

Orthodoxy as Project: Temporality and Action in an American Protestant Denomination

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The term “orthodox” is often used to characterize religious communities who understand themselves to hold a stable set of practices or beliefs. However, as is the case with any group, orthodox communities experience ideological fragmentation and change. How then, do communities who identify as orthodox maintain the perception of orthodoxy in spite of ideological fragmentation and change? I describe activities engaged in by a conservative Protestant denomination in the service of orthodoxy. I draw on archival and field research in this denomination in order to demonstrate how the orthodox: (i) project future threats; (ii) develop strategies for obstruction; and (iii) coordinate in-group interactions.

Key words: orthodoxy; denominations; conservative protestantism.

The term “orthodox” is often used to characterize particular religious communities as upholding a stable set of practices or beliefs. Orthodox communities are those that—in contrast to “progressives” or “moderns”—understand themselves to hold traditional beliefs that remain constant over time. As is the case with any ideological identity, the meaning of the term “orthodox” is not fixed. It is a category that is used to make contrasts between and within communities and that is constructed during struggles over meaning (Alexander and Smith 1993; Bourdieu 1977; Emirbayer 1997; Gross et al. 2011). To label a group as “conservative,” “liberal,” “orthodox,” “progressive,” etc. is to make claims about their ideological positions relative to others. In actuality, these positions—even those of the “orthodox” or “conservative”—change over time and are subject to both syncretism and fragmentation. And yet, even as orthodox positions may not actually remain constant over time and as orthodox communities exhibit ideological fragmentation, the perception of stability remains a central aspect of orthodox identity. The orthodox perceive themselves (and are assumed by others) to hold

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fixed perspectives on morality. *How then do communities who identify as orthodox maintain the perception of orthodoxy in spite of ideological fragmentation and change?*

I explore “orthodoxy” using a qualitative case study of a conservative Protestant denomination. Conservative Protestants are often described as holding “orthodox” views, because they affirm a number of commitments related to the stable interpretation of the Bible. Yet, even as they affirm such commitments, they also demonstrate significant interpretive pluralism and flexibility (Smith 2011; Coward 1988; Harding 2000). I investigate contexts wherein denominational actors engage issues of denominational orthodoxy in order to investigate how this community maintains a perception of orthodoxy in spite of interpretive pluralism.

In order to develop my argument, I first review relevant literature on how orthodox identity is structured around a narrative of change over time, as well as literature on the relationship between orthodoxy and practice. I then present an alternative model for conceptualizing orthodoxy. Rather than a definition that relies on the orthodox consistently holding—or acting on the basis of—commitments to an unchanging moral authority, I argue that we should focus on the activities engaged in by those who self-identify as orthodox in service of this identity. These activities provide insight about how beliefs may motivate practical action.

ORTHODOXY AND TEMPORALITY

Existing literature in the sociology of religion has demonstrated how orthodox identity is oriented toward the past. Orthodox or conservative communities perceive their morality to be fixed or absolute and tied to doctrine or teachings established long ago (Hunter, 1983, 1991; Wuthnow 1988). These communities understand themselves “as agents of social preservation” and are often conceptualized in terms of both resistant to change and veneration of the past (Gross et al. 2011:329). Conservative Protestants, in particular, imagine themselves to be “on the defensive” against forces of modernity (Hunter 1983:131). They are oriented by the struggle to “preserve” their “religious heritage” and are often animated by narratives about the past such as the biblical basis of American society (Hunter 1983:131; Smith et al. 1998). These actors adopt a “pastoral perspective” on history, perceiving patterns of societal change as threats to morality and religiosity (Gorski and Altinordu 2008:61).

Even as “the past” is an orienting symbol for orthodox communities, there are important elements of the temporal narratives constructed by the orthodox that have received considerably less scholarly attention—namely, their relationship to the future. In constructing narratives about the threat of decline over time, orthodox communities not only describe the past—they also posit a relationship toward the future. These actors must anticipate threats and respond to them to maintain their status as orthodox. Recent cultural sociological work on the relationship between temporality and action has considered the ways that

social actors' projections about the future inform the practices in which they engage (Jerolmack 2009, 2013; Mische 2009; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). These "future projections" often take a narrative form (Mische 2009; see Polletta 2006; Wagner-Pacifci 1987), and these narratives motivate actions on the part of these actors. By considering the "projects" in which social actors engage in the service of narrative-driven goals, cultural sociologists have put "individuals' active intentions and creativity closer to the center of analysis" (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:915; see Mische 2009; Schutz 1967, 1978).

