Encounters at the Religious Edge: Variation in Religious Expression Across Interfaith Advocacy and Social Movement Settings

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In a time of increasing religious diversity, interfaith political coalitions have become important settings for interreligious interaction, but little research has explored the types of religious expression that are generated therein. Prevailing theories in the sociology of religion indicate that interaction with religious others results in dilution of traditional religious commitments or production of stronger boundaries. But emerging perspectives in cultural sociology shift attention from individual religious commitments to the ways in which settings shape different styles of religious expression. Insights about edge spaces drawn from urban theory suggest that religiously diverse settings can be generative of new types of religious practices. We apply these insights to the study of interfaith activism by drawing on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with religious advocacy professionals and activists working in interfaith coalitions. Conceptualizing the sites of these interfaith encounters as edge spaces, we analyze variation in the types of religious expression that occur in interfaith settings. We find that both aggregative and integrative practices are produced, but these vary depending on the goals and structure of the setting, as well as participants’ accountability to outside religious gatekeepers.

Keywords: interfaith, activism, diversity.

Introduction

The United States has become increasingly religiously diverse over the last century. More than one out of five Americans now affiliate with a tradition other than Christianity or Judaism (Pew 2008). More frequent contact with religious others—both face and virtual—has resulted in new forms of conflict and cooperation (Bender and Cadge 2006; Wuthnow 2006). One of the most widespread forms of interreligious interaction occurs through the work of interfaith political coalitions. In these settings, religiously diverse groups of activists work together in sustained ways to solve problems facing their neighborhoods, their country, and the world. While there are empirical examples of interfaith political coalitions (cf. Nepstad 2004; Wood 2002), researchers have rarely theorized interfaith interactions themselves (Braunstein, Fulton, and Wood 2014; Lichterman 2005, 2008; McCarthy 2007 are important exceptions). We use our data on national religious advocacy organizations and the New Sanctuary Movement—a network of interfaith coalitions of immigrant rights activists—to develop a framework for understanding interfaith encounters today.

Rather than focusing on how actors’ differing religious beliefs create conflict or cooperation, we ask: What kinds of religious communication and practice occur in interfaith settings, and how do they vary depending on the characteristics of the settings themselves? In line with emerging cultural-interactionist frameworks (Lichterman 2012), our analysis demonstrates that the style of
interfaith settings—which is shaped not just by individual actors’ religious beliefs, but by their collective goals, organizational constraints, and relationships to religious institutions—shapes the interreligious practices that emerge from interfaith political work.

**Encountering the Religious Other**

**Sociological Expectations**

For much of sociology’s history, theorists believed modernization would result in inevitable religious decline (Durkheim 1912; Weber 1905). In particular, confrontation with alternative ways of seeing the world was expected to weaken religious commitments by challenging the plausibility of each belief system (Berger 1967). Yet individual religiosity has been unexpectedly resilient in the face of religious diversity (e.g., Casanova 1994; Finke and Stark 2005), with sociologists emphasizing the significance of intergroup competition (Finke and Stark 2005) and boundary work (Smith 1998) in maintaining individuals’ distinctive religious beliefs.

Shifting away from concerns about the maintenance of individual beliefs in the wake of rising religious diversity, research is increasingly finding that the expression of religion differs according to social context, from religiously homogenous worship services to interfaith activist groups (Klassen and Bender 2010; Lichterman 2012). This need not mean that people do not have enduring religious identities and commitments, just that those are expressed differently depending on the setting (Lichterman 2005, 2008; Wood 2002; Yukich 2010).

Settings can vary in form from ephemeral gatherings to more enduring organizational structures. In each case, researchers are attuned to the ways in which interactions within are shaped and constrained by the dominant style of the setting. The interactional style of the setting is influenced by the norms (and constraints) of the organizational fields in which it is embedded or to which it is connected, but it also reflects participants’ more fluid understandings of what kinds of practices are appropriate within the setting, and how the group gathered at any given time relates to other groups (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). That styles can vary even within organizations—depending on “the scene at hand” (Lichterman 2012)—suggests a need to view organizational structure as intertwined with a range of other cultural factors that together shape group practices.

Lichterman (2012) proposes two analytic moves that allow researchers to more sensitively capture and theorize how these differences shape religious expression. First, he calls for a shift in the unit of analysis from unitary religious actors or groups to religious communication within varied group settings. Second, he calls for greater attention to how styles of religious communication vary across different kinds of settings. In this article, we do just this by comparing two settings in which interfaith political cooperation occurs. We examine the style of each interfaith setting, which is shaped by the norms of the organizational fields in which it is embedded or to which it is connected. But we also build on previous work in this vein by drawing insights from an area of theory and research that focuses on in-depth empirical observation of what happens when diverse groups meet: urban theory and ecology.

**Ecological Insights**

In recent years, cultural sociology has deepened theoretical understandings of the interactional dynamics of small groups (e.g., Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Fine 2010). Empirical studies of small groups, however, have been limited by a reality of contemporary group life: that most such groups are relatively homogenous (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). This has made it difficult for researchers to examine how individuals navigate interactions across various forms of difference within group settings. But scholars of community life—particularly those concerned with the everyday negotiation of diversity within cities—have long asked what happens when people of different class, racial, ethnic, and other differences meet in physical space that must be shared.
Specifically, a distinction between *borders* and *boundaries*, proposed by Sennett (2009), helps to distinguish between different types of interreligious encounter. “Borders” are conceptualized as “active zone(s) of exchange” in which diverse groups can exchange ideas and practices and create something new together. Meanwhile, “boundaries” are more fixed and allow less interaction and sharing. While it may be relatively common for religious individuals to come into contact with one another (e.g., in the workplace, at children’s schools), most of these exchanges occur across what we might conceptualize as religious *boundaries*. Informal interaction rules declaring much religious conversation to be off limits in these nonreligious settings mean that there is typically minimal interaction and sharing of ideas or values that are religiously salient (Bender 2003). Instead, in the interfaith encounters we examine, groups are actively engaging with religious identity as part of their social change efforts, meeting and exchanging religious ideas and practices in spaces more akin to a *border*.

Having established this distinction, it is necessary to ask how the properties of border zones might structure the practices of those interacting within. The borders Sennett describes can be roughly compared to Odum’s (1971) “ecotopes,” zones of transition where natural habitats like forests and grasslands meet and overlap. According to Odum, encounters between different species in these zones of exchange produce greater diversity and flourishing, which he calls an “edge effect” (1971:157). Furthermore, despite the creation of new “edge species”—which are produced in the ecotone and survive only in these precise edge conditions—the ecotone also “commonly contains many of the organisms of each of the overlapping communities in addition to organisms characteristic of and often restricted to ecotones” (Odum and Barrett 2005:386).

While we do not seek to equate social encounters directly with those that occur in natural ecosystems, the ecological metaphor supplies us with an alternative starting point from which to analyze our empirical evidence. Indeed, it points us away from *a priori* assumptions of conflict or destruction across fixed boundaries toward a more open-ended interrogation of social liminality. Studies of liminality highlight the ways that in-between spaces—like ecological edge zones, or interfaith encounters—can bring together those who would not normally associate with one another. They do so by downplaying distinctions such as rank or status in favor of participation in common rituals (Shields 1991; Turner 1969; Van Gennep 1960). We might think of these as *edge practices* occurring in *edge spaces*.

Not only does the ecological metaphor attune us to the generative potential of these liminal spaces, but it also offers tools for understanding variation in the edge practices generated therein. For example, based on patterns identified within population ecology, organizational theorists have developed explanations for organizational emergence, growth, change, and decline (Hannan and Freeman 1989), and interest group theorists have developed accounts of variation in the density and diversity of interest groups within and across policy niches (Gray and Lowery 2000). This body of research highlights the value of systematic comparisons and attention to contextual factors in understanding variations in outcomes across different settings.

Applying insights regarding the edge effect to interfaith encounters, we would expect that when representatives of religious communities come together in an interfaith edge space to work together toward a common goal, their interactions have the potential to produce new practices and religious expressions that would not be found outside the interfaith setting in any of the participating religious communities. We would also expect variation in the outcomes of interfaith encounters depending on the characteristics of the settings and the group styles that dominate them. Based on the broad strokes that Odum has drawn, we expect that this edge effect will be mediated by variation in the internal characteristics of the interfaith setting but also by variation in the types of connections and relationships that individuals and groups have with institutions *outside* of the interfaith setting. In what follows, we describe two of the most common types of interfaith settings—religious advocacy and social movement settings—and outline how we would expect their characteristics to shape interfaith encounters in different ways.
Interfaith Encounters in Religious Advocacy and Social Movement Spaces

Interfaith political coalitions are among the most common settings in which individuals acting as representatives of different religious groups and institutions interact, yet there has been little effort to understand the distinctive nature of each of these spaces as settings for interfaith encounters. While actors employed by religious advocacy organizations and social movement activists often participate in the same coalitions, and it is common for individual and even institutional actors to travel between movement and advocacy settings (Findlay 1997; McAdam 1982), we ask whether their practices vary depending on the constraints imposed by the dominant styles of each setting (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2012). Previous research on religious advocacy and social movement settings attunes us to two sets of factors that are likely to shape the styles of these settings: their organizational goals and structures and their accountability to religious institutions.

Religious Advocacy Settings

The liberal religious advocacy field has existed in some form since the early 20th century, when the Methodist Church established a permanent office in Washington, DC. Other organizations advocating for policies that were consistent with their communities’ religious values soon followed, most of them representing mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish constituencies (Fowler et al. 2010). Although liberal religious advocates enjoyed greater prominence than conservative groups during the 1960s, conservatives eclipsed them during the 1980s. In recent years, however, the field of liberal religious advocacy has experienced a significant expansion in its public reach, facilitated in part by a Democratic Party coalition interested in challenging the moral monopoly of the Religious Right (Dionne 2008; Jones 2008; Sullivan 2008).

Actors identified with the progressive religious advocacy field include progressive faith leaders, membership-based political advocacy organizations affiliated with liberal religious groups, the Washington offices of several religious denominations, faith-based peace, social justice, and service organizations, and a handful of media and consulting groups (Dionne 2008; Jones 2008; Braunstein 2012). Although some may occasionally participate in activities alongside social movement activists, most of these players operate within formal nonprofit organizations staffed by paid professionals (Fowler et al. 2010; Hertzke 1988).

They also differ from movements in their formal connections to religious institutions, although this varies depending on the organizational structures of the advocacy groups—namely, whether they are national offices of religious denominations or membership-based groups. Paid employees of religious denominations are formally accountable to upholding the principles and positions agreed upon by the internal leadership structures of their denominations, while membership-based groups are accountable to their dues-paying members (Weber and Jones 1994:165–66). Most of these advocacy organizations regularly participate in issue-based interfaith coalitions, yet their authority status as advocacy organizations is also predicated upon maintaining the integrity and depth of their particular religious traditions (Wood 2002).

Advocates thus enter interfaith coalitions not as unconstrained individual actors but as the official representatives of distinctive religious institutions and communities. Previous research has raised questions about how faithfully advocates represent the views of their mass memberships in practice (Djupe, Olson, and Gilbert 2005; Fowler et al. 2010; Hertzke 1988; Skocpol 1999).

1 Although organizations across the political spectrum participate in interfaith coalitions (Hertzke 1988; Fowler et al. 2010), the field as a whole includes more liberal than conservative groups (Weber and Jones 1994:183–84). We focus on the more liberal side of this field. Although participants do not consistently identify with the term “liberal” (and we use both the terms “liberal” and “progressive” to describe participants because they identify with both terms depending on the context), they rarely to never identify as conservative. We are thus able to hold political orientation constant in our comparison to the politically progressive New Sanctuary Movement.
Yet various mechanisms are likely to constrain advocates’ activities even in the absence of mass oversight, such as the requirement to involve laity in decision making, the need to raise funds from members, or the ability of activist minorities to publicly police advocates’ activities. We should thus expect that advocates’ interfaith practices would be shaped by a combination of both actual and perceived pressure to represent these distinctive religious constituencies.

**Social Movement Settings**

Social movement settings share many characteristics with religious advocacy organizations. Like advocacy groups, many of today’s social movements count institutional actors as some of their participants (McAdam et al. 2005; Meyer and Tarrow 1998). But while today’s social movements are more institutionalized and professionalized than those of the 1960s and 1970s, “the modal object of study for movement analysts” remains the “loosely coordinated struggles that are generally national in scope and orientation” (McAdam et al. 2005:10, emphasis added). The phenomena typically characterized by scholars as “social movements” remain less formalized and bureaucratic than interest groups and advocacy organizations (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; Meyer and Tarrow 1998; Polletta 2006; Snow 2004). They are also more likely to mobilize around a single issue, whereas most advocacy organizations work across multiple issue areas.

Many contemporary movements—like the New Sanctuary Movement—are comprised primarily of volunteers rather than paid movement staff, many of whom are recruited through member institutions like churches (Meyer and Tarrow 1998; Rucht 1999). These institutions and individuals come together to seek social changes that may overlap with but are nonetheless distinct from the mission of their preexisting institutions. The glue binding movement participants together is a shared collective identity and its association with the movement’s focal issue (Rucht 1999), whereas for advocacy organizations the bureaucratic framework itself binds members together.

Religious participants in social movements include both laypeople and clergy. Lay participants face few organizational constraints on their movement activities. Even if their activism is unpopular in their home congregation, laypeople cannot be fired or otherwise punished by the congregation except through social exclusion, which would be an extreme response in most congregations, particularly the progressive ones that are most common in interfaith coalitions (Iannaccone 1994; Wood, Fulton, and Partridge 2012).

Clergy participants have more to lose. While being fired is an unlikely result for the clergy most often involved in interfaith coalitions (i.e., mainline Protestant clergy, who are typically hired and fired by their more liberal regional counterparts—see Calfano 2009; Wood, Fulton, and Partridge 2012), parishioners may withhold financial contributions to discourage clergy participation in movements that are unpopular with congregants (Calfano 2009). However, congregational views are less likely to influence clergy political behavior when the issues are less contentious (Djupe and Gilbert 2003), and for many progressive religious people, policing religious distinctiveness is not of particular concern (Putnam and Campbell 2010), suggesting that representatives of such congregations would not feel constrained in their interfaith activities.

While clergy participants in social movements are more accountable to movement outsiders than laypeople are, they still face less pressure than employees of religious advocacy organizations to officially represent their denomination’s or membership’s distinctive positions and values. Overall, religious advocacy and social movement settings differ in their organizational goals and structures and in their accountability to religious institutions. In what follows, we examine whether these differences translate into different styles of interfaith interaction and expression.

**DATA AND METHODS**

This article is based on data from two sources. First, we draw on in-depth interviews conducted by the second author with 22 lobbying, research, and communications professionals
engaged in liberal religious advocacy at the national level. These advocates bring varied faith perspectives to bear on a wide range of national public policy debates. Interviews were conducted with professionals from six organizations representing a variety of organizational structures: one is a denominational group, two are membership based, two are networks of grassroots organizations that also engage in national policy advocacy, and one specializes in communications strategy. These groups also represent multiple faith traditions: one is Catholic, one is Jewish, one is mainline Protestant, and three work with a diverse range of faith communities locally and nationally. Because these professionals participate regularly in religiously diverse issue-based coalitions, experiences recounted in interviews were often shared with colleagues from a wide range of organizations, allowing insight into an even broader sphere of professional activity. These interview data are supplemented by ethnographic observations and public records of selected events, media appearances, and statements by a broader set of professionals associated with the liberal religious advocacy community to develop a multifaceted account of this professional field.

In addition to the research on national advocacy organizations, this article is based on qualitative research on the New Sanctuary Movement, a national network of interfaith immigrant rights coalitions. Beginning in 2007, New Sanctuary activists publicly partnered faith communities with immigrant families to highlight family separation due to deportation policy, calling on their fellow Americans to embrace “real family values” by supporting immigration reform that would keep immigrant families together. At its height in 2009, the New Sanctuary network included approximately 30 local coalitions around the country. The first author spent approximately a year and a half (August 2007–January 2009) conducting ethnographic observation with the New Sanctuary Movement, primarily in New York City and Los Angeles. The first author also conducted 70 in-depth interviews with New Sanctuary activists and allies as well as content analysis of thousands of movement documents. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling techniques and were largely representative of the religious diversity of the network. In both the New York- and Los Angeles-based New Sanctuary coalitions, the majority of participants were mainline Protestants (approximately 60 percent of faith communities), while 20 percent were Catholic, 5 percent evangelical Christian, 5 percent Jewish, 5 percent Muslim, and 5 percent from another tradition.

While ethnographic data and public records of interfaith gatherings supply evidence of the similar and different interfaith practices produced in advocacy and movement settings, in-depth interviews offer essential insights into how participants’ perceptions of the settings’ norms and constraints shaped the interfaith practices forged therein. If an actor’s perception of the dominant style of a setting leads him or her to behave differently across different settings, as recent research suggests (Lichterman 2012), then interview data are necessary in order to link these actors’ practices to their perceptions of these contextual factors, which could not be discerned through observation alone. Although we rely on pseudonyms when quoting interview subjects or discussing private observations, we reference the actual names of speakers and organizations when citing public statements and events.

**Findings**

The Goals and Structure of the Interfaith Activist Setting

There are different types of interfaith activist coalitions, formed for different purposes and with different concerns depending on the kinds of groups that participate in them. We found that the types of interfaith practices that emerge from these encounters are shaped in part by the goals and structure of the setting. Namely, whether a coalition’s work is single or multi-issue and
whether cultivating activist commitment is a major goal shapes the group style that dominates the setting and the types of edge practices that participants construct together.

**Religious Advocacy Settings: Multi-Issue Professionals**

“We don’t work in isolation at all. We’ll rarely work on our own. We work on all of our issues in coalition with other groups,” the lobbyist from a mainline Protestant organization explained in an interview, indicating how central coalitions are to religious advocacy organizations in Washington, DC. Although some of these coalitions include both religious and secular organizations, others are comprised exclusively of faith groups that believe their collective interfaith identity will lend greater moral authority to their claims. In several interviews, advocates explained that they perceive policymakers as sensitive to the appearance that they are serving the interest of a single religious group over others; as such, advocates working on similar issues often join together to speak on behalf of all “people of faith.” They report that this allows them to speak with broad-based moral authority that transcends differences between religious communities. But their diverse interests and values are not always as easy to aggregate as this rhetoric suggests. To speak as one, while representing each of their faith communities fairly, requires sustained coordination and cooperation by these professionals.

In practical terms, this means that advocates spend a great deal of time working closely with representatives from different religious communities. This can be complicated, as a number of informants reported, by the fact that they occasionally partner with “strange bedfellows.” One representative of a Jewish organization explained that his group was partnering with a conservative evangelical Protestant organization on environmental policy, even though they disagreed on other issues like abortion. As long as the primary goal of the interfaith partnership is to advance a set of narrowly defined shared political demands, interviewees indicated that they are able to bridge their other political and religious differences in these ephemeral spaces of cooperation. This is possible because most of the advocates do not participate in permanent interfaith organizations, but rather enter into and out of collaborations around specific legislative issues, working on multiple campaigns rather than a single issue over time. As one Catholic professional explained: “We participate in a lot of interfaith activity, but they are not organizations that are specifically interfaith.” This is not to say that the same groups do not work together repeatedly, or that professionals do not develop longstanding relationships with one another. (Indeed, some interfaith efforts, like the Washington Interreligious Staff Council, known as WISC, have endured for decades [Hertzke 1988:85].) Rather, it means that if necessary, organizations are typically able to exit a coalition at any point during a particular campaign, or participate in some activities and not others, if they feel threatened or uncomfortable with the positions that the coalition takes, or if the group’s work leads in a direction they do not support.

Providing an example of what these encounters look like in practice, a lobbyist from a mainline Protestant organization described the process used by an interfaith working group with which she regularly partners. They “get around a table” to collectively draft a letter to President Obama explaining their position on a particular issue:

> So we put together a transition document that had made several points in it, and we started out with one draft, tweaked it, another draft, tweaked it, so you just keep going on things until you get something that you feel represents fairly each group—and that was an interfaith group—so you can all sign onto it. So you just kind of negotiate a bit on it until you get something … and you can offer up additional language. Anyone has the right to say, “We can’t sign on if it says that, so we would recommend that you strike it.” And then if you don’t, you’ve got to decide if you can come onboard or not. So it’s all a matter of negotiating a final outcome, a final document. [emphasis added]

This coalition’s goal, like others that advocates described, is to advance a political argument using multiple faith traditions as a basis for the claim. Yet advocates also underscored that they can withdraw from any given collaboration—from a sign-on letter to an issue campaign—if it...
does not reflect their organization’s guiding principles or if collective statements contain language that runs counter to their faith tradition.

Indeed, interviews suggested that the ability for groups to exit is a necessary condition of entering the interfaith space, for reasons that will be discussed in the next section. This fluidity is enabled in part by the fact that, notwithstanding any personal friendships that may emerge from sustained cooperation, the relationships developed in these interfaith working groups are ultimately professional. Although many of the advocates are themselves people of faith, they participate in these efforts as paid representatives of organizations. As paid professionals, advocates are charged with representing their organizations within these settings, even if it becomes especially difficult or contentious, and even if it requires they represent positions that they do not share personally. Indeed, most of the advocates interviewed expressed that there were internal debates within their organizations about how theological principles translated into policy positions on various issues, and that these debates mirrored broader disagreements within the faith communities they represent. But as a lobbyist for the Jewish group explained: “At the end of the day, we take a position, and it’s my obligation to represent that position.” The relatively contained and constrained nature of these professional encounters shapes the interfaith practices that are produced in distinctive ways, as we will outline below.

**Social Movement Settings: Single-Issue Volunteers**

In a typical interfaith social movement, religious individuals and communities at varying levels—from the local congregation to the national denomination—organize around a single political cause, usually one that requires a long battle and sustained commitment. In contrast to religious advocacy organizations, social movement organizations are typically made up primarily of volunteers rather than paid professionals. The more long-term, sustained, and sometimes high-risk interfaith settings inhabited by activists in movements like the New Sanctuary Movement necessitate private relational work to form the strong ties required to sustain commitment and trust among a mostly volunteer activist base.

One New Sanctuary activist explains this aspect of movement organizational culture, stressing the importance of building relationships and trust in order to work together in the intense, long-term committed way that movement activism requires:

I find that it takes work to build relationships. It takes work to build trust because historically who knows what has happened? You know, what suspicions or assumptions are there, stereotypes are there for all of us? But I think that is going to continue to take work on both ends, so that communities are feeling that when there’s a need to come together—that there’s trust to be able to kind of cross over to each other’s worlds, and build on the commonalities. I think so often it’s easy to focus on what separates us . . . and it’s like, let’s kind of cut through all that nonsense because while we’re discussing all these issues, there are people that are really dying around us. Like how can we just kind of come together around that, and put together all our resources because we all have limited resources. I think that’s going to take more time, bridging all of that.

Because they are committing themselves to a long-term, single-issue campaign rather than a more temporary collaboration, social movement activists must focus not only on shared political projects but also on developing a deep level of trust and solidarity with fellow activists. In these settings, private relational work is as important in some ways as public political work, making the interactional dynamics of interfaith movement settings different from those common in religious advocacy settings. These variations in the internal characteristics of interfaith activist settings result in the creation of different kinds of interfaith edge practices.

**Connections to Religious Institutions Beyond the Edge Space**

In different interfaith settings, activists tend to have different kinds of institutional ties to groups outside the interfaith setting, namely, to the religious institutions and communities in which
they participate either as representatives or members. Whether participants are lay members or paid employees of a religious institution, and the extent to which those institutions are charged with protecting religious distinctiveness, produce different forms of accountability that shape the style of the particular setting and the types of interfaith edge practices that are possible therein.

**Religious Advocacy Settings: The Accountability of National Representatives**

Interfaith coalitions of advocacy organizations form on an issue-by-issue basis, and shifting constellations of religious organizations find common political ground in these settings. Although a group’s particular take on a policy issue may be up for debate within the coalition, the group’s faith tradition is not. As a Catholic lobbyist explained: “Interfaith groups come together around an issue that they’re working on. And everybody brings their own faith tradition into that, but you’re issue specific.” As this lobbyist’s comment indicates, they bring the principles of their faith into the coalition with them, fully formed, and they will exit the coalition before they risk breaching them.

The maintenance of these strong religious boundaries is viewed as an organizational imperative, and it is one that often places lobbyists in a double bind: they are charged with publicly recognizing common principles with other faith traditions, while also protecting the boundaries around their own religious traditions. Understanding how actors practically negotiate these pressures within interfaith settings requires attention to the ways in which they feel accountable and are actually held accountable to their religious communities and institutions. The analysis revealed that accountability varies depending on the organizational structures of the advocacy groups—namely, whether they are national offices of religious denominations or membership-based groups.

Religious advocates working for religious denominations reported feeling a sense of accountability to their denominational members, and to upholding the principles and positions agreed upon by their denominations. As one representative of a mainline Protestant denomination explained:

> Every day, I think about how I represent the position of the church that we voted on at the [annual denominational meeting]. And I am representing those people in the local church, and I served in local church ministries, so I’m thinking about all those people who are sitting in the pews who want our church to have the best witness possible.

These lobbyists conceive of themselves as representatives of bounded faith traditions, albeit working together toward a common political goal. In this light, they are not necessarily empowered to diverge from or reshape these traditions without explicit guidance from their communities. Not only do they feel an obligation to work within the confines of the community’s principles and teachings—their members also actively hold them accountable to these positions. In several interviews advocates described instances where members criticized their organization for signing onto a letter or participating in an interfaith action that was seen as pushing the boundaries of their religious tradition. One example comes from a mainline Protestant lobbyist, whose denomination had recently determined that its social teachings on abortion required it to support certain restrictions on abortion access:

> We cannot go beyond the [church’s social teachings] so I have to be really careful. And I’ll tell you just within the last [few months], right after Obama got elected and we signed onto this transition document coming out of [an interfaith working group], and there was one sentence in there that I had not caught . . . . One sentence in like two pages of other things that we were putting forth. Well I got a couple of critics writing and saying, “How could you possibly do that? That goes against everything the church says.” . . . I had to pull our support from that [document]. It was not a pretty picture!

This is not to say that members are policing these professionals en masse. Indeed, this lobbyist acknowledges that most people in the pews are not aware of their work or deeply familiar with
the social teachings that guide it. Rather, the challenge in this case came from an “unofficial group” that focuses on holding several of the mainline denominations accountable to their stated principles. In addition to this group, the lobbyist reported that two other “movements” within this denomination also push for more orthodox visions of their faith tradition. They watch the advocates’ work closely, read their newsletters, and speak out if they feel the advocates have overstepped. They have been successful in making their presence felt: as the lobbyist explained, “we get taken to task just continually, and they have money and they have their own network.”

This situation is not unique to this denomination alone. As the lobbyist notes, “those are the kinds of the tightropes that we have to walk. And, the other [mainline Protestant denominations], they walk the same thing.” This interview reveals that advocates are cognizant of the possibility that groups focused on policing the religious boundaries represented in these interfaith settings can effectively do so. As such, it is both this awareness of the possibility of constraint, in addition to instances of actual constraint, that appear to shape the kinds of interfaith practices that are possible in these settings.

While the Washington offices of denominations are formally accountable to large religious institutions that are focused in part on maintaining the distinctiveness of their traditions, membership-based groups are accountable to their dues-paying members, who choose to affiliate with and support particular policy advocacy groups based on the understanding that they represent a particular set of faith-based values and principles that are elaborated in their organizational mission statements. If large membership bases can be visibly mobilized in support of issues, this can give advocates a certain degree of freedom to diverge from the formal priorities of religious institutions—as when lay Catholic organizations sought to sidestep abortion debates in order to emphasize the social justice dimensions of health-care reform, for example. At the same time, however, these organizations must attend to the fact that many of their members also feel allegiance to the institutional church. As one member of a Catholic group explains, “[we’re] not afraid of being yelled at by the Church, but we have to be conscious of our members. It could hurt us if we became known as being against the Church. It would divide us. It would hurt us. We have to think long term.” In each case, advocates’ ability to enter into and participate in interfaith advocacy work is determined in part by the broader structures of accountability in which they are embedded.

**Social Movement Settings: The Accountability of Congregational Pastors and Laity**

The connections of social movement activists to broader religious institutions are often different from those of religious advocates. From 2007 to 2009, when ethnographic data on New Sanctuary were collected, most activists in the New Sanctuary Movement were pastors and lay members of local congregations. Some were accountable to the wishes of their local congregation members and their regional denominational leaders (who, in both New York City and Los Angeles, were largely supportive of the New Sanctuary Movement), but other laypeople involved in New Sanctuary joined as individuals rather than as representatives of a congregation. Those lay members were not accountable to their congregation in any meaningful way.

Though many New Sanctuary activists were indeed accountable to their congregations, this did not carry the same demand for policing religious boundaries that being a professional representative of a denomination or an explicitly faith-based political organization does. While the existence of denominations is rooted in part in the need for religious specialists to represent a distinct religious tradition, the raison d’être of most local congregations is less about policing the distinctiveness of their own religious tradition, with many congregations instead spending most of their time on worship and care of their community members (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004: 1–2). As such, New Sanctuary activists’ religious identities and practices can be more porous and fluid within the interfaith activist space, compared to those of national religious advocates.

As Wuthnow’s (1988) argument about the restructuring of American religion would suggest, many New Sanctuary activists, both clergy and lay, saw their primary responsibility as working
with other religious progressives on shared political concerns, even if those other activists came from different faith traditions, rather than seeing their responsibility as rooted in providing a distinctive voice based on their particular religious tradition. One rabbi, a religious activist who was involved in the movement early on, exemplified this view:

I feel my real community to be among progressive minded people ... Really I would say the biggest defining issue among religion now is not Jew, Catholic, Protestant: it’s fundamentalist religion or, what I would say, a status quo, hierarchical vision of religion versus progressive, non-hierarchical, non-fundamentalist. The differences are the most profound between those two camps, not between Jews and Muslims or Muslims and Christians. I can sit in a room with progressive religiousists from whatever faith and feel like I’m perfectly at home with them because we share that common view of what religion should be.

He felt he has “very little in common” with religious conservatives, including many of his fellow Jews, instead believing his community of responsibility to be one of fellow religious progressives. A broad community of religious progressives was where his accountability lay, rather than in a particular religious tradition or congregation.

Not all New Sanctuary activists shared these views. However, even for those New Sanctuary activists who did feel somewhat accountable to their congregations, the level to which they were responsible for representing a distinctive tradition differed in public and private settings. As we discussed in the previous section, movement activism requires a good deal of behind-the-scenes work in cultivating intergroup solidarity and commitment. In these more private settings, movement activists may blur the boundaries between their individual faith traditions in the spirit of creating a shared culture that will support and advance their political goals, without facing scrutiny from outsiders who may disapprove of these actions.

**Religious Expression at the Edge: Aggregative and Integrative Interfaith Practices**

The collaboration of religious groups leads to the production of new edge practices within interfaith settings. However, we find that the types of religious practices that emerge vary. **Aggregative practices** involve the combination of symbols, language, and practices from various religious traditions packaged side by side, with the different elements remaining recognizable and associated with each individual religious tradition. **Integrative practices** involve the intentional and creative mixing of religious symbols, language, and practices, such that the resulting practice is not immediately identifiable as belonging to any single religious tradition.

Although we have thus far presented the interfaith settings occupied by advocacy and social movement actors as separate ideal types, we should reiterate that many large faith-based issue campaigns involve both advocacy and social movement organizations. As such, their public claim making is often done in tandem. We find that participants in both types of interfaith settings engage in aggregative practices as part of their public claim-making efforts, while only those settings occupied by social movement activists tend to generate more integrative practices, and they may not always do so. These integrative practices tend to be produced in more private settings dedicated to building solidarity, trust, and commitment among their volunteer members. Put differently, the religious advocacy settings generated aggregative interfaith practices, while the social movement settings generated both aggregative and integrative practices. This variation reflects differences in the internal goals and structure of each kind of setting, as well as the nature of participants’ connections to religious institutions beyond the confines of the interfaith setting.

**Aggregative Practices**

The act of using faith language to publicly articulate how public policies either advance or detract from the common good is a central practice for activists working from a faith perspective. When such public statements emerge out of interfaith work, as they often do, they must reflect
the religious justifications of all participating groups. At the same time, however, participants recognize that they could lose their authority to speak on behalf of their own religious community if they do not maintain a certain level of religious distinctiveness when making these public claims. Although we found that many social movement activists do not feel the same level of external pressure to maintain strict religious boundaries that national religious advocates experience, both groups of interfaith activists developed practices that publicly draw on the recognizable symbols, language, and practices of their varied faith traditions in order to express the claims they make as part of interfaith coalitions.

For religious advocates, the most common form this takes involves signing onto joint public statements or letters. In the process of negotiating these statements, religious advocates report being careful to recognize the distinctiveness of each tradition, even while highlighting those principles they share with their interfaith partners. This complicated negotiation occurs around meeting tables (or on conference calls or email chains), where representatives of each faith community offer their own scriptural or historical justifications for the policy position shared by the group. One lobbyist from a Jewish organization explains this process, referencing a recent statement on international human rights:

We’re speaking with a moral voice on this, and we’re saying, “We as people of faith believe that this is one of the great travesties in human history, and we need to stand up because we’re all taught . . . ” It’s that moral part of it that’s the real key. So how do you best demonstrate the moral? Do we take something from the Torah? Well that’s fine for Judeo-Christians maybe, with the caveat that most of the Christian groups would maybe prefer something from the New Testament. But it’s certainly not going to work for the Muslim community. And what about Hindus or other religions? So in this case, we pulled one quote from the Old Testament, which we referred to as the Hebrew Bible in this case. We pulled one quote from the New Testament and we pulled one quote from the Qur’an.

Similarly, at press conferences and public rallies, representatives from multiple faith traditions—typically outfitted in the recognizable garb of their respective religious leadership—offer prayers and faith reflections that demonstrate the basis for each of their communities’ participation in the collective effort. A 2009 interfaith rally for health-care reform, for example, commenced with the singing of “There is a Balm in Gilead” followed by an introduction by the pastor of a local African Methodist Episcopal Church proclaiming: “There is a balm in Gilead. There is a balm in Freedom Plaza!” Next, a Hindu prayer called for healthcare for all, and several prominent progressive religious leaders, including Rabbi David Saperstein and the Catholic Sister Simone Campbell, explained how Judaism and Catholicism, respectively, supported the coalition’s call for “comprehensive and compassionate healthcare reform,” as Saperstein put it (Braunstein 2012). The long rally was punctuated by performances by liturgical dancers and a children’s choir, each showcasing a different tradition from the coalition’s religiously diverse membership.

Because each advocate is charged with representing his or her own religious tradition and is constrained by his or her community from going beyond that tradition, the positions, statements, and joint actions that emerge from interfaith work reflect the faith traditions of each of the groups involved. We call these emergent practices “aggregative” because the symbols of existing traditions are arrayed side by side without significantly transforming any of those symbols. To say that the different elements remain recognizable and associated with each individual religious tradition is not to say that they have not undergone any kind of transformation through aggregation. Indeed, the act of placing one’s religious justifications for a policy alongside that of other religious

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2This is a reference to Jeremiah 8:22: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” “There is a Balm in Gilead” is also a well-known African-American spiritual, thereby associating this language especially with the African-American Christian tradition in the United States.
traditions is a practice that requires one to implicitly acknowledge and recognize the legitimacy of other traditions. For some faith communities, this would not be possible: the very act would risk threatening the truth status of their tradition. The ability of groups to participate in this act of aggregation should thus be seen as the outcome of extended interaction and exchange within these interfaith spaces in order to produce something shared by all.

**Integrative Practices**

In addition to the aggregative practices generated during public claim making, which advocacy and movement settings both produce, many interfaith social movements also seek to build a semblance of a more private shared religious culture that can contribute to the goals of generating activist commitment and solidarity in the movement setting. These kinds of settings make possible the production of more integrative practices. In the New Sanctuary Movement, activists developed practices that went beyond aggregating distinct, existing religious rituals and language, instead merging their symbols to create something new that was shared by all groups and belonged exclusively to none. One way they did this was through the use of inclusive prayers that tied the oneness of God to the oneness of humanity. For example, at the end of a private New Sanctuary steering committee meeting where there had been some interfaith tension, the mainline Protestant pastor leading the meeting closed with a prayer.

The pastor asks everyone to stand in a circle, to hold hands, and to pray with their eyes open, looking at everyone. In a calm, clear voice, he prays using images of birthing: God giving birth to us, God giving birth to justice through this movement. He references God, Allah, and Yahweh, each by name, also mentioning racial diversity. “Before all of the divisions, there was God,” he proclaims. He uses the term “alien” disdainfully, arguing that its use in describing undocumented immigrants just seeks to further divide people. “We are all children of God, brother and sister.” As he concludes, an enthusiastic “Amen” echoes around the room.

A public, aggregative prayer practice might have included a pastor offering a prayer to God and an imam offering a prayer to Allah. Instead, this pastor offers a single prayer that references each of the religious traditions represented on the steering committee rather than solely his own, using multiple names for the divine and discussing the need to erase divisions between religions. Also, by likening the distinctions between immigrants and citizens to those between people of different faiths and then pointing to a God that is above all of these divisions, the prayer does something besides combining separate religious traditions. It creates a new basis for unity among religions by drawing from the religious-political idea of divine care for all human beings, regardless of immigration status. While the step of connecting the prayer’s inclusivity specifically to the issue of immigration represents a form of new integration, the similarity of this prayer to inclusive prayers that might be deemed aggregative demonstrates that practices often lie on a continuum between aggregation and integration.

In an even clearer example of an integrative practice, at a national gathering of New Sanctuary Movement activists in New York City in November 2009, activists participated in a ritual that included symbols drawn from multiple religious traditions but was not typical of the religious rituals of any major religious tradition (Yukich 2013).

Seventy people stand around tables, watching the ceremony. Mark, a white mainline Protestant pastor in his 50s, moves toward a round table in the center of the room. Unlike most of the tables, which are largely bare, this table is dressed with a flowing white tablecloth and is set for four or five people, though there are no chairs around it. As he nears the table, he says, “someone describe this table for me.” A couple of people speak up, one saying “elegant” and another saying, “for a few.” “Exactly!” he responds. “We have to deconstruct to transform,” he continues, referring to the need to challenge the systems that keep immigrants down. He asks for some help as he walks up to the table and begins “deconstructing” the table by removing the champagne flutes and other table dressings. Two or three people come and help him—a young Latino man,
a white woman in a wheelchair. They remove the fancier things and, as Mark explains excitedly, they “make it the People’s Table, the Creator’s Table!”

Holding up several different loaves of bread in his hands—a dark wheat or rye, a braided challah, and a round, white loaf—he proclaims that this table will have no dishes, but it will have bread and room for all. He invites everyone to come and grab on to a piece of the white tablecloth. As people move toward the center of the room, it is clear there is no way that 70 people will be able to reach the table and grab hold of the tablecloth. However, as the first few people grab on to it and step backwards so that others can move in, the tablecloth begins expanding, growing into a gigantic, parachute-like circle of cloth reminiscent of the kinds of parachutes children play with during recess. Everyone fits around this tablecloth: there is indeed, surprisingly, room for all. Mark begins singing an old African American spiritual, gesturing for everyone else to join in:

I’m gonna sit at the welcome table
I’m gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days
Hallelujah!
I’m gonna sit at the welcome table
Gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days

Soon everyone in the room is smiling and singing loudly. When the song winds down, Mark says into the microphone, “Here we have three different types of bread, representing three of our major religious traditions. Please pass the bread around and share a piece as we all share this table together.” Passing around the loaves, people tear off small bites and chew as they make their way back to their seats.

This is an innovative interfaith movement liturgy. Some of its elements are recognizable from other settings, of course—especially Christianity—but one would not encounter this liturgy in any church, synagogue, or mosque that one would visit. By this point in time, New Sanctuary activists had worked to develop interfaith practices with which activists from a variety of religious traditions could identify, so that people could form a shared symbolic and ritualistic life together within the interfaith activist space that would strengthen them for long-term joint public actions. The development of these integrative practices not only reflected the goals and structure of the social movement setting, but was also made possible by the relatively lower degree of pressure in these private settings to maintain the distinctiveness of each religious tradition.

CONCLUSION

This article began by asking what happens at a particular type of edge—the place where a diverse set of religious groups meet to work on a shared political project. Emerging cultural-interactionist models of religious expression inspired us to shift the focus of discussions of interfaith encounters away from the religious beliefs and motivations of individual religious actors to how the characteristics of different settings shape the forms of religious interaction and expression that occur within them. Looking beyond the sociology of religion, we also asked whether these interfaith encounters could be better understood as cases of a more general phenomenon of encounters with social difference. Urban and ecological models of intergroup interaction moved us to interrogate the extent to which different edge conditions—the cultural contours of the material and social settings in which interactions occur—shape the practices that emerge from different settings.

We asked whether interfaith spaces of interaction and exchange might produce an “edge effect,” or the constitution of new forms of religious expression. Furthermore, we asked whether this effect was mediated by variation in the characteristics of different edge settings. We found that there was indeed an edge effect and, moreover, that the types of religious expression produced within each setting depended on the organizational (e.g., single vs. multi-issue goals) and
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cultural (e.g., public vs. private shared rituals) characteristics of the setting, as well as activists’ accountability to institutions beyond the setting.

These findings are consistent with the expectations of the emerging cultural-interactionist approach to religious expression that views actors as constrained by their social settings. Still, in its existing form this emerging approach has been unable to predict the kinds of practices that are likely to emerge from such encounters, or to explain how and under what conditions these practices would vary across settings. Our findings concerning these questions are generally consistent with the expectations of organizational and interest group theorists employing ecological approaches to analyze variation in organizational outcomes. This body of research, while diverse, has found that organizations are constrained by both their own structure and the structure of the organizational field in which they operate (Lowery and Gray 2004). Moreover, our findings cohered with the expectations of those scholars of community life who, like Sennett, find that encounters across difference can, under certain conditions, generate new and innovative practices that complement (rather than displace) those that exist beyond edge spaces of exchange. By bringing these insights into the sociology of religion, we deepen cultural-interactionist models of religious expression by specifying the kinds of contextual factors that might shape religious expression in interfaith settings.

Having situated these encounters theoretically within a more general class of diverse social interactions, we must now turn to the question of whether there is anything special about the role of religion as a source of social difference in these encounters. Could the same effect be found among activist groups organizing in interracial or interethnic coalitions? In other words, are all edge settings likely to produce the types of interactions we find in these religious edge settings? Two factors appear to be unique to interreligious encounters. The presence of religious gatekeeping institutions and the belief among participants in the need to maintain certain boundaries around their faith traditions both shape and constrain the shared practices that can emerge from the interfaith setting in ways that may not apply to other types of social encounters. Our cases do not allow us to assess the generality of the model we have proposed beyond interreligious encounters to those across other sources of social difference, like race or ethnicity, though we hope future research will attempt such a comparison.

Furthermore, we would not necessarily expect these same factors to play a role in all religiously diverse settings. We distinguished above between those settings marked by informal (often individual-level) interaction across religious boundaries, and those involving groups that meet and exchange ideas and practices in settings more akin to a border. We have no reason to expect that these findings would apply to the former settings, but we do expect that religious expression within a wide range of edge-like settings would be constrained by similar contextual factors to those identified here. Further research is needed, however, to specify other potential sources of variation than those identified by this comparison: for example, much could be learned from a comparison of multiple movement settings that differ along theoretically interesting lines of variation (e.g., religious composition, organizational structure, issue focus, institutional accountability).

Future research might also consider comparisons of settings that include both progressive and conservative religious activists; or across conservative religious advocacy and social movement settings. Indeed, although there were some theologically conservative religious groups involved in the coalitions in which the groups we analyzed took part, the groups themselves leaned more progressive, both theologically and politically. Interfaith settings in which theologically and/or politically conservative groups are predominant may differ in important ways. For instance, they may actively avoid the creation of integrative practices even in social movement settings, since theologically conservative congregations are often more concerned about maintaining their religious distinctiveness (Smith 1998) and are also more active in punishing deviance among community members (Iannaccone 1994). They may instead engage in some other type of practice beyond integration and aggregation to build and maintain the long-term solidarity needed for
social movement activity. Alternatively, concerns about engaging in interfaith practices in these settings may be part of the reason why evangelical Protestant congregations are underrepresented in interfaith activism (Wood, Fulton, and Partridge 2012).

According to the framework we have developed, it is less the content of religion than certain elements of group style, particularly the goals and structure of the interfaith activist setting and the external connections that activists maintain, that shape the types of interfaith practices that emerge. Exploration of forms of internal and external variation that differ from those found in our cases would complement the insights that emerged from our data and reveal an even greater diversity of interfaith practices in today’s activist context.

REFERENCES


