

# Religion in Public Action: From Actors to Settings

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Paul Lichterman<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Contemporary social research often has located religion's public influence by focusing on individual or collective religious *actors*. In this unitary actor model, religion is a stable, uniform feature of an individual or collectivity. However, recent research shows that people's religious expression outside religious congregations varies by context. Building on this new work, along with insights from Erving Goffman and cultural sociology, an alternative, "cultural-interactionist model" of religious expression focuses on how group styles enable and constrain religious expression in public *settings*. Illustrating the model are two ethnographic cases, a religiously sponsored homeless advocacy organization and a secondary comparison setting from an activist campaign for housing, both from a U.S. metropolitan area. Shifting from actors to settings and group styles clarifies the interplay between religious and nonreligious culture over time. The shift refines our understanding of how religion's civic or political effects work, as in the case of building social capital for collective action. The cultural-interactionist model enables us to track historical change in everyday group settings. It promotes further research on historically changing ways of managing religious diversity, and diverse ways of constructing a religious self.

## Keywords

religion, public, interaction, group style, social settings

## SOCIOLOGY'S FOCUS ON THE RELIGIOUS ACTOR

Classical sociology found an important place for the religious actor. Max Weber's ideal-type of the ascetic Protestant and Émile Durkheim's generalization about the less suicide prone Catholic represent different kinds of social science as well as different substantive claims, but they share something important: Both imply an *actor* who carries religion consistently as either a character type or internalized group norm. The religious actor largely receded from sociology's front stage with the story that religion no longer provides strong motives or public meanings in modern societies (Berger 1967; Luckmann 1967). In the past two decades, the religious actor has returned. Critiques of the modernist story (Casanova 1994) have opened researchers to investigating religion's publicly visible roles in promoting civic concern (Baggett 2000; Warren 2001), motivating risky protest (Nepstad 2004), mobilizing voters (Djupe 2009; Sager 2009), or

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<sup>1</sup>University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

### Corresponding Author:

Paul Lichterman, University of Southern California, Department of Sociology, 3620 S. Vermont Avenue, KAP 352,  
Los Angeles, CA 90089-2539, USA

Email: [lichterm@usc.edu](mailto:lichterm@usc.edu)

arming interest groups with moral arguments (Hunter 1991, 1994). By identifying the locus of these strong civic and political influences in a religious *actor*, newer research resuscitates the enduring assumption that social researchers know which actors are religious or not and that actors are either one or the other.

But it is not always so easy. To give one puzzling example, treated further below: A breakfast meeting of 60 community advocates concerned with homelessness opened with a pastor's welcome to "religious and nonreligious" people, followed by a short prayer to an unnamed divinity. Some participants signaled religious identities, others did not, and a few deflected ideas they associated with religious people. The meeting facilitator validated them all. It may not be so surprising if a large, onetime gathering produces mixed expectations and a polite attempt to finesse them. The puzzle deepens when we see that monthly meetings of the group sponsoring this breakfast were similarly ambiguous, *routinely* so. Secular reasoning, reference to religious publics, and vague appeals to potentially religious or simply humane principles routinely shared the group's time as people with and without explicit religious identities planned educational outreach about homelessness. Should these count as religious meetings?

Meetings such as these highlight the limits of what I will call the unitary actor model of public religion. In this model, the researcher determines whether action is religious by designating individual or collective *actors* as religious actors. The unitary actor model is an ideal-typical way of thinking about religion and action; actual studies rely on its assumptions to varying degrees. The model propels valuable studies that sensitize us to broad correlations between particular religions and various actions or orientations. By giving us only the option that actors either are or are not religious, though, it does not help us understand whether and how the same people relate to religion differently, or ambiguously, in different contexts. Yet everyday life offers many examples of individuals or groups that express religious commitments forthrightly in some circles and signal them ambiguously or not at all in others. Recent studies have been conceiving and investigating this variation.

Starting with those studies' insights, in this article I borrow concepts from Erving Goffman and recent cultural sociology to synthesize an alternative approach. This "cultural-interactionist" model grasps setting-specific aspects of religious communication. Rather than ask whether actors are religious or not, the alternative model highlights how different styles of interaction in everyday group settings open opportunities for qualitatively different kinds of religious or ambiguously religious expression. The primary case of the homelessness advocacy group and a comparison setting from a housing campaign show how the alternative model illuminates certain conditions of possibility for religious expression in public groups.

In this article, I develop the cultural-interactionist framework beyond its earlier statements and apply it to religion research, in which insights on interaction and settings have been less influential than in other areas of sociology. Grounded in empirical research as well as theoretical critique, the framework reconceives the role of religious communication in group action. The framework does not intend to replace the unitary actor model for all research purposes. It intends to expand our empirical grasp of how religion becomes publicly present in different ways and how it comes to have the putative benefits or drawbacks for public action that numerous studies such as those cited above ascribe to it. The move from actor to setting also clarifies how very similar styles of action could shape both religious and nonreligious groups historically, so that we can track interactions between religious and nonreligious meanings without needing to imagine rigidly separate spheres for each.

Although the alternative framework should help us study a variety of group settings, these two cases portray people enacting religious *pluralism* in different ways: They are negotiating multiple religious as well as nonreligious identities. Interfaith and religious-secular civic groups such as these are significant empirically and theoretically. Interreligious community advocacy groups have had a prominent if underreported place in American local life for decades (Warren 2001), and interfaith public projects have been spreading in the United States (Bender and Klassen 2010; McCarthy 2007; Wuthnow 2005). Social research increasingly asks how individuals and groups negotiate religious diversity in public life around the globe (Demerath 2001; Jonker and Amiraux 2006; Lefebvre 2005). Religious/secular forums are theoretically significant too. Jürgen Habermas advocated a "postsecular" understanding of modern, highly

secularized societies in which religious groups are still influential and relevant. For such societies, Habermas (2011:26-27) advocated informal public arenas in which “cooperative fellow citizens” would translate religious citizens’ claims into more general, nonreligious terms while recognizing, and potentially learning from, religious reasoning (see Habermas 2006). The primary case shows one set of group-level cultural conditions for putting into play the epistemic mutual regard that these mixed forums would require.

The sections that follow suggest why sociology has continued to focus on the religious actor and what we miss empirically by doing so. Then, we see how the cultural-interactionist alternative builds on recent studies and other insights less indebted to the unitary actor model. Two cases of religious communication in public action illustrate the alternative. A subsequent discussion shows that the cultural-interactionist framework improves our understanding of *how* religion may or may not benefit the “social capital” of civic actors, a topic of much recent research. A concluding discussion shows how the cultural-interactionist approach can incorporate historical studies and then suggests how the framework can illuminate the collective accomplishment of religious pluralism over time and the individual construction of religious selfhood.

## THE UNITARY ACTOR MODEL IN PERSPECTIVE

### *Sociology’s Emphasis on the Integrating Force of Religion*

Distinguishing public religious from nonreligious actors, the unitary actor model assumes that public actors’ religious expression is not significantly shaped by the setting. In this view, religious people might keep religion private in some settings, but when they do express religiosity in public, it takes one consistent form. This view departs remarkably from a lot of sociological studies over the past several decades that treat other identities—ethnic, racial, national, or gendered—as constructions that depend partly on situational contexts, even as social structures often make those identities incumbent on individuals. As Ammerman (2003:217) put it, in a modern world of fluid institutional boundaries, people as well as interactions are intersections of different identities, and there is little reason not to treat religious people or interactions from this intersectional view too. Religious identity is partly constructed in relation to the social context at hand, as historical and ethnographic studies already show: Early twentieth-century street celebrations in New York could be *Italian* Catholic (Orsi 1985), and community meetings in some African American Chicago neighborhoods can borrow styles of public address that are African American *Protestant* (Patillo-McCoy 1998), for example.