Studies on temporality and action offer a productive lens through which to interpret the actions of the orthodox. Even as "the past" plays a symbolic role in orthodox identities, these actors are centrally concerned with maintaining their practices and beliefs *in the future*. How might actors in orthodox religious communities anticipate threats to orthodoxy and engage in practices in order to maintain their identity in the future?

ORTHODOXY AND PRACTICE

The conceptualization of orthodoxy as a "project" in which actors engage aligns with the approach of scholars who have argued that religious observance "can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment" (Avishai 2008; Irby 2014; Mahmood 2005:15). Several sociological studies of the practices of the orthodox have identified discrepancies between the prescriptions of religious traditions and actual practice (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Chaves 1997; Davidman 1991; Pevey et al. 1996; Stacey and Gerard 1990). However, the practices of the orthodox are significant not only insofar as they differ from institutional prescriptions. Individuals participate in religious communities primarily in pursuit of *religious* ends. As such, their compliance with institutional prescriptions is the *mode through which* they pursue "the goal of becoming an authentic religious subject" (Avishai 2008:413).

An approach to orthodoxy centering the goals of the orthodox must consider the actions by which this identity is constructed (Edgell 2012). In general, researchers have addressed this question by describing *orthopraxy*, for example, how the observance or non-observance of explicit or "interactionally visible" religious practices serves to signal and regulate membership in an orthodox community (Avishai 2008; Mahmood 2005; Sharot 1991; Tavory 2010). As I describe below, communities also engage in less-examined regulative practices when they interpret the boundaries and substance of their beliefs. While the "rules" that structure these practices are less explicitly codified, they also play an important role in constructing orthodoxy by signaling adherence to tradition and demonstrating group knowledge (Gross 2005). These practices are especially significant to communities that endeavor to maintain orthodox identity in light of internal diversity. Though conservative Protestants are oriented around ideas about the

“self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability” of the Bible (Smith 2011:viii), they do not derive coherent, singular meanings from it. Instead, they interpret the Bible to teach contradictory things about the nature of God, revelation, the sacraments, and just about every other central Protestant tenet. Conservative Protestant communities are therefore characterized by “pervasive interpretive pluralism” (Bartkowski 1996; Bielo 2009a, 2009b; Smith 2011:x). This interpretive pluralism has resulted in substantial fragmentation both between and within denominations (Ammerman 1990; Wuthnow 1988).

Given the challenges posed by interpretive pluralism, it is necessary to account for how actors maintain the perception that they are orthodox in spite of ideological diversity. Despite interpretive pluralism, the denominational actors I consider here demonstrate ongoing commitments to the idea of orthodoxy. How, then, does a community with a wide range of interpretive practices and beliefs maintain the perception of orthodoxy?

OPERATIONALIZING ORTHODOXY

It is a central claim of this article that communities who identify as orthodox must manage ideological fragmentation and change. In contrast to dominant treatments of religious orthodoxy that focus on epistemological differences between the beliefs of the orthodox and the modern (most significantly that the orthodox hold and act on the basis of commitments to an unchanging moral authority, while “progressives” or “moderns” make use of subjective, contextual rationales), I argue for a focus on the activities engaged in by individuals that sustain the identity of being orthodox. The management of ideological positions is a primary activity of religious authority structures. Religious authorities demonstrate power through their ability to determine and enforce “correct” . . . and “incorrect” forms of belief and praxis” (Berlinerblau 2001:340; Bourdieu 1987). As I will describe, this type of regulation occurs not only as top-down mandates whereby religious elites impose rules upon lay people but also as a cultural project engaged in by practitioners of these traditions whereby they regulate and coordinate their own positions.

I draw on a study of a conservative Protestant denomination in the United States in order to demonstrate how organizational actors in one religious community imagine orthodoxy, and how this perception motivates concrete strategies for self-regulation. I present my findings in terms of three concepts: (i) how social actors in this denomination imagine orthodoxy within the context of a *future-oriented narrative* in which groups move away from truth over time, (ii) how this temporal narrative motivates *strategies for preventing movement away from beliefs* designated as “orthodox,” and (iii) attempts by denominational actors to internally *coordinate their beliefs*.

