” during boundary work, Catholic Workers open themselves to the possibility of I–Thou encounters and occasionally experience them.
These are not moments in which they are consciously intending to be inclusive—rather, the ongoing, concrete practice of sharing something as elemental as food allows for meeting the other spontaneously, whole person meeting whole person, in meaningful dialogue and recognition of mutual humanity and worth.

**Sharing space as inclusion.** In societies like the United States that stress individualism, people tend to want their own personal space in their homes, not only for privacy and status but also so they can transform this space into something that represents their sense of who they are as a person (Bellah et al. 1985). At the Catholic Worker, this process of turning individual space into a representation of identity becomes much more complicated, as people are sharing space by living together in a single building. While they have their own small areas for personal living space, these areas are often visible to and frequented by others. Also, the areas of a home where people tend to spend most of their time—the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom—are common spaces in both of the houses. As a result of living together and sharing space as part of a community, individuals must, in part, sacrifice control over the ways their surroundings relate to their own individual identities. By living with people who do not identify as Catholic Workers or share a commitment to its collective vision, Workers practice inclusion of concrete people whose use of space and everyday actions may offend or frustrate their own identities as Catholic Workers.

For instance, an African American woman in her late 50s who lived at the Catholic Worker for many years regularly challenged the Workers’ commitment to a personal, less rule-bound way of running the lunch for women at Maryhouse. She would come into the kitchen and start instructing new volunteers about everything from the appropriate way to wash dishes to how best to mop the floor. Her unsolicited advice often came across as a reprimand and typically made volunteers look and feel uncomfortable. Similarly, when she was around she would almost always rush the women guests out early, putting chairs up on the table and getting the mop and bucket out to show them that it was time to go. While frustrated by the ways in which her actions went against Catholic Worker ideals of cultivating a more personal, inviting, hospitable lunch environment than one might find at a more typical social service agency, the Workers never told the woman that she could not participate in the community’s activities, let alone that she would have to leave the community. When she died in 2008, community members planned and attended her funeral as though she were family, mourning the loss of their friend.

Several people who lived in the community disagreed with the Workers about the institutional Church as well. One man who had lived at St. Joe’s for years insisted on wearing a tie and combing his hair for the house masses, a practice more associated with formality and traditional Church rules. Another person, a woman who had lived at Maryhouse for many years, once gave me some pamphlets on “The Secrets of Fatima,” a collection of apocalyptic tales about the Virgin Mary. Another man who had lived at Maryhouse off and on
for several years had a much more traditional view of Catholicism than the Workers. He attended a different parish than most of the people in the house, and he was very pious, giving religious instruction to anyone who would listen. Another person, a woman who lived at St. Joe’s for a year or so, would talk about the pope, the bishop, and other church leaders with much greater respect than the Workers did and had a pocket rosary that she prayed with regularly. Sharing their everyday lives and homes with people who had differing views of the Church meant that Catholic Workers had to listen to accounts of the Church with which they strongly disagreed and had come to the Worker largely to leave behind. These examples demonstrate that Workers relaxed their distaste for the institutional Church’s formality and traditionalism in order to practice inclusion of concrete individuals who appreciated, or even found essential, these more traditional aspects of Catholicism.

Lastly, Catholic Workers lived with people with different ideals and practices regarding war, violence, and consumerism than they did. Many of the men who have lived at St. Joe’s in recent years have been veterans, and not usually “repentant” ones. For these men, their time in the armed services was a source of pride and identity. Some would wear hats or t-shirts with American flags on them or had similar symbols in their personal areas upstairs. Similarly, after dinner each night the common spaces in both of the houses usually turned into TV rooms, where a television would be rolled out and people in the houses could watch television. The choice of programming was usually decided by only a couple of people in each house—not Workers—and the most popular programs often contained significant violence and even torture, such as the show “24.” Though some Workers would complain about these choices or refuse to watch them, they never told residents that they could not watch them or asked them to leave on account of watching them.

