

Pattern Maintenance, Tension Management, and the Problem of Ideological Assimilation

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As we sat down to lunch I could tell something was weighing heavily on his mind. As he talked, it became apparent that things weren't going too well for this newly appointed pastor of Harbor Church of the Nazarene. Slowly bits and pieces of the problem he was facing began to come out. A major proportion of his congregation was made up of "Navy families." Early on he had entertained high hopes of increasing the number of such families in his congregation. But not only was he losing these families, he was finding it next to impossible to secure new families to replace them. The problem, as he diagnosed it, was two-fold. On one hand, Navy men who had made a commitment to Christ found it next to impossible to live out the terms of this commitment during the long months at sea and simply gave up trying. On the other hand, sensing this problem, Navy personnel who had not made such a commitment were reluctant to do so.

Volumes have been written to describe aspects of the tension between Christ and culture (not the least of which is Jon Johnston's recent book) and I'll not belabor the point here. But the above story—accurate in all details except the name of the church—serves to dramatize the seriousness of the conflict. Incidentally, I ran across this pastor last year....Harbor church of the Nazarene is no longer in existence.

Research suggests that there exists a fair amount of tension between the values espoused by the Church of the Nazarene and the values of the prevailing culture (Bainbridge and Stark, 1980). It goes without saying that if people are going to be assimilated into this denomination, it is essential that this tension be dealt with in some significant way.

In the following section I shall examine some of the strategies religious organizations employ in dealing with the tensions between denominational and cultural values. However, in recognition of the fact that securing intellectual assent to denominational values does not wholly resolve the problem, a second section will focus on the approaches organizations employ in motivating denominational participants to actually act out religious values in the context of a secular society. Both of these problems will be dealt with in terms of what social theorist Talcott Parsons refers to as the twin tasks of pattern maintenance and tension management.

Pattern Maintenance Strategies

For present purposes we will consider the problem of pattern maintenance as one confronting religious organizations as they assist members in dealing with the tension between Christian norms and values and those espoused by the broader culture in which the organization exists.

The task of mapping out the strategies employed by religious organizations is eased somewhat by the work of other sociologists. William Gerson's (1969) research on the "strain-reducing mechanisms" Jewish families used to cope with "culturally produced cross-pressures" has application here. And Demerath and Hammond (1969) have commented explicitly on some

specific pattern maintenance strategies I shall rely heavily on the work of Demerath and Hammond.

Strategy #1: Separate the Sacred from the Secular

This strategy involves a tacit agreement, as it were, to maintain a wall of separation between church and society such that the affairs and concerns of one are not discussed or otherwise dealt with in the sphere of the other. This may or may not be a consciously imposed strategy. Yet as one carefully listens to the content of songs, sermons, and prayers offered in some congregations, it becomes quite apparent that the world outside is almost never dealt with. Moreover, upon sensing that it might be somehow out of place to deal with such "mundane" matters of the world, church members and visitors alike may be quite uninclined to mention them.

The compliment of such removal of the "secular" sphere from the "religious" sphere is a similar separation the latter from the former. The reluctance of a religious organization to address worldly concerns carries the implicit suggestion that religion is somehow to be restricted to the church sanctuary.

As long as the boundaries are carefully maintained, theoretically at least, there should be little likelihood of conflict. Yet in reality, this approach is far too simplistic, as we are discovering in the present furor over the proper relationship between church and state.

Another problem with this approach lies in its failure to incorporate the prophetic message of the Old Testament or, for that matter, Christ's injunction to Christians to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. How are these themes to be realized in the lives of Christians who merely fade into the world upon leaving the four walls of the local church? Such defacto segregation of sacred from secular betrays an extremely shallow hermeneutic.

Strategy #2: Rewrite the theology

According to this strategy, if conventional theology fails to articulate well with the surrounding culture or subculture, simply rewrite it. No matter whether it is orthodox or biblically consistent. The main concern is that it be palatable. If homosexuals wish to believe that their sexual orientation is acceptable to God, develop a gay theology. If Americans worship success, then turn God into a success deity. (See Compolo's book, *Success Fantasy*.)