Temporal Trajectory

Orthodox communities are centrally concerned with resisting a decline from orthodoxy. This concern indicates an important temporal dimension of orthodoxy. Recent sociological work on the relationship between temporality and action has considered the ways that social actors' projections about the future inform the practices in which they engage (Jerolmack 2009, 2013; Mische 2009; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). In the case of the orthodox actors discussed here, they imagine themselves within the context of the threat of future decline and are animated by the desire to anticipate and respond to this threat.

Strategies for Obstruction

The orthodox actors I discuss here are centrally concerned with managing internal perspectives. Members of groups who perceive themselves to be orthodox are afraid that *they themselves* will, over time, become less orthodox. As such, they consciously engage in practices in order to prevent themselves from becoming less orthodox.

Coordination

Even as orthodox groups may appear externally homogeneous, there is internal diversity (as is the case with all social groups). Because orthodox communities are vested in commitments to consensus and submission to authority, they may perceive themselves to be "rendered vulnerable" by internal ideological disagreement (Berlinerblau 2001:350). Temporal perspectives such as the one discussed here motivate organizational actors with heterogeneous perspectives to coordinate their beliefs.

METHODS

I draw on an analysis of a conservative Protestant denomination in the United States. Similar to almost all major Protestant denominations, this denomination is the product of a schism (Wuthnow 1988) formed when conservative members broke away from one of the largest denominations in the United States over concerns about liberalism (most notably the issue of women's ordination). This conservative wing is now a national denomination with about 400,000 members. In addition to its other ministries, the denomination has a seminary and undergraduate college.

In order to discuss denominational perspectives on orthodoxy, I identified national *forums* in which pastors, elders, and leadership of denominational ministries (such as the denomination's undergraduate college and seminary) discuss and debate current denominational issues. I use the term "forum" to refer to environments in which denominational actors discuss and debate denominational standards. Lichterman (1999) uses the "forum" concept to describe non-strategic talk within social movements and defines forums as a quality of a group. A group

is characterized as a forum insofar as it “values critically reflective discussion about members’ interests and collective identities, apart from strategizing identity and interests to gain more members or influence. To the extent a group is a forum, members converse and learn together as an end in itself—in order to become richer participants in public life” (Lichterman 1999:104). The national forums that are created under the aegis of the denomination act as discrete cultural communities for official denominational actors where important sets of meanings about orthodoxy are created and circulated (Ammerman 1990). Within these private discursive spaces,¹ denominational actors articulate aspirations for the denomination and critique existing practices and dynamics, with the intention of improving their community. The national forums I consider include: four years of national denominational meetings and two websites used by pastors and elders to discuss and debate denominational standards. In order to identify practices that occur within these forums, I triangulate three types of data: field notes from participant observation, analysis of content and commentary on the websites, and interviews with denominational actors.

I attended two years of the national denominational meeting (2012 and 2013) and viewed video transcripts of an additional two years (2014 and 2015). At this yearly meeting, delegates (pastors and elders) from churches across the nation gather for a few days to debate issues such as valid translations of scripture and appropriate observance of communion. I observed all business sessions where official denominational stances are debated and voted on. In addition to business sessions, during the two years that I physically attended the meeting, I also attended worship services, workshops, seminars, and the exhibition hall, and I spoke with event organizers, pastors, vendors, and other denominational employees. Following participant observation, I transcribed meetings from video transcripts.

The internet is a particularly important venue for deliberation about organizational standards in this denomination. I considered two websites that serve as forums for debate among pastors and elders: an official denominational site affiliated with the denominational magazine, and a blog run by a group of pastors in the denomination. I selected these sites after surveying 10 denominational blogs. These sites were selected both because they are widely read by pastors and elders throughout the country and because the range of comments and commentary on the sites reflect multiple factions within the denomination. I made use of the webscraping software *import.io*, a web-based platform that enables users to extract website data as spreadsheets or HTML files, in order to aggregate about five years of available posts and comments from each of the sites (2010–2014). Using the crawler feature to convert the content of these two websites into a database, I aggregated 810 posts, which included several thousand comments.