Similarly, some residents were focused on trying to make money or accumulate material goods in a way that conflicted with the Worker philosophy of voluntary poverty. Some of the men at St. Joe’s would get things out of the trash, from the curbs on the streets, or from the back of the nearby storage building and try to sell them on the street in front of the house on Saturdays. Also, sometimes people who would come and stay for brief periods at the Worker as volunteers were young and would have more provocative wardrobes or cell phones, laptops, or other items that were frowned on by some Workers. Though some of the Workers did not like that these temporary residents were more accepting of consumerist values than they were, they did not require them to leave (though they sometimes discouraged the use of the electronic items in the houses). In doing so, they practiced inclusion of concrete people who did not fully share in the Catholic Worker’s vision of voluntary poverty.

In sharing intimate spaces with people with whom they profoundly disagreed, Catholic Workers daily exposed themselves to concrete human beings that are much more complex than those represented by the abstract stereotypes used in boundary work. Everyday interactions with concrete
members of the other occasionally resulted in recognition of the other as a “Thou,” thereby transforming the self into a more complete “I.” These moments were treasured by Workers and residents alike as ones in which they developed intimacy and respect for each other on a deeper level. These I–Thou encounters enabled Workers to maintain a sense of inclusiveness, particularly because the encounters were “genuine” and unintentional.

Sharing spirit as inclusion. Many of the actions typical at institutional Church masses are not usually practiced by Catholic Workers at their twice-weekly house masses, held on Tuesdays at St. Joe’s and on Thursdays at Maryhouse. For instance, as other studies of Catholic Worker house masses have shown, inclusive liturgical language is often substituted for male pronouns describing people and the divine by both clergy and Workers during the mass in order to better represent their identities as inclusive Catholics (Spickard 2005). Despite this, people with more formal, traditional Catholic commitments and identities were welcomed both as celebrants and as attendees at house masses, itself a practice of inclusion of the other. Though the priests who celebrated mass at the Catholic Worker often shared the Catholic Workers’ disillusionment with the institutional Church (such as the priest in the earlier story), not all of them did. Some were much more committed to traditional forms of Church doctrine and practice and were more formal in their celebration of the mass. While many of the priests who celebrated mass at the Catholic Worker would wear their simple street clothes and would perform simpler versions of the mass, a few priests insisted on wearing their own clean, official vestments when they celebrated mass at the Worker and would perform all of the formal bows and gestures that are parts of masses at traditional Roman Catholic churches. Some people who attended the masses were likewise more formal, doing things such as standing during the “alleluia” and kneeling on the floor during the consecration of the Eucharist.

In addition to this most basic act of including the other by welcoming them to participate in the masses, three more specific parts of the mass served to include outsiders: the prayers of the people, the passing of the peace, and the celebration of communion/the Eucharist. In an institutional Church mass, the “prayers of the people” is a portion of the mass in which prayers are offered on behalf of the members of a parish, with these prayers prepared ahead of time and offered by a single, designated parish member during the mass. At Catholic Worker masses, rather than have a single person deliver prayers that are prepared in advance, the priest usually opened the floor for anyone present to offer his or her own prayers in front of the entire group. One man who regularly attended mass inevitably prayed for the fall of China’s communist government. While Workers do not necessarily support China’s government, this prayer always seemed slightly out of place, as Workers usually focus on critiquing the U.S. government rather than other countries’ governments. Others would pray “for the troops,” something that Workers rarely did considering their lack of support for military action. By opening up the prayers of the
people to all in attendance, Workers practiced concrete inclusion of these people as whole, dignified persons, even if their concerns were ones with which the Workers did not identify.

The second major way in which the Workers “shared spirit” was during a section of the mass known as “the passing of the peace.” During a typical Catholic mass, people walk to the pew in front of and behind them, shaking the hands of a few people and saying “the peace of the Lord be with you” or even just “peace.” However, like at Los Angeles Catholic Worker masses (Spickard 2005), at New York Catholic Worker masses this part of the service was very different from the usual passing of the peace. It usually lasted at least five minutes, with everyone in the room greeting everyone else, often with a hug or kiss on the cheek. People acted genuinely excited to see each other, and even newcomers were greeted with a welcoming embrace. Once, when I had a Catholic friend come to one of the masses with me, she commented on how loved and welcomed she felt after the passing of the peace, surprised at the power of physical touch and embrace. In this practice, every person present at the mass experiences concrete inclusion in the practice of physical embrace.