To understand why the unitary actor model has endured despite the constructivist trend, it helps to review why the religious actor has mattered in the sociological imagination. In the classic privatization thesis, religion or its functional substitutes (Luckmann 1967) had an integrative, authoritative, meaning-giving power for the individual self, or in Peter Berger’s (1967) more declensionist view, religion *used to* have an integrative, meaning-giving power for individual and society before the glare of modern science and voluntarism frayed the sacred canopy of religious meaning. These views rested on the unitary religious actor at least partly because they imagined religion as a personal and societal stabilizer, a social constant. Studies in the “new paradigm” (Warner 1993) of religion research have been more skeptical of the privatization thesis and freer to investigate public religious expression, but they have not often challenged the assumption that religion is interesting *as* a first-moving integrator of selves and groups, if not society at large. They have leaned on a unitary actor, whether it is one who carries a deeply personalized spirituality (Roof 1999) or a tradition-bound practice such as orthodox Judaism (Davidman 1991). Religion in these studies slakes a “wholeness hunger” created by modernity’s differentiated institutions and segmented roles. Individual religious identity might change over the life course, but any change from setting to setting would fly under an intellectual radar more attuned to whole-making religious selves.

The resilience of the unitary religious actor through decades of theory and research suggests that the sociological discipline itself may have been built on epistemological assumptions that would make this notion of the religious actor hard to question. As Manuel Vásquez (forthcoming) argues, sociology’s

self-understanding as a modern discipline has come at a cost of “othering” religion as a premodern way of knowing and being. The actor who does not change by setting and somehow escapes a modern society’s differentiation of roles and settings sounds indeed like the other of sociology’s modern actor. In short, a constructivist approach to religious expression has faced distinctive theoretical and perhaps even epistemological habits rooted in the discipline, and these may have been reinforced by a Protestant-derived, American cultural tendency to understand religion as identity-pervading belief (Neitz 2004).

### *What the Unitary Actor Model Misses Empirically*

Mutable religious identity has become harder to neglect, as researchers influenced by theories of culture and communication follow “everyday religion” beyond officially religious institutions to citizen groups, workplaces, and other sites of modern life (Ammerman 2007; see also Bender 2003). Comparing these recent studies with carefully crafted, valuable research from the unitary actor model substantiates two important critiques, while illustrating that the unitary actor is in fact operative in a wide range of sociological research on religion. Because qualitative methods potentially offer the most access to everyday actions and meanings, it will be fairest to apply the critiques to qualitative studies.

One critique is that when studies consider religious identity “a singular guiding ‘core’” that drives our own action as well as others’ response to it, they oversimplify variation in an individual’s religious self-understandings and their practical consequences (Ammerman 2003:209; see also Bender 2003; Orsi 1997). Some research on Christian conservatives, for instance, has emphasized a shared worldview among conservative-movement women, deduced from evidence from national conferences, local activist group conversation, and private interviews (Klatch 1987:20-31). Similar analytic moves produce a portrait of a shared, conservative religious subculture that prolife women carry to varied religious and nonreligious settings (Press and Cole 1999). Some conservative women may well nurture selfhood in intensive, stable subcultures; scholarly narratives of worldviews or intensive subcultures by themselves assume a continuous religious actor and do not sensitize us to variations by setting. Yet other close-up research on prolife activists has shown that the setting of a protest action can be “polysemic” (Munson 2007), carrying both religious and/or nonreligious meanings for participants who identify religiously in other settings. An activist may articulate abortion issues in religious terms in an interview setting yet interpret a prolife protest action in purely political terms: the same public action that other participants in the setting experience as religious devotion. The unitary actor model would miss these variations, diminishing our grasp of how this activism appeals to different kinds of people at the same time.

A second criticism applies especially to studies of collective actors. It is that the unitary actor model encourages at least a soft form of “groupism,” by attributing to members of a religiously identified organization the same shared religious sensibility and identity. Groupism is the tendency to take “internally homogenous, externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life” and the main actors in social conflicts (Brubaker 2002:164). Applied originally to studies of ethnic or national “groups” in society at large, the insight is a healthy one for studies of religious groups too, though research reviewed here investigates religious organizations or congregations rather than entire religious categories.

Groupism marks some studies that compare “religious” and “secular” social service programs (see Wuthnow 2004). The groupism is avoidable, however, as other studies distinguish different kinds of organizational religious identity, mandatory versus optional, for instance (Smith and Sosin 2001; Wuthnow 2004), and varying identities of program participants too. In the case of a state-funded food program in Mississippi, for instance, participants could choose whether to take part in prayer sessions (Bartkowski and Regis 2003:68-72). Simply designating the program “religious” would obscure how it handled potential controversies over church-state relations. Sometimes a study’s own observations exceed the bounds of groupist terminology: One study of volunteers at a Catholic Worker Movement agency for poor and homeless people generalized that a religious vision of charity “permeated” the agency (Allahyari 2000:33). Yet the study’s fascinating data also imply that some agency volunteers changed or silenced religious identities

expressed elsewhere (p. 135). Similar empirical realities emerged in Bender's (2003) study of an AIDS food service organization, which avoids unitary actor terminology and highlights ambiguity, showing how volunteers tentatively tried out speech genres that might open a conversation about churchgoing or holiday practices.

Harder or softer versions of groupism mark case studies of religious community organizers. One study deduced that "Christianity was a shared yardstick" in the organization because some members spoke dubiously about elected leaders' religious virtues (Lichterman 1996:119). A more subtle kind of groupism informs another study's claim that "religious commitments to community caring, family well-being, and social justice inspire and sustain political participation" in community organizing campaigns (Warren 2001:4). Those religious commitments in turn grew out of religious traditions said to be shared by clergy and laypeople of congregations in the campaigns (pp. 191-210). It is easy to infer here that groups were pervaded by shared religious fellow-feeling. Yet the study sensitively observed how religiously based community organizing must juggle racial and other social identities that can inhibit solidarity on the basis of religion. It makes sense for a broad-ranging study of community organizing campaigns to focus less on specific settings of a campaign, but group-centered analytic terms make it hard to tell *when*, and how, religious rather than other kinds of identity mattered.

A closer focus on communication in settings helps us see *how* religious language makes community organizing powerful for participants: Activists stage carefully scripted "public dramas" for targeted adversaries that are emotionally compelling for participants. These dramas open with prayers, sending the message that the world of mundane interests must be accountable to a transcendent authority (Wood 2002:42). Public prayer "provides a forum for identity work" so that participants are less likely to continue "compartmentalizing themselves into a 'secular self' enacted in other settings; instead this creates a setting in which these often fragmented identities can be integrated" (p. 167).

Assumptions about pervasively religious worldviews, subcultures, and groups are difficult to leave aside entirely in research that aims to portray social patterns. These can be useful analytic moves for some research questions. Still, they make it difficult to ask how and when religion acquires the motivating or social bonding power that researchers have been ascribing it.

### *Insights for an Alternative Model*

Studies using communication metaphors such as polysemy, dramaturgy, or speech genre show religious expression crossing, or moving, boundaries between religious and nonreligious settings of modern life. These studies show that public religious expression can be setting specific, such that collective *actors* are not monovalently religious or nonreligious. Perhaps more subtly, they imply, too, that common forms of civic group *action* such as charitable volunteering, protesting, or the ritual of a community meeting can occur with relatively similar formats across religious, secular, or mixed settings. In modern societies, not only are identities intersectional, but repertoires of action (Swidler 1986) and forms of communication cross institutional boundaries between religious and nonreligious.