Any theology which invokes a you-can-have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too approach betrays this strategy. The problem is that such theologizing turns a transcendent God into a group possession. *Such practice constitutes the very essence of idolatry!*

Strategy #3: Understate the requirements

A Hawaii pastor once shared with me that he was preparing to take new members into his church. Since I knew some of the candidates and suspected that there might be passages in the Nazarene manual that they would find difficult to accept, I asked him about this. He simply replied, "unless they bring it up, I feel it is unnecessary to do so."

Let's face it. There are positions taken by the Nazarene denomination—and the church universal, for that matter—which are not likely to be well received. But whether they should therefore be ignored is questionable. Perhaps the denomination has an ethical obligation to be "up front" with potential converts concerning its beliefs and convictions. One serious criticism of many of the cults is that they operate in a climate of secrecy. Consequently people have a difficult time determining what they are getting into. But our Lord clearly warns potential followers to count the cost lest they find the going too difficult (Luke 14:28).

Strategy #4: Popularize the theology

This strategy of tension reduction is closely related to strategy number three. Operating in this mode, the church functions as though it had procured the services of a hard core public relations firm to head up the promotion department. And like the politician who discovers he is starting to lose out at the polls before the election, it begins to promise everything under the sun...and beyond...in an effort to win supporters. Under the competent hand of the P.R. firm, Jesus winds up endorsing popular values. Even renderings of His physical appearance may appeal to such values. (Perhaps you will recall the picture of the hairy-chested "macho" Jesus decked out with rugged looking buckskin.)

Those who would opt for this strategy dare not pattern their behavior after Christ's. His behavior would most surely have given even the slickest P.R. people nightmares or even driven them to the brink of suicide.

Strategy #5: Be selective in your requirements

If one should undertake a content analysis of testimonies given over victories of sin, I would wager that in some congregations (quite possibly Nazarene) the column under "personal vices--smoking and drinking"--would be quickly filled to capacity. I recall the stirring testimony of my dear aunt who, after many years of smoking and drinking, joined a church and gained victory over these sins. The change was truly remarkable. But just broach topic of negroes with her and her racism would blossom profusely. Conveniently this never constituted a problem for her. As far as her congregation was concerned, she was a Christian in very good standing.

This illustration is not meant to infer that victory over such sins is not significant. The point is that religious organizations or local congregations frequently select a few "favorite sins" for special emphasis and virtually ignore all other scriptural pronouncements. The net result is that it becomes incredibly easy, by this narrow standard, to be a Christian. Once again, the tension between Christ and culture is minimized.

Strategy #6: Highlight the tension

At first thought, this hardly seems like a strategy at all. Yet some groups seem capable of making it work to their advantage. Radcliff-Brown (1939) has observed how religious groups sometimes create tensions precisely to promote in-group cohesion. A number of modern-day cults have aptly demonstrated the workability of this strategy (see Stellway, 1979). It is this writer's opinion that, by definition, a tension necessarily exists between authentic Christian

values and those of virtually any contextually-relevant culture. Consequently this latter strategy might be more authentic and less potentially misleading than the other five. Yet should people be somehow motivated to buy into a set of deviant values, another problem quickly looms on the scene...

Tension Management

For present purposes I will use the tension management designation to refer to the problem of living out a "deviant" pattern of behavior consistent with one's religious commitment. As with the problem of pattern maintenance, religious organizations employ different strategies to deal with the problem of tension management.

Strategy #1: Stress that proper belief is what really counts

Some religious organizations who promote deviant values are more than satisfied if their members give a verbal assent to these values. This is likely a consequence of an overriding emphasis on the belief dimension of religion.

Tony Campolo has observed that even Satan is a believer. (James 2:19-20). He goes on to observe that "We think that evangelism is getting people to agree with our theology we say they're saved. What we need to realize is that you're a Christian when you make a commitment to becoming a disciple of Jesus" (Campolo, 1982). Clearly, if the assimilation of deviant values is to be complete, believers must be motivated and prepared to act out these values.