¹I describe these spaces as “private” because it is assumed that participants are members of the community, rather than because they are inaccessible to outsiders. Many of these forums take place online, or in venues (such as the national denominational meeting), where non-denominational actors can access the proceedings.

In order to describe the significance of these debates within a local community, I also drew on interviews from one important forum for debates about orthodoxy—the denomination’s undergraduate college. Reformation College² is a small undergraduate college in the southeast United States. Reformation has become a symbolic battleground for debates about orthodoxy due to fears about the antagonistic relationship between religious orthodoxy and academia. Data for this analysis comes from interviews conducted with 25 individuals (15 faculty members, both current and retired, and 10 staff, administrators and trustees) in spring of 2013. Interviews with faculty, staff, and administrators were primarily conducted either at Reformation or off campus in the town where Reformation is located. In a few cases, I interviewed multiple faculty members together. I identified initial faculty interviewees through staff members and prominent alumni who identified these individuals as knowledgeable about campus dynamics. I provided these interviewees with a general introduction about my research on the denomination more broadly and expressed an interest in discussing campus dynamics and “standards” at the college. When these key informants all discussed a conflict over the institutionalization of a community belief statement, I began to identify other faculty because of their proximity to the conflict, interviewing individuals who were known to have played central roles in the conflict. I then focused on diversifying the sample of faculty, interviewing seven female faculty members and racial minorities (all of the individuals initially identified as playing central roles in the conflict were white males), seven faculty who were hired after the institutionalization of the document, and three visiting and adjunct faculty members (see [Rubin and Rubin 2005](#) for a discussion of triangulating subjects). Interviews with trustees (none of whom live in the town where Reformation is located) were primarily completed at their workplaces or over the phone. Board members were identified by recommendation and introductions from administrators (then, following initial interviews, other board members). Board of trustee interviewees were chosen because of active participation in the institutionalization of the document. Interviews with denominational actors were semi-structured and lasted between one to three hours. Almost all interviews were tape-recorded; in cases where interviews occurred spontaneously or permission to record was not obtained, handwritten notes were taken and transcribed after the interviews.

The analysis strategy used in this case study draws upon insights of grounded theory ([Glaser and Strauss, 1967](#); [Myers 2009](#); [Strauss and Corbin 1998](#)) and abductive analysis ([Timmermans and Tavory 2012](#)). Following data collection, I made use of iterative coding to code transcripts, field notes, web content, and interviews using the web-based qualitative coding application Dedoose ([Glaser and Strauss 1967](#)). I first coded interviews based on whether or not denominational actors were engaging about issues that participants understood to be matters of

²Identifying information throughout this article has been altered.

denominational orthodoxy. This allowed me to eliminate instances where individuals engaged about topics such as evangelistic outreach, personal spiritual growth, or resource concerns (such as the denomination's budget). I then used an open coding scheme in order to identify actions and rhetoric I observed in these interactions. In addition to the codes I eventually focused on, I also developed codes about different ideological fault lines in the denomination, beliefs about the denomination's identity, and dynamics within the denomination (consensus, conflict, etc.). I then engaged in secondary, selective coding to refine themes and to explore connections between these themes and existing sociological theory about orthodoxy. In this second-order analysis, I was able to group the orthodoxy codes into three categories: first, those that contextualized orthodoxy concerns within a narrative about decline over time; second, those that reflected strategies engage in (or described) on behalf of orthodoxy; and third, those instances where denominational actors engaged in efforts to manage ideological diversity.

ORTHODOXY IN AN AMERICAN PROTESTANT DENOMINATION

The denomination I examine is centrally concerned with strict fidelity to scripture and to denominational confessional statements. In denominational forums, pastors and elders debate topics such as the appropriate observance of communion, valid interpretations of the scriptures, and the role of women in the church. Positions adopted on these issues are understood to be integral to guarding the integrity of the denominational confessional statement and to maintaining fidelity to scripture.

Temporal Trajectory

Pastors, elders, and other denominational actors (such as seminarians, professors at the denominational college, and ministry workers in the denominational agencies) devote considerable attention to addressing the threat of the decline from orthodoxy. These individuals often describe themselves as resisting a large-scale movement away from biblical truths. But it is not only the threat of external secular forces (like legal or cultural impositions on their religious liberty) that denominational members fear (Hunter 1983; Smith et al. 1998). Rather, they characterize human nature in general as “drifting” away from truth and are highly concerned about their own tendencies to move away from stable truths over time.

Denominational actors often invoke cautionary tales about other organizations—such as the denomination from which they broke away or formerly religious seminaries and colleges—that once held orthodox, biblical beliefs, but fell victim to secularizing impulses over time. These references are meant to demonstrate the threat facing the orthodox. Though these organizations had at one point held similar biblical views, they fell victim to the temptation to, in the words of one denominational official, “be up with the times” rather than remain

faithful to timeless truths. These cases are used to demonstrate the importance of vigilance. It is often implied that without constant attention there will be a gradual movement away from their orthodox commitments.

In discussions about orthodoxy within the denomination, pastors, elders, and other individuals in denominational roles often appeal to the image of the “slippery slope.” This metaphor is used to describe a trajectory whereby laxness on smaller issues will lead to further concessions and the eventual loss of central value commitments. Arguments about the “slippery slope” are characteristically future-oriented. Denominational actors use this image to contextualize the significance of current decisions by casting them in light of future repercussions. At national denominational meeting business sessions, pastors and elders frequently make arguments by asserting that “if we continue to vote in x manner” then “it won’t be long before y” (e.g., “If we allow women into the diaconate, we will shortly be ordaining women to serve as elders or pastors”). At the denominational undergraduate college, one professor described a conflict in her local congregation in order to illustrate the slippery slope concern. Some individuals in the church had complained when an entire family (husband, wife, and children) took up the collection plate rather than just the man. Church members felt that it was important to prohibit this practice because they viewed it as a step toward the destruction of male headship in the church. They suggested that allowing such practices would eventually lead toward permissiveness of women in leadership roles such as elders.

In other instances, concerns about preserving orthodoxy around male-only ordination manifested in broader fears about “feminism.” Faculty members at the denomination’s undergraduate college shared experiences wherein they had been censured because they had used gender-neutral language in their academic writing. One faculty member (who is also an elder in the denomination) hypothesized that this occurred “because at this point there are so many pastors who have worries that this is driven by a kind of egalitarian, feminist kind of agenda,” and because the board of the college is concerned that the use of gender-neutral language at the college will lead to a “creeping effect” where other values of secular academia will become norms. Instances such as these demonstrate the function of a temporal narrative—by invoking the image of the slippery slope, denominational actors are able to continually contextualize actions within a broader narrative about the long-term threats to orthodoxy.

Strategies for Obstruction

In articulating a narrative about the “drift” from orthodoxy, organizational actors are centrally concerned with self-regulation. The frequently made arguments about “drift” are often accompanied by claims about the responsibility of the denomination to serve as a system for accountability. One pastor of a large urban church who expressed frustration about many of the dynamics in the

denomination (in particular, the frequent in-fighting between pastors and elders) explained his continued engagement in this way:

If I'm behaving immorally or teaching things way outside the fray of core Christian theology . . . there's a sense in which I want to be protected against myself. . . . I want people to come after me if I'm going astray in a given area that ultimately they believe is damaging to people, and if I'm seeing things correctly, hopefully I'll see what's damaging to people also. . . . And so, you definitely want an organization that helps you along those lines.

Explained another professor at the college: "I chose to be within the denomination and place myself under its authority because I think that's good for me, as a brake on . . . stepping outside the lines too far."

The belief that it is the responsibility of the denomination to hold members accountable animates denominational actors to engage in strategies to preserve orthodoxy. I describe two such strategies: (a) "tethering" themselves to perspectives that are symbolically identified with denominational orthodoxy and (b) articulating a spectrum of standards for individuals based on their perceived proximity to the center of the denomination.

Tethering. Leaders in the denomination often stress the importance of tensions within the organization for maintaining denominational standards. In an open letter written by older members of the denomination to up-and-coming leaders (printed on the denominational website), the authors described the conflict between strong conservatives and others as a "necessary tension." This idea that conflict plays a role in the maintenance of standards is echoed often in denominational forums, and a great deal of attention is given during national denominational meetings about how to manage these "necessary" internal conflicts. However, most frequently, it is those who identify as the most conservative in the denomination who are considered to be actively upholding orthodoxy.

In several instances, denominational actors affirmed the role of denominational members who were more conservative than themselves. For example, a board member of the denominational undergraduate college described the task of the college's president, saying, "He has to pick deans and vice-presidents who probably are more conservative on a whole host of issues, even than he is. . . . I mean, if he's going to stem that natural tide, that drift from the right to the left." Other denominational actors echoed the idea that the most conservative members of the denomination would help them preserve central commitments of the denomination from changing in the future—even as they often did not agree with these individuals.

In conversations at the national meeting and denominational college and in online forums, denominational actors often described the most conservative members of the denomination as overly dogmatic and "mean-spirited" but acknowledged that they continued to allow them to have a public platform because they felt that tethering themselves to these individuals would serve to regulate

their own perspectives, preventing the drift from orthodoxy. A professor at the undergraduate college explained:

The truly, truly dyed-in-the-wool sort of extremists in the denomination who wouldn't let women even help take up an offering, who perhaps wouldn't want women to vote in church meetings because their husband is head of the household and votes for them, you know, the minority who are back there still, [they] seem to sometimes be deferred to more than they should be because the rest of us really don't want to slide into heresy—or be liberal—and maybe their protests, and their condemnations arouse those fears in the rest of us. So it's deferring to the one with the most scruples in the group. . . . And it's not negative. I mean it's a helpful [restraint].

Others lamented the dynamic of particular denominational forums—such as one particularly active blog—that seemed to be dominated by the most extreme voices, insisting that the opinions of these individuals were not representative of the “broad middle” of the denomination. Even as they described this blog and others similar to it as mean-spirited (and as other blogs have been started to encourage more charitable dialogue), critics of the more conservative online forums make certain to note that they would “rather err on the side of being too conservative than on the side of being too [permissive].” Although they disagreed with the aggressive discourse in these forums, they still felt that they played an important role in identifying key issues of orthodoxy.³

A spectrum of standards. Denominational actors also demonstrate concerns about orthodoxy by articulating different standards for individuals based on their perceived proximity to the center of the denomination. When one elder at a 2013 national meeting workshop tentatively expressed concerns that women in the denomination were not being encouraged to demonstrate leadership within their congregations, he caveated his claims by noting that he is not “famous” enough within the denomination for people to care about his stance on the issue. He implied that members of the denomination that had a more public persona did not have the same kind of freedom to take stances like the one he was about to share. This man expressed a commonly shared belief that individuals who are the public face of the denomination (such as the men who pastor very large churches or who write books), are judged more harshly than those who are not. These more prominent individuals are likely to be publicly critiqued for not being orthodox enough and are often the subject of discussion on denominational blogs. In another instance, an assistant pastor shared frustrations about having to defend the head pastor of his church (one of the most prominent in the denomination) from “ridiculous” charges in ecclesial court and the conservative blogs that “eat [this popular pastor] for breakfast about every other week.”

³Conservative pastors and elders often seem to enjoy power in the denomination because they are the most likely to initiate debates about orthodoxy concerns. They are also more likely to mobilize denominational resources in the name of preserving orthodoxy—for instance, they are the most likely to take advantage of organizational procedures such as bringing charges against other pastors for suspected heresy (Ammerman 1990).

At the denominational college, a venue that serves as an important battleground over orthodoxy due to fears about the antagonistic relationship between religious orthodoxy and academia, there has been a long-raging conflict about the beliefs required of employees. In determining the acceptable latitude of an employee's theological beliefs, administrators and board members have considered the individual's position within the organization. Faculty members who teach in departments such as the hard sciences, mathematics, or music have been granted more leeway than those who teach in the humanities or theology departments because it is presumed that faculty in these departments will be more likely to have to engage with students on subjects that are touchstones of denominational orthodoxy. A board member explained, "We have a biologist who doesn't believe in [the denomination's position on baptism]. But we would probably never hire someone in our biblical studies and theology department that didn't believe [that]." Similarly, adjuncts and visiting faculty members who are less involved in the life of the college were given substantially more leeway in their theological views. One casual faculty member explained that she had been told outright that her views would disqualify her from a more permanent position.

In interviews, it was also suggested that women are excluded from central roles at the college because of concerns about orthodoxy even though the denomination does not prohibit women from holding non-ordained leadership roles. One professor related a story about a faculty meeting after the president of the college retired. When a member of the college's board of trustees led a prayer for "the man who will lead us next," a female faculty member asked, "So you're saying that this will definitely be a man?" The board backtracked, responding that this was not necessarily the case, but many faculty members interpreted this to mean that a male president was the only possible option. Likewise, several individuals explained that the college would never entertain a female candidate in the theology department. In both these instances, it was suggested that while the college desires to increase the numbers of women working at Reformation, hiring women for these positions would appear to be a compromise that would lead to future laxness regarding male leadership in the church.

Coordination

In public conversations about orthodoxy, denominational actors often discuss the importance of unity, which would better enable the denomination to pursue shared goals such as evangelism. Of course, unity is often threatened by conflicting theological perspectives, and denominational leaders dedicate significant attention to determining fault lines within the denomination, categorizing conflicts as occurring between "doctrinalists," "pietists," and "culturalists," or between the younger and older generations, or between "conservatives" and "progressives." In denomination-wide conversations, pastors and elders often suggest that the ideological diversity in the denomination is something to be actively managed and coordinated. Official forums—such as a recent "Civil Conversations" initiative and a part of the denominational website titled "Deliberating Together"—aim to

mediate discussions around contentious issues between pastors and elders. Organizers of national and regional denominational meetings now regularly schedule annual retreats and public discussions between pastors with opposing viewpoints in order to deliberate about “how to live with our differences” and to “maintain our unity.” These forums provide opportunities for participants to discuss how to manage internal tensions in such a way as to maintain goodwill within the denomination.

Coordination in the service of “maintaining unity” takes a variety of forms. In addition to targeted initiatives and public conversations, denominational actors regularly engage in behaviors intended to manage and move past internal dissent and to maintain the perception that their viewpoints are singular and stable in spite of internal diversity. I describe two specific coordination behaviors: (a) submission by denominational actors to official denominational positions with which they disagree and (b) circumscribing specific contexts and rules for tolerating ideological diversity.

Submission. Issues determined to have significance for denominational orthodoxy are hotly debated in denominational forums. Conflict plays an important role in circumscribing denominational standards, and denominational actors have to actively address how to maintain consensus following denominational debates. Once debates culminate in official denominational stances at the national meeting, denominational actors on the losing side of those debates must submit to these stances. This requires work on the part of those holding the minority position who, because of their commitment to authentic ideological consensus, are forced to negotiate how to accept the dominant position in good conscience. It also requires work on the part of the majority who must determine how to reincorporate the minority as authentically submitting to the dominant view.

Denominational actors often refer to their broader commitment to the denomination in order to explain their willingness to suppress viewpoints that are in disagreement with official denominational positions. One professor at the denominational college explained the decision she had made to sign the college belief statement in spite of her disagreement with some of the views in the statement, saying, “It was just so obvious to me that God was calling me to this position that I was willing to submit to that.” She also explained that when she arrived at the college she “found out that when people were really honest they don’t wholeheartedly agree to those standards that they signed. And that’s ok—they’re submitting to their authorities, and sometimes we have to do that.” She did not interpret this to mean that the professors at the college were dissembling in signing the college belief statement. Rather, she and other professors at the college view the decision to sign the document as a demonstration of their shared concern with the preservation of orthodoxy. In several other instances, individuals in official denominational positions expressed private opinions that they were unwilling to express in denominational settings as a result of their commitments to “maintaining unity.” In one conversation with a pastor encountered at the national meeting, he expressed sympathy with arguments for female

ordination but explained that he would never talk publicly about this because of his commitment to “the peace of the denomination.”

Denominational actors also manage and move past internal dissent by acknowledging the significance of the act of submission. Following contentious debates, pastors often publicly affirm the importance of vigorous debate and express respect for the challenge that minority parties face in submitting to the denominational decisions they opposed. In one contentious debate on the denominational website about appropriate observance of communion, a pastor reminded participants, “Those who [are opposed to the denominational position] are not being divisive, contentious, subversive, rebellious, or revolutionary. They are being submissive in humility, accepting the constraints put on them, even if it means doing something they think is wrong.” His words were intended to remind those involved in the debate to be sensitive to the work that those who disagreed with the official denominational stance on communion were doing in order to submit to the denomination’s stance.

Willingness to submit to denominational positions with which they do not agree is often described as testament to these men’s character. In several instances at the national meetings, I observed pastors and elders arguing in support of men who had formally reported personal opposition to doctrinal