Although boundaries between religious and nonreligious can shift, modern actors do assume that boundaries exist and should be negotiated: In the specific modern context that Charles Taylor (2007) called "secular" (pp. 185-94), people do not often assume that public settings will be pervaded by unambiguously religious communication. They routinely anticipate "the public" as a secular, leveled sphere of individuals with rights, not a timeless moral and hierarchical order that places people according to God's will or natural law. Priming a public setting with prayerful invocation is not reaffirming participants' places in an always-existing Great Chain of Being so much as setting *off* the setting from others, offering needed signals that in the setting, religious expression is welcome, or that action there may have religious significance. Together, these insights favor an alternative conceptual framework with room for patterned routines of group action as well as negotiation and indeterminacy.

## A CULTURAL-INTERACTIONIST MODEL OF PUBLIC RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

To lay out the cultural-interactionist alternative, I start by clarifying what will count as “religious” in public action. Succeeding subsections define central concepts. To summarize the alternative model: Participants in interactional scenes draw on their background knowledge to classify “what kind of scene this is.” That knowledge along with cues from others helps them enact a group style that participants consider appropriate for the scene. This “group style” is perceived fuzzily and sometimes heeded selectively; participants signal what is appropriate or not appropriate, but they also make, or risk, mistakes. Participants’ implicit expectations and cues about group style roughly enable and constrain how if at all people express religious identities or use religious reasons aloud in the scene.

### *From “Religion” to Public Religious Communication*

“Religion” can connote private belief, public ritual, personal or collective identity. This model starts where the alternatives to the unitary actor model all started, with public religious *communication*. What makes public communication religious? As Ammerman (2003:216) helpfully explained, religious interaction “directly or indirectly invokes the co-participation of transcendence or Sacred Others”; that can include simply identifying oneself publicly as Catholic, Muslim, or pagan, because doing so implies some participation in a narrative that includes sacred or divine entities or ideas (see also Riesebrodt 2008). The same is true of those who justify acts or opinions with religious reasons. Discussing religion’s role in world affairs is not by itself religious expression. “Public religious communication,” in short, will mean expressing *reasons* or avowing *identities* that invoke the coparticipation of transcendent others explicitly or implicitly, in addition to proclaiming religious beliefs or worshipping, in sites of public life.

### *Settings and Scenes for Public Religious Communication*

Erving Goffman’s (1959, 1961, 1979, [1974] 1986) work is a good source for a focus on everyday settings. As Scheff (2006) commented, Goffman proliferated labels for roughly the same concept, and sometimes he used conceptual tags vaguely. Two terms need clarification: *Setting*, borrowing from Goodwin and Duranti (1992), refers to the “social and spatial framework for interaction” (p. 6). That framework itself may carry cues to what forms of interaction are valued. A judge’s office with its legal tomes and robed incumbent, for instance, communicate a solemnity that defendants may not feel for the law elsewhere (Gusfield 1981:161). Church buildings as settings can send a variety of cues; Pentecostal churches signal that interaction inside has otherworldly significance far removed from the profane “street” immediately outside (McRoberts 2003).

Then, we ought to distinguish *scene* from setting. People copresent in one spatial setting may change their implicit agreement about “what is going on” in one “strip” of action, as Goffman ([1974] 1986:8-10) put it. “What is going on here” sometimes can change quickly even among the same participants in one setting of a civic organization; for instance, youth volunteers cue one another in that they are supposed to be “bonding” instantly with hospital patients by chatting amiably. The challenge of banter with sick strangers soon proves daunting, and the volunteers begin recounting college experiences; the setting has remained, but the scene is now a college advice session, not warm communion with the needy (Eliasoph 2011:176-77). Goffman often called “what is it that’s going on here” the “frame,” but sometimes “footing” (Goffman 1979) or “scene” (Goffman [1974] 1986). Others (Diehl and McFarland 2010; Steinberg 1999) have pointed out that sociologists use *frame* in confusingly different ways. Following Eliasoph and others (Lichterman, Eliasoph, and Cefai forthcoming), I use *scene* as the conceptual name for a strip of action in which actors are sharing understandings of what is going on here. Sometimes participants mark off a potentially religious scene from previous or following scenes, with explicit signals. Goffman’s ([1974] 1986:

251-52) notion of “episoding convention” is useful here, and I adapt his specific concept of “bracketing” to include prayerful invocations and other communication devices by which actors signal that some kind of religious (or ambiguous) communication is appropriate.

### *Group Style and Its Consequences for Public Religious Communication*

The primary focus of analysis below will be on one important dimension of a scene, which recent cultural sociology illuminates beyond Goffman alone. One implicit dimension of shared understandings about “what is going on here” in a scene is *group style*. Group style is an ongoing pattern of interaction arising from a group’s shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in a scene. The concept applies to scenes, whether in informal or formally organized groups, in which participants have been interacting long enough to have routine assumptions about how to coordinate action. This study uses but also aims to develop further the group style framework, by distinguishing style from setting more carefully and clarifying the role of negotiation and indeterminacy in group style beyond the original formulation and showing how styles may circulate across secular-religious boundaries.

In the original formulation, patterns that constitute group style are part of a society’s cultural repertoire (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), not purely emergent patterns innovated *de novo* in group after group. Thus, a similar group style may characterize many scenes—local social movement group scenes in the United States, for instance. Conversely, one organization may host more than one group style, in its different scenes. To discover group style, a researcher can focus on several elements of coordinating action (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003:739-40), but two matter most here: First, participants share a wider, imagined *map* of reference points—other groups, individuals, populations—in relation to which the group of participants defines its boundaries. Boundaries on a map bring “the group” itself into being, defining what is “inside” or “outside” it, whom it is like, and whom it avoids. Second, participants sustain *group bonds* that define a set of good members’ obligations to one another as participants. For instance, in some groups, members depend on one another to express themselves with individual nuance; in others, members depend on uniform expression to support a cause. In sum, group style is coparticipants’ shared, often taken-for-granted sense of “who we are” collectively in relation to a wider world and how “we” rely on one another while in a scene. Because group style is not purely emergent but can endure across interactions, discerning style can take repeated observation or retrospective analysis of interactions (Sanders 1999). Research shows that leading participants often are also style leaders (Lichterman 2005).

The original formulation implies that people figure out which group style is or should be in play, locating it cognitively among a finite number of styles they know. To elaborate further, group style is *fuzzily* perceived, partly on the basis of background knowledge (Cicourel 1993), like other cultural practices and categories (Bourdieu 1985; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). That means participants and researchers alike recognize group styles as family resemblances more than sharply outlined forms. The tag *group style* is best used to name roughly similar patterns of coordinating action that people perceive in a fuzzy way and coproduce, not a mechanical “rule” of interaction (see Taylor 1993) imposed by a leader.

The group style concept avoids some limitations in other concepts of group culture, without rejecting their insights. As Gary Fine (2010) argued, symbolic interactionist work on group culture tends to emphasize the emergence of meanings in small groups at the expense of attention to enduring culture. Complementing Fine’s critique, a focus on group style requires attending to “sedimented understandings” (p. 358) in a collectivity, some of which may originate outside it. Having perceived a scene at the outset, participants invoke some implicit notion of what the style of interaction should be, what *kind* of “group” this is supposed to be; cognitive studies support this supposition (D’Andrade 1995; Kahneman and Tversky 1973). To clarify further, group style is different from the also valuable notion of “idioculture”: a group’s substantive inventory of jokes, collective memories, or other conversational topics (Fine 1979, 2010). Group style is more like the neoinstitutionalist notion of organizational formats that define “who we are and how we do things here” (Becker 1999), though focusing closely on everyday interaction. Rather than

saying that a group simply exists and then develops a style, this approach says that people choose and enact a roughly perceived group style for the scene at hand, and if they keep it in play most of the time, they are creating a particular kind of group in that scene. Groups with a similar style need not be identical; they may have somewhat different idiocultures, and some scenes may elicit different elements of the same idioculture.

The group style concept expands our understanding of what about settings or scenes influences the communication taking place in them. As new research is showing<sup>1</sup>, group styles can constrain communication—how people make political or religious claims, for instance. Empirical claims about the enabling and constraining influence of group style comport well with contemporary cultural theory, which holds that culture can influence culture (Swidler 2001), because some elements of culture are “deeper,” more implicit or taken for granted, and more durable than others (Sewell 1992). They are patterns that we discover by analyzing interaction over time. There is yet no exhaustive list of public group styles in the United States, but studies suggest a relatively limited, certainly finite number of group styles or their family resemblances circulate in one society.

Finally, the group style concept helps us observe how patterns of communication and action cross permeable boundaries between religious and nonreligious institutions. Fuzzy but recognizable styles may change or evolve without losing basic features that distinguish them from other styles. For example, the general, “personalized” group style described below can characterize religious or nonreligious scenes, and we will see an inflection of it that welcomes some religious expression. The benefit is that we can recognize some variation amid stylistic similarities across secular-religious boundaries. We need not always suppose that group styles must differ fundamentally in religious and nonreligious contexts.

### *An Opening to Consistent Religious Identity*

The cultural-interactionist approach may appear to efface some people’s deep sense of religious selfhood for situational determinism. Some critiques have implied that cultural approaches to religion risk rendering people too much as situational believers who do not really feel morally compelled (Smith 2003; Vaisey 2008). These concerns offer an opportunity to clarify how a focus on public religious expression can complement notions of individual religious experience or identity over time that one might use to address other research questions.

A focus on scene-specific religious expression need not imply that the actors under study are only passive respondents to situational cues. Hans Joas’s (2002) writing on the relation of religious experience to narration is helpful here. Inspired by Castoriadis (1984), Joas argued that we know we have had experiences only through our articulation of them, but there is always potential slippage between what we experience, how we articulate that experience privately to ourselves, and how we articulate it using more standardized, public cultural repertoires. Difficulties putting felt experience into the “right” words ratifies that we have had an experience (Joas 2002:509-10, 514). In this view, what we say in a group scene need not exhaust our feelings or beliefs about moral rightness. Psychological research complements this notion, having shown that a stable sense of self and varying interaction across settings are not mutually exclusive (Mischel and Shoda 1995).

Neither does a focus on scene-specific religious expression imply that all scenes or settings must be equally important for religious identity. Affirming a notion of experience is ultimately a theoretical choice, but it is an empirical question whether powerful experience articulated with one religious identity at one point enlarges or changes an individual or collective religious identity narrated later on. It depends partly on whether different narrations bring to the fore earlier emotional experiences for speakers (Joas 2002:511; see also Myerhoff 1978). Experience in explicitly religious, social activist groups may influence future religious self-understandings (see Wood forthcoming).

A focus on scene-specific group style, then, is compatible with the notion that individuals attempt to maintain a coherent if multistranded sense of self over time. Defending one particular theory of the self



would exceed the bounds of this discussion, but the framework here works well with approaches, such as Joas's, that would tap an individual's sense of religious identity through individual narrative (see also Roof 1998; Somers 1994). Such an approach has room for an experiencing self, coherent narrations of religious identity over time and the power of group style to shape experience and articulation.

On methodological principle, the model proposed here limits its empirical purview to religious communication in specific settings and scenes. Like Wuthnow's (2011) recent statement on religious talk, the model remains agnostic on whether we can know if "underlying" motives compel religious action and emphasizes instead that religious talk itself matters. That talk is not simply after the "fact" of motives but can be motivating itself, because values and beliefs become meaningful and guide collective action through talk. The model does not intend to exhaust our understanding of religious selfhood over time, and it can work with other approaches intended to answer other questions. Unitary actor and cultural-interactionist models lead to different foci and open different research questions, summarized in Table 1.

## CASES AND METHOD

Research reported here derives from a larger project on nonreligious and religious associations that address housing issues in an American metropolitan area. Scenarios pictured below come from voluntary associations of the sort seen as central to U.S. civic life, commonly sponsored or joined by congregations and other religious groups (Lichterman 2005; Putnam 2000). One organizational scene is central, while scenes from a brief comparison setting are included to cast doubt on the objection that the cultural-interactionist model illuminates only a narrow segment of religious groups.

The central organization, Caring Embrace of the Homeless and Poor (CE), was a loose-knit group of congregational leaders and housing and homelessness advocates. Between 5 and 12 core members met monthly, under the facilitation of staff member Theresa, at an urban, mainline Protestant church in a multiracial neighborhood. Theresa identified as a liberal Presbyterian. Other core participants included the hosting church's pastor, a longtime liberal Lutheran pastor of a nearby congregation, an evangelical Protestant real estate agent, and the congregational liaison for a regional chapter of Habitat for Humanity, who identified simply as Christian, along with two housing activists and two members of a homeless people's theater troupe who did not identify themselves religiously. Other participants included a liberal Presbyterian homeless advocate, an evangelical Protestant pastor, and an advocate for homeless veterans from a synagogue. The core group was ethnically and racially mixed, with its two Korean evangelicals, two African American homeless dramatists, Latino community organizer, and white facilitator and pastor members.

As facilitator Theresa often explained, congregational leaders initiated CE when they noticed more apparently homeless people in their neighborhood. They began meeting monthly to discuss responses to homelessness that were caring rather than stigmatizing for homeless people. CE's main project during the study was the Nails Project, a consciousness-raising campaign urging local religious congregations to collect a total of 74,000 nails, to symbolize the number of people homeless on an average night in the region. CE planned to publicize the collection, then donate the nails to Habitat for Humanity®, a large nonprofit organization that builds houses for low-income families. CE designed an educational presentation for congregations, intended to dispel myths about homeless people, advocating affordable housing as the real solution to homelessness.

In the comparison setting, a Spanish-speaking Catholic church in a working-class, mostly Latino neighborhood, the main scene was community meeting. CE's facilitator attended the meeting, co-organized by a housing advocacy coalition whose representatives attended CE meetings at Theresa's welcome. The meeting drew nearly 300 congregants and neighbors, who had come to speak out for more affordable housing and safer streets.

Data come from participant observation, the method of choice for studying how people enact religious identities in everyday settings in real time (Bender 2003; Lichterman 2008). I studied CE for 24 months; in addition to observing monthly meetings, I volunteered for outreach and other tasks and tried to get two

**Table 1.** Two Models of Religion in Public Action

	Unitary Actor Model of Public Religion	Cultural-Interactionist Model of Public Religious Communication
Main unit of analysis	Actors, individual or collective, and their shared beliefs or communication	Group style and communication in settings and scenes
How public actors carry religious culture	Public actors (individual or collective) express religion monovalently	Religious communication can be scene specific for individuals and collectivities
How religious culture shapes public action	Religious culture suffuses identity and action for the actor under study	Actors in a scene converge on a group style (from cues and their own background knowledge) that shapes religious communication
Examples of research themes:	Questions representing a unitary actor approach to the theme:	Questions representing a cultural-interactionist approach to the theme:
1. How religion affects public action	1. Which religious groups pursue which kinds of public action?	1. Which group styles enable people to link different kinds of religious communication to action?
2. How religious pluralism works	2. Which religious groups are more or less exclusive in public?	2. How do different group styles shape different kinds of interreligious collaboration, for different kinds of projects?
3. How religion relates to social ties	3. Which religious groups create stronger or weaker social ties?	3. Which group styles allow participants to use religious communication to mobilize social ties?

congregations interested in hosting a CE speaker on homelessness. I tried to contribute usefully to ongoing projects without initiating new ones, which time would have prohibited in any case. I took field jottings during meetings, later expanding them into complete field note sets (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). I coded notes using procedures well established by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss (1987).

Even the single case of CE suggests that we can improve our theories (Burawoy 1998), in this case, our conceptual grasp of religion's role in public action. Studying a more unambiguously religious, and more collectivist, community meeting that CE's director attended further highlights the limits of the unitary actor model and the potentials of the alternative. To strengthen evidence for the presence of a group style in a scene, I contrast actors' expressions of religious identity or reasoning in the main scene of each case with communication outside that scene. Interactionists also point out that conversational breaches or awkwardness, or a quick switch in conversational topic, are good signs that shared understandings have been threatened or violated (Goffman 1961; McCall and Simmons 1978). These interactional glitches helped reveal the influence of a group style on religious expression. Close-up evidence for how a style enables and constrains religious expression comes from examples different from the examples used to infer the existence of a shared group style to begin with, and from later in the study; this follows a methodological procedure already tested on empirical cases (Lichterman 2005).

## APPLYING THE CULTURAL-INTERACTIONIST MODEL

Before introducing CE's style, let us return to the scene from the breakfast meeting, to understand more concretely the problems with the unitary actor model's core analytic move. This scene's "bracketing" allowed participants to relate to religious identity, religious reasoning, and worship in a variety of ways.

## Bracketing an Ambiguous Scene

Pastor Frank bracketed the event with an opening comment and prayer.<sup>2</sup>

Pastor Frank intoned, "How can we make a compassionate response to homelessness? How can we make a compassionate response to poverty in this area? . . . How can we make a response with dignity. . . . How can we work together as religious people, as non-religious?" He added that "we all have resources to bring" to the issue, and listed several qualities including "compassion" and "courage." There followed a mild petition to bless our work together, offered "in your name, amen." The prayer included no name for the being addressed in this supplication.

Asking "how can we work together as religious people, as non-religious?" Frank's invocation bracketed the scene as religiously ambiguous by design. It allowed participants to *decide whether we wanted to sound religious and whether someone else meant to sound religious*. Thomas, a Presbyterian associate pastor, enunciated no specifically religious commitments and said that homeless people should work collectively instead of trying to stave off homelessness on their own. Wes, pastor of a nearby mainline Protestant church, said, "I came here to learn, and to pray." Two actresses from a theatrical troupe made up of homeless people both said "I'm a child of God, a social activist, a prayer warrior." Francis, a staff member with a housing advocacy organization, said, "Our response, traditionally, in many religious communities has been immediate service. But we need to broaden our imagination to think about what we can do to *end* homelessness." And a formerly homeless woman who had spent time living in a car parked outside a church criticized churchgoers for walking by, pointing, and laughing.

It is hard to infer confidently the presence or absence of religious core motives among these participants. For instance, Pastor Thomas's comments made him sound more like (nonreligious) housing advocate Francis than fellow mainline Protestant pastor Wes. To claim that Thomas was more "motivated" by social critique than piety, or that Wes was more motivated by prayer than the possibility of collective political action, would require inferring a core religious self and then using that inference to explain speech. That is the analytic move that the cultural-interactionist framework aims to avoid. It is safer simply to suppose that Thomas interpreted the breakfast meeting as an appropriate place to present a political activist's account of what is to be done, while Wes interpreted it as a setting that welcomed prayerful reflection. The cultural-interactionist approach does not ask whether a group "counts" as religious but how a scene could brook religious, nonreligious, and even antireligious identification or reasoning over time, as we see next.

## The Style of Individual Inspiration

In CE's monthly meetings, participants maintained a group style that both enabled and limited interfaith religious expression in distinctive ways. Meetings enacted a style resembling the "personalized" style that has been found in a variety of nonreligious as well as religious settings (Becker 1999; Brewer and Miller 1984; Lichterman 1996; Polletta 2002). This personalized group style regularly includes wide leeway for individually nuanced opinions, rather than tight, uniform solidarity. It defines a good group as one that integrates highly individualized voices into collective efforts.

As a group that made religious identities salient without mandating them, CE enacted a particular inflection of the personalized style. I call that inflection "individual inspiration," because Theresa and other members projected a group whose members might be acting on individual religious, spiritual, or nonreligious humanistic inspirations for the group's notion of a good cause. Like other groups with a personalized style, CE was routinely open to diverse individual expression, reinforced with a consensus decision-making format. And parallel to the personalized style in general, CE's inflection of the style made religious reasoning and identity into matters of *individual* inspiration, not collective duty or exclusive truth. To use the dimensions of group style introduced above: Group conversations continually conjured up a distinctive *map*, upon which a group of inspired individuals are set in a wider world full of individuals with the potential

also to be inspired by CE to act for the good of homeless people. Conversations made clear that *group bonds* obligated members to respect one another as valuable, inspired, or potentially inspired human beings, but not necessarily as “religious” people, even though many were, nor as political progressives who criticize social-structural injustice, even though many were.

Clues to the group’s *bonds* became apparent in the first two meetings. At the second meeting, the woman from the breakfast meeting who had lived in her car asked rhetorically why she should join a church, because she was a moral person already. At my first meeting, she delivered five minutes of tirade before Theresa lifted her pencil in the air, and said respectfully, “I hear you” and that we needed to move on with the agenda. Similar episodes early on suggested that the group norm, cued by Theresa, was for participants to honor each other’s individual contributions, even ones that some probably found disagreeable.

CE’s group bonds elicited a distinctive kind of positive interdependence, beyond tolerance. For example, when Theresa sadly recounted the story of a family friend’s terminal illness at one meeting, she told us, “So whatever you do—pray, mediate, send energy—do it for them,” then commented on having come to the meeting unprepared. “In some circles, it would be bad to come in unprepared—but I don’t think that. I think it’s part of our shared humanity.” Her comments suggested that participants could and should depend on one another to access individual inspirations, whether religious, spiritual, or nontheistic, and honor “shared humanity” over conventional social roles. The bonds of individual inspiration were like those of other personalized groups in general, but they emphasized a welcome for religious or ambiguously religious identity.<sup>3</sup>

Clues to the group *map*, the shared assumptions about who we are in relation to a wider world, also emerged at the first meeting. The physical setting offered participants initial clues that “we” *might* be religious: It was not the cinderblock church basement of the breakfast meeting but a church library room with banners announcing “peace” in different languages, and red candles and a lit tree at Christmas time. We cannot know for sure how participants interpreted the room, but at least some noticed it; one with weak eyesight was piecing together words on the banners aloud—“sha . . . lom”—before a meeting. Once meetings started, Theresa would refer implicitly and explicitly to a larger, diverse arena of religious groups as potential supporters, less often to secular groups. At my first meeting, Theresa told the group that “everyone out there is doing something—churches, synagogues, mosques, non-profits, but until there is a groundswell, we can’t [change the policies].” No one engaged with a mosque ever came to regular monthly meetings I attended during 24 months, and only two very infrequent participants identified with Judaism, so I inferred that this oft-repeated phrase served as a cue that the group’s shared imaginary should be pluralist (Bender and Klassen 2010). Months later, at a monthly meeting, Theresa said, for instance, “If every church, mosque, and synagogue takes a homeless family . . . [then we could lessen homelessness].”

The imagined map of CE’s wider world spotlighted diversely religious, *inspired individuals*. Early on, the Lutheran associate pastor, for instance, urged the group to collect homeless people’s stories, because these could inspire other individuals and move them to action on homelessness. Similarly, Theresa said from the start that the Nails Project’s symbolism would inspire individual nail collectors, moving each of them toward action to end homelessness; she did not say that nail collecting would teach them to commit their congregations or build power collectively. Individual inspiration applied even to a nearby university’s community relations administrator. Theresa said she hoped that this individual found the internal strength to care about homeless people. The group map was similar to that of other personalized groups in highlighting a world of diverse individuals (Lichterman 1996) but explicitly highlighted a variety of religious individuals.

Comparing the same people’s expression inside and outside a scene helps illustrate a style’s existence. Members who participated in more tightly bound, specifically religious groups *outside* CE meetings comported with the more inclusive, individual-centered, individual-respecting style at CE meetings. For instance, at a volunteer workshop for CE participants at a Habitat for Humanity® warehouse—a different setting and scene—Habitat representative Raquel bracketed the scene with Habitat’s opening custom, a “scriptural reading.” She used the reading to justify Habitat’s work, and another Habitat worker described the organization

as a specifically Christian ministry. In contrast, at CE meetings, although Raquel occasionally implied that she was a churchgoer, she described Habitat's mission not as a fulfillment of biblical teaching but simply as one of building "safe, simple, decent, affordable housing for working poor families."

Participants who eschewed religious identity in other settings collaborated in the individual inspiration style too. They did not criticize others' religious identities in the CE meeting scene. Housing advocates Francis and Zina stood by quietly at CE meetings when other participants identified themselves in religious terms, never doing so themselves. While I was participant-observing the advocacy office where they worked, Francis told Zina that a core CE participant was "religious." Zina's face crinkled in half-mock distress, and she asked if it were really true. I noticed that a cartoon affixed to Zina's computer was an ironic commentary on Christian piety. Neither Zina nor Francis ever suggested at CE meetings that homeless advocacy should be free of religious identities.

### *A Close Look at How Group Style Constrains Religious Communication*

Participants collaborate in keeping a group style normative in a scene. Their collaboration is patterned partly by participants' expectations, their background knowledge regarding "what kind of group this should be" (Cicourel 1993; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) within that scene and is not open to endless innovation. Thus, group style can constrain how people express religious claims or identities, not as a formula but a rough sensibility regarding what is appropriate (Eliasoph 2011) in a scene. Participants pick up roughly on a style and concur enough on what count as "mistakes" that they share awkward silences or switch topics quickly when mistakes happen, cuing in the participant-observer as well as participants to what is appropriate. "Mistaken" conversational topics violated expectations about mutual respect for individual sources of inspiration (bonds) or else supposed that CE meetings happened in relation to one, Christian religious reference point on the wider "map."

Within the individual inspiration style, making a particular religious claim authoritatively could be difficult, and risk offensiveness, unless the claim could complement a variety of individual inspirations. Perhaps for that reason, I heard only three direct endorsements of religious claims during 2 years of field research, even though most members were churchgoers and several were pastors. One came as an inclusive-sounding interfaith affirmation, in the spirit of "churches and synagogues and mosques." Half way through the study, Raquel, known to the group as a Christian, quoted a rabbi she had heard saying that "if we are all made in the image of God, then the image of God sleeping on the street should be unconscionable." Raquel's own pastor had said nearly the same thing. She told us, "When people from two completely different directions say almost the same thing—Wow, that is a truth!" Her comment signaled respect for individuals of different faiths who cared about homelessness.

The two other direct endorsements seemed to challenge the style, and came from *guests* of CE's evangelical pastor member, at another meeting. One guest said instructively that Christ decides who is worthy. Another guest testified a Christian story of personal redemption, in which a homeless, seemingly distraught woman she had once invited to her church later returned to church, dressed in white, hair less unkempt. Both guests' religious expressions differed strikingly from what was typical, by positing a specifically Christian reference point that would not easily translate to diverse, individual inspirations. That the testimony about the homeless woman was highly unusual even in a scene with regular, evangelical Protestant participants, and yet told at some length, suggests how group style set parameters of appropriateness, but fuzzy ones not immune to contravention. Nonguest participants smiled quietly at the testimony. One regular evangelical member had left the room already; Raquel gave the storyteller an appreciative look, and also said that her parking meter was three minutes over. No one said anything about the story itself, though some members' own worship services, evangelical members' services especially, likely included testimonies of redemption routinely. The guests never returned. Several times, the guests' evangelical pastor casually announced at the very end of a meeting that CE participants were welcome to worship at her church; this characteristically evangelical Protestant etiquette (Smith 1998) was not silenced by the group style

either. However, unlike her one-time guests, the pastor never imparted Christian teachings at meetings, and members never said anything to her worship offer. Theresa often responded to Raquel with conversational back-and-forth, while taking a mostly *listening* if respectful stance toward this pastor's offers and her guests' one-time participation. She took as individual inspiration what these latter speakers tried to offer as shared religious affinity.

Even regular members do not necessarily interpret or heed a group style in exactly the same way. Even the leader can introduce initiatives that subsequent interactions show to have been mistakes in relation to boundaries or bonds others are upholding. Eight months into my observations, when a style had seemed quite sedimented in the group, Theresa asked CE participants if they would collaborate in writing a broadly interfaith prayer about homelessness. Collective prayer *writing* almost certainly requires some religious *reasoning* aloud, a kind of religious communication that CE's group bonds seemed unable to sustain.

No one took up the prayer-writing idea at first, and one member changed the topic quickly. Theresa said that a bar mitzvah student and a Lutheran youth group were collecting nails, then asked a second time what we thought about the interfaith prayer idea. No one said anything, then someone abruptly asked what was the deadline for finishing the nail collecting. The third time, Theresa's invitation that we create an interfaith prayer produced a pause:

Then, Ted, from the synagogue, asked: "Would it be a one-time event?"

Maureen said that "in our church," people suggest a topic that "the pastor then wraps into a prayer." Ted said "It's the same at our synagogue."

Theresa offered that "we could craft something interfaith-ey, that would be very generic, and could be used across denominational traditions, and just be a resource." She asked "What if we have Kathleen (from Progressive Jewish Alliance), Opal (from a Protestant-initiated, interfaith homeless service organization)—and you?"—looking toward Ted. Ted said quietly he'd have to decline. Kathleen and Opal agreed at last to "look at" an already written prayer.

Three direct requests produced, at last, a polite decline from the Jewish man and hesitant acquiescence from representatives of a multireligious and a Jewish service organization to review a prayer template already written. Maureen and Ted answered Theresa with a statement about clergy policy on prayer. Yet Theresa had not asked them to get the prayer into their own congregations' services, but only to write together a prayer for unspecified congregations' future use. Still, Maureen and Ted received the request from the standpoint of their *own*, individual religious "homes" and authorities. The bid to write a prayer together would have smudged the tacit agreement to respect separate, *individual* inspirations. Cowriting a prayer would have presupposed group bonds on the basis of a more tightly shared sense of religious "we" than this gathering of differently religious individuals mustered. Theresa never brought up the prayer idea again at meetings I attended, though the Nails Project continued.

This focus on group style is useful as well in more unambiguously religious contexts.

## STYLE IN A LESS AMBIGUOUS INTERFAITH SCENE

### *A Community-Centered Style for "People of Faith"*

This brief comparison setting represents a scenario of local community-based social activism widespread in the United States (Hart 2001; Wood 1997). Participants at this public meeting demanded that their city council endorse a policy platform to increase affordable housing and strengthen tenants' rights, in the city where CE worked to raise awareness of homelessness. The meeting was sponsored by a community-organizing coalition and promoted the housing platform that activist Francis discussed at the CE breakfast meeting described earlier. CE belonged to that coalition, and CE leader Theresa attended the meeting, at San Pablo church. Participants explicitly shared a more definitely religious, less individual oriented collective identity as "people of faith" than what CE meetings elicited. Participants performed religious identity

in ways we would not necessarily derive from religious affiliations or personal worship practice outside the scene. Additional observations of the coalition, not reported here, made it possible to identify the community-centered group style operating in the San Pablo meeting scene. Studies of very similarly styled local activism (Warren 2001; Wood 2002) offered helpful clues. Theresa's reactions at this meeting help demonstrate how the alternative framework allows room for an actor's sense of consistent religious selfhood across settings.

After a children's chorus sang several pop tunes, San Pablo's pastor, Padre Franklin,<sup>4</sup> opened the meeting. Speaking in Spanish,<sup>5</sup> as did all other speakers from the neighborhood, he bracketed the meeting as a gathering of unambiguously religious agents of social justice, in contrast with Pastor Frank's invocation at the CE breakfast.

Padre Franklin intoned: "God wants us to live in a world more just, more united." He appealed to the "common good" and offered his comments "in the name of Jesus Christ."

The padre's remarks were "faith based" and then ended on an exclusively Christian note; it would be hard to mistake them as secular. Padre Franklin invoked a scriptural passage as a call to housing justice: "They shall not build, and another inhabit" (Isaiah 65:21-22). The same passage appeared on a huge banner strung across a sanctuary wall. Recall, in contrast, that Theresa's bid to create a less religiously specific prayer about homelessness got a chilly reception at CE. Next, a neighborhood leader characterized the gathering as a "faith-based movement for social change"; officially, the collectivity here was religious, whether or not all individuals had a religious identity and practice.

In terms of group style, the *map* shared at this meeting pictured not a world of inspired individuals but religiously motivated, engaged local residents in an inner circle, with outside professional allies in a larger concentric circle, as-yet uncommitted onlookers further outside, and enemies of affordable housing beyond them. *Group bonds* at this meeting also contrasted with those maintained during CE meetings. This meeting elicited much less individualized religious expression, and it implicitly defined bonds of obligation in terms of a tighter, religious "we." After Hernandez's comments, a meeting facilitator asked everyone in the sanctuary who belonged to that church to stand up together. This stand-up identification collectivized both religious and geographical location for a large number of participants, in contrast with less specified, more open and optional individual religious identifications at CE. Complementing the style, an organizer from the coalition appealed to loyal commitment rather than deferring to individual autonomy. She prevailed upon the audience: "Are you ready to go to city hall, to friends and neighbors, to talk to the mayor?" In contrast, Theresa had hesitated to push the Nails Project because it was just one idea, and she wanted other participants to feel free to suggest other projects.

The cultural-interactionist model cautions the observer against assuming that religious identity of any sort was the *sole* motive behind the collective action unfolding at the church. Boundaries on the map shared this scene made the insider "community" Latino, Spanish speaking, and immigrant as well as faith based. For instance, an outside housing advocate positioned "the community" in linguistic terms: "I have a language disability—I don't speak Spanish." He closed with an activist mantra in Spanish that others began to chant: "¡Sí, se puede!" At the climax of the meeting, the city councilwoman signed a large "pledge" card, dramatizing her endorsement of the affordable housing platform, and most of the audience rose to their feet, some cheering loudly. The unitary actor model might interpret this outburst as religious actors' expression of a *religiously* motivated enthusiasm for housing justice, but we need not trace the collective enthusiasm to either religious or ethnic and nonreligious solidarity alone. An observer could infer that the scene had room for both without saying which motivated whom.

Once again, comparing participants across scenes bolsters the cultural-interactionist approach. The "faith-based" religious identity expressed in this scene differed from religious identities that participants shared in other scenes even inside the same church. That evening, the reception tables, unusual visiting guests, and hortatory banner on the wall helped prime participants for a distinctive scene, but many participants normally attended San Pablo church as Catholic worshippers: *Before* the meeting, I watched two women

seat themselves in pews near mine and cross themselves. Once the meeting began, participants referred to a “faith” not specifically Catholic. *After* the meeting, the scene changed again: Activists removed the out-sized “housing pledge card,” and some participants stayed, joined by other worshippers not present at the meeting, and they all sang a clap-along song about Jesus—explicitly Christian, not “faith based.”

### Room for Individual Consistency Across Settings

Outside the church, Theresa of CE said that she was impressed yet uncomfortable with the event. She supported the coalition and the cause and had followed the meeting closely. Her comments strongly implied discomfort with the style, but she tried tentatively to articulate her feelings in terms of denominational differences.

Theresa: “Something in me (gesturing to clutch her heart) is dissonant with [tonight’s meeting]. I guess in the Catholic church they’re used to that more top-down. . . . For us [Protestants] it’s—like herding cats! . . . We want to rebel! . . . Well clearly, people were very passionate about it. But I don’t know if *we* [her church] could fill a church about anything.”

I offered that this meeting’s “style” was different from what Theresa knew best, and she agreed. A few minutes later, Theresa returned to the idea that the Catholic church has the structure that can turn people out for an event. I observed that Thomas, from the CE breakfast, pastored a liberal Presbyterian church (like Theresa’s) and was very active in a community organizing network, similar to the sponsor of tonight’s meeting. Although Theresa was right that the institutional structure of Catholic churches facilitates recruitment of congregants by pastors for social advocacy (Warren 2001; Wood 2002), Catholic as well as main-line Protestant activists also participate in group styles that value individualized expression and multiple inspirations (Lichterman 2005).

In Joas’s terms, Theresa *experienced* the meeting with discomfort that she *articulated* in terms of Protestants’ difference from Catholics. She perceived it fuzzily as a style less comfortable to her. From a research point of view, Theresa’s own narrative does not fit her experience as closely as does a narrative about an uncomfortable group style. Yet Theresa’s narrative of “Protestant” identity here was consistent with remarks she made to me on other occasions about how her Presbyterianism differed from that of theological conservatives in the same denomination and how she disliked hierarchy in general. This illustrates the earlier claim that maintaining a coherent sense of religious self can be compatible with participation in scenes of varying group style.

## RETHINKING RELIGION’S BENEFITS FOR THE ACTOR: SETTING-SPECIFIC SOCIAL CAPITAL

As the religious actor has returned to sociology, researchers have sought to document religion’s benefits for civic action. Selectively borrowing Tocqueville’s ([1835]1969) thinking, prominent studies claim that various aspects of religion<sup>6</sup> influence civic engagement through “social capital.” The term is a collective tag for the social networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust that empower collective action—and the subject of a great deal of research and debate (e.g., Putnam 1995, 2000; Somers 2005; Woolcock 1998). Social capital studies rely on the unitary actor model when they argue that shared religious beliefs or motives make a group successful at mobilizing social networks (e.g., Warren 2001; see Smidt 2003). The cultural-interactionist model specifies our understanding of *how* religious identities, reasoning or worship relate to social capital.

Some group styles allow people to propound specific, even exclusive religious claims or identities and gather likeminded others. Other styles detach people from the *potential* uniting power of religious sensibilities they may share in other scenes. Ethnographic observation found Theresa with many religious as well as



nonreligious contacts. She attended a variety of organizations' meetings related to housing. On the unitary actor model, Theresa, and her church, had a lot of social capital through connections to religious people. The church itself had a decades-old reputation for supporting progressive causes. Two pastors said at different CE meetings, in the same words, that for CE to get congregations to collect nails to publicize homelessness "should be a no-brainer." In this view, CE's nail-collecting campaign should have reached its goals quickly.

Yet CE's inclusive, individual-centered, and only ambiguously religious style diluted the Nails Project's efforts with religious people. Respectful of separate, individual inspirations, Theresa often hesitated to make her religious concern for homelessness an explicitly *guiding* inspiration for CE or potential congregational constituents, lessening the potential benefit of her networks for the Nails Project. The quest to collect 74,000 nails lagged many months behind schedule. Nail collecting was in effect a good proxy measure for CE's social capital–mobilizing capacity. In scenes of religious activists, the director preferred a group style that, on one hand, made religiously diverse contacts possible but, on the other hand, made it difficult to prevail upon them the way the housing advocate prevailed upon San Pablo meeting participants to "go to city hall."

The networking appeal of religious identity or religious reasoning depends at least partly on the group style of the scenes in which religious people interact. The individual inspiration style may, at least initially, welcome actors from a variety of religious traditions or none at all. It does not cultivate bonds and boundaries that produce tight loyalty to single-goal, collective endeavors (see also Lichterman 1996). Further research can tell us whether the community-centered style successfully gathers religious people for collective action because it encourages tight bonds of group loyalty, because "people of faith" is a compelling basis for pursuing social justice, or for both reasons. For now, the comparison suggests that a religiously pluralist style can compel more cohesive networks when it gives spokespersons a basis for prevailing confidently upon others, and mapping a group firmly against potential opponents.

## GROUP STYLE IN HISTORY: ACROSS SECULAR-RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES

Given that group style is less an idiosyncratic negotiation than a kind of format that fuzzily resembles formats in other groups, the cultural-interactionist framework opens us to sketching the historical roots, cultural parameters, and spread of a style. The individual inspiration style offers a case in point. It illuminates the permeable boundaries between religious and nonreligious settings over time.

Taken together, several observations suggest that liberal or mainline Protestant Christianity is an important historical, organizational source of that style of interfaith group: After World War II, new strands of Christian theology and pastoral practice, Protestant more than Catholic, were affirming individually validated inspiration and empowerment (Swanson 1980; Wuthnow 1988:55-56). In the United States, interfaith groups and projects have been associated most closely with liberal Protestant denominations (McCarthy 2007). Liberal, mainline Protestantism opens room for individual, spiritual exploration (Davie 1995) and tends to soften boundaries between Christian denominations and between religious and secular culture (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1994). Yet, as mentioned earlier, individual inspiration parallels a more general, personalized style of relationship building beyond religious contexts. That group style has been traced to the immediate post–World War II period too, in management and psychological fields (Back 1987; Swanson 1980). It spread alongside Americans' increasing familiarity with psychotherapeutic thinking about self and society (Bellah et al. 1985). Using somewhat different terms, researchers have observed a personalized style increasingly crossing lines between theological liberals and conservatives since the 1960s (Roof 1998; Wuthnow 1994). In all, it would be difficult to say a current interfaith group such as CE is influenced *only* by a specifically religious culture or only by a more general cultural form.

A good analysis does not need to choose.<sup>7</sup> Nonreligious organizational formats are embedded in American religious life, while religious or once-religious meanings influence practices of American citizenship (Demerath et al. 1998; Lichterman and Potts 2009). Recent cultural sociology helps us make sense of how a nonreligious and a more specifically religious cultural form can relate over time: First, the original

group style framework (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003) implies that people can transpose (Sewell 1992) a familiar group style to other settings. CE participants familiar with other religious or interfaith scenes may have transposed individual inspiration to CE. Second, people who are unfamiliar with the individual inspiration style but know the more general, personalized group style either from nonreligious settings or congregational life might transpose this background knowledge to a scene such as CE's monthly meeting. They may pick up cues on how to inflect the style for an interfaith, religious/secular scene. Fuzzily similar patterns of group style can circulate between the larger social environment and more religious settings, in *both* directions, once we agree that religious culture does not live in a tightly sealed institutional sphere.

Group styles circulate within limits, too: Theologically conservative, evangelical Protestant notions of exclusive religious truth would validate a narrower range of "inspiration" than did CE's group style. Exclusive religious truth is a central part of evangelical Protestant, more than liberal or mainline Protestant, personal identity (Smith 1998). It is unlikely that people of just any religious tradition can participate in the individual inspiration style with equal ability or comfort. Still, the possibility of transposition, and the emphasis many Americans place on individuality, makes it likely that a range of participants can enact it. Perhaps ironically, the often secular, personalized group style can be an important earlier source of a current group's religion-friendly individual inspiration style. Beyond tracking a single style, a cultural-interactionist approach can drive new research questions that broaden "out" to large, collective accomplishments, or focus "in" on the individual construction of religious selves.

## NEW QUESTIONS FOR A CULTURAL-INTERACTIONIST APPROACH TO RELIGION

### *Tracking Religious Pluralism in Public Life Historically*

Social historians increasingly advocate "put[ting] interaction at the front and center of historical explanation," and that depends on linking historical turning points with changing interaction styles (Diehl and McFarland 2010:1713, 1747). Diehl and McFarland argued that Goffman's work can help researchers compare social situations across historical periods. In their spirit, we might track changing practices of religious pluralism by comparing group styles or acts of bracketing across time. Bracketing statements are a good place to start. Researchers might mine the newsletters and pamphlets of selected religious and officially nonreligious associations for evidence of change in the ways leaders bracket their meetings and other events. We might note the choice of a religiously specific or generic prayer, or the habit of naming December gatherings Christmas parties, holiday get-togethers, or multicultural feasts. We might similarly scan meeting minutes and flyers for evidence of changing group reference points—group maps—or changing understandings of what makes participants valuable—group bonds: We might look for references to mosques as well as churches and synagogues, for example. These inquiries could track historical change in the ways public groups welcome or limit religious diversity, complementing inquiries into change at legal<sup>8</sup> and other institutional levels. This historical tracking would help us see whether cultural conditions of interaction have become more, or less, propitious for a "postsecular" public sphere as Habermas or others envision it.

### *Genres of Religious Selfhood*

The cultural-interactionist framework can inform further research on the construction of religious motives and selves in settings. Whether or not we posit deeply internalized religious motivation in the psychological sense, people still must interpret the potential religious significance of their own and others' words or actions. I would propose that people vary widely in how they construct a believing self; the variation probably helps define some differences between theologically conservative and liberal denominations and congregations. We may conceive of "genres" of religious selfhood and follow how an individual performs

one or more of those genres, constrained by different settings. Theresa, for instance, performed a religious self of fluid and ambiguous boundaries that intentionally left open for the listener (and perhaps she herself) to decide whether she was religiously motivated. In church, she may perform a different believing self. In contrast, some evangelical Protestant community volunteers have performed a self of religious constancy (Lichterman 2005). The self they communicate to others is always “on a walk with Jesus,” inviting interlocutors to assume that everything they say and do is motivated by a relationship with Jesus Christ. Remaining agnostic on the question of deep religious motives, we can observe that they construct constant Christian motivation.

Finally this framework can help us understand how people in a setting send signals, or know that other participants are signaling, the co-participation or relevance of sacred Others to begin with. Widely known cultural vocabularies provide some of the cues, and an extensive cultural-interactionist analysis includes those (see Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2005). People also rely partly on perceptions of group style, bracketing, meaningful variations in rhythms of speech and action, and other interactional moves. People may disagree on these perceptions and acts, with noisy consequences for public life. Further research may show that mass-mediated public forums with national audiences, as well as ongoing groups and organizations like the ones observed here, have a limited range of recognizable styles. If that is the case, then it is likely that mismatches between the expected style of a forum and the religious reputation of some speakers drive noisy conflicts over religious-sounding talk that has riled American electoral politics and the public life of many other societies recently. These tensions give us yet more warrant for a cultural-interactionist approach that reveals different ways that people maintain settings for religious expression and march in, storm out, meander, or tiptoe either way.

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## NOTES

1. For expositions of group style, guidelines for using the concept, and examples of group style constraining the ways people make claims, see Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003), Lichterman (2005, 2006), and Eliasoph (2011). Applications of the group style concept in different national contexts include, for instance, Citroni (2010), Faucher-King (2005), Luhtakallio (2010), Mische (2008), and Yon (2009).
2. All indented blocks separated from the rest of the text represent excerpts from field notes, unless otherwise specified.
3. When a self-described atheist attended, members also listened and considered his practical suggestions, as much as anyone else's.
4. Linguistic features of pseudonyms parallel those of the real names.
5. Quotations below are my translations.
6. For a good review, see Wuthnow (2004).
7. Other studies influenced by neoinstitutionalism similarly show how an organization can be influenced by culture originating outside as well as inside its institutional field (see Armstrong 2002; Becker 1999).
8. For an astute discussion of state-sponsored limits on religious pluralism, see Bender (forthcoming) and Bender and Klassen (2010).

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## BIO

**Paul Lichterman** is Professor of Sociology and Religion at the University of Southern California. He writes on political and civic culture, religion, social movements, cultural theory and ethnographic methodology. He is finishing a study of how cultural and organizational dynamics produce different approaches to problems of housing and homelessness.