Strategy #2: Stress the importance of religious commitment but remain silent about the practical implications of such commitment

The task of sustaining converts in their commitment to live out deviant values becomes progressively more difficult as people become aware of what is going on in the world around them. During the first few days of class I sometimes suggest to my students that a knowledge of the events and circumstances that we will be studying may enhance their social responsibility even as it increases their moral culpability. Consequently, I warn them that they may learn more than they might want to know.

Ignorance may function to reduce the pattern. maintenance problem Consistent with strategy #1, local churches will be quite reluctant to invite special speakers, sponsor issue-oriented forums, or to in other ways inform their people concerning the dimensions of social issues or the social and ethical implications of their beliefs--except along the narrowest lines.

In an effort to overcome this tendency, the dean of students at NNC, in cooperation with student leaders, set up a point-counterpoint series to deal with the dimensions of contemporary issues. The first session was to have presented the pro-life and pro-choice positions on abortion. No sooner was the topic announced than a group of students began circulating a petition to prevent the pro-choice position from being presented.

Strategy #3: Stress the importance of religious commitment but oversimplify the implications of such commitment

A short time before the last presidential election, one local pastor inferred in his sermon that all one needed to know about the up-coming election was that one side was pro-abortion and the other was pro-life. He proceeded to invite his congregation to meet in the church sanctuary and pray and fast for direction in the election.

While such action may be praiseworthy--at least an effort was made to apply Christian values--a problem arises when issues are presented in oversimplified terms (the essence of demagoguery) and without any effort at diligent information gathering and processing. Such action carries the implicit suggestion that issues are quite simple--one need not struggle to come to grips with social complexities--and that ample direction is obtained from personal prayer.

Strategy #4: Uphold deviant values but stress that they lack practical application

A fourth way of managing the pattern maintenance problem is to uphold deviant values while pointing out reasons for not acting on them. The Bible says to be good to the poor and the organization affirms the value. But one must remember that helping the poor will simply make them lazy, more dependant, or somehow worse off. The Bible says to go the extra mile and the organization endorses that value. But one must also be aware that to actually do so will "spoil" people or encourage them to take others for granted.

Of course one has to give careful thought to how best to act out Christian values. But when people end up never acting out what they say they believe in, one must begin to question the integrity of their commitment.

Strategy #5: Acknowledge the difficulty: invoke spiritual (and social) support

A religious organization's reluctance to investigate the moral and ethical implications of the values they affirm is understandable when the means for sustaining their members in their efforts to act on these implications is lacking. But the doctrine of the Church of the Nazarene affirms that the means are available. The cleansing and empowering function of sanctification, made possible by God's holy spirit, plays a vital role in this regard. Furthermore, the testimony of many adds validity to this doctrine. But just how does the Holy spirit work?

In a culture characterized by individuals, there is a tendency to see the spirit working in people's lives on a one-on-one basis. But isn't it possible that the spirit might work among groups as well? (The biblical account of the upper room experience suggests this possibility.)

There is considerable evidence that people are more inclined to act out a personal commitment when they are responsible to and/or supported by a social group. Christian

sociologist Jim White gives a moving account of a member of his congregation who was having problems living out her Christian values on her job. It seems that she was being pressured to overlook certain unethical practices engaged in by her employer. Upon sharing this situation with her Sunday school class, members of the class decided to come to her aid by writing letters of support on her behalf. To make a long story short, their active intervention (and no doubt their prayer support) resulted in transforming her work situation in such a way that she was able to live out the implications of her Christian commitment. Christian support groups can play a vital role in pattern maintenance.

Conclusion

The task of ideological assimilation is a difficult one. As illustrated in the opening account, it involves the related problems of pattern maintenance (P.M) and tension management(T.M.). The strategy employed to cope with the P.M. problem influences the strategy employed to deal with the T.M. problem. In the process of working out strategies, religious organizations are often inclined to compromise on Biblical imperatives. By adopting an uncompromising position, the twin tasks of P.M. and T.M. would appear to be especially difficult. However there are steps that religious organizations should can take to help members manage these twin tasks. Our task is one of determining appropriate strategies for facilitating ideological assimilation while not compromising on these biblical imperatives. In the process we dare not forget the important function of the Holy Spirit. A recognition of this function should facilitate a non-compromising risk-taking approach.

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