Likewise, the practice of open communion is a concrete practice of inclusion opening Workers to the possibility of I–Thou encounters with the other. Unlike at traditional masses where only baptized Catholics can take communion, anyone is free to partake of the Eucharist at Catholic Worker masses, including “others” such as social workers, traditional Catholics, supporters of the war, or people wearing trendy clothes. An older Muslim man who lived at St. Joe’s for a year or so before passing away used to take communion at the mass, saying “we all serve the same God.” A long time resident at St. Joe’s who was a chain smoker would occasionally light up during masses without thinking. On one particularly memorable occasion of this, rather than becoming angry, the priest laughed and said “You need to put out that incense, Freddy!” at which everyone present laughed as well. Another time, a woman from the street who was a regular at the Worker wore a costume, complete with cat ears and tail, when she came up to take communion. While such actions might be considered disrespectful and such people might be asked to leave masses at an institutional Church, Catholic Workers share communion with anyone who wishes to take it, even under odd or uncomfortable circumstances.

In the prayers of the people, the physical embrace of the passing of the peace, and open communion, Workers opened intimate parts of themselves and their spirituality—aspects of the Catholic mass—to the participation of people who differ from them in important ways. These concrete practices of inclusion involving some of the most meaningful practices for Catholics exposed Workers to the possibility of experiencing not only the divine “eternal Thou” during mass but also the human “Thous” present in the form of concrete members of groups that were othere.
Personalism, concrete practices of inclusion, and I–Thou encounters. The ideology of personalism encouraged Workers to share themselves intimately with people who were not like them, including those who were members of groups with which the Workers drew boundaries. In concrete practices such as sharing food, sharing space, and sharing spirit, Workers cultivated openness to I–Thou encounters and occasionally experienced them. The rare moments in which they actually “met” a person who was pro-war, for example, as a whole person were transformative moments for them, ones which made the often difficult work of being a Catholic Worker feel “worth it.” This is in line with the aspect of Buber’s work that recognizes the realization and development of the self, the whole “I,” as only possible through encounters with the “Thou” (Gardiner 1996). In addition to serving this purpose of helping Workers get through difficult times, these I–Thou encounters affirmed, on a deep level, the Workers’ identities as genuinely inclusive. Though they also regularly participated in the exclusive practice of boundary work, the transformative effect of meeting the other as “Thou,” and thereby “becoming I” (Buber [1923] 1958:28), countered the exclusivity of boundary work, maintaining inclusive identity.

CONCLUSION

Though they consider hospitality and inclusiveness to be central aspects of their identity, Catholic Workers engage in the exclusive practice of symbolic boundary work in constructing their distinct collective identity as personalist service providers, faithful Catholics, and peaceful, simple-living people. In constructing these identities, they compare themselves with institutionalized social service providers, the institutional Roman Catholic Church, and “mainstream America,” emphasizing their superiority to these groups. Their participation in exclusive practices of othering confirms the importance of boundary work in constructing distinctive collective identity, not only in exclusive groups but in inclusive ones as well.

While the practice of boundary work seemingly challenges the genuineness of inclusive identity, the work of Martin Buber sheds light on how some inclusive groups may manage the tension between inclusive identity and the exclusive nature of boundary drawing. When groups draw boundaries, they do so largely on an abstract level, stereotyping the other in a monologic way that Buber calls I–It relations. If these were the only types of identity processes in which an inclusive group participated, members might indeed find it difficult to maintain inclusive identity. On the other hand, ideologies and narratives that encourage interactions with whole, concrete persons that are members of the groups that are “othered” during boundary work, such as the Catholic Workers’ personalism, open up the possibility for I–Thou relations. As I–Thou encounters are deeply transformative and, according to Buber, represent genuine inclusion and love, they provide a counterpoint to the exclusive
nature of boundary work, allowing Workers to maintain both distinctiveness and inclusive identity. While it is likely that most groups, particularly ones with very distinctive identities, use symbolic boundary work to construct identity and create group cohesion, more research is needed on inclusive groups to examine the extent to which they use boundary work, how group ideologies and practices encourage or discourage I–Thou encounters with the other, and the degree to which this impacts their ability to maintain inclusive identity in the midst of boundary drawing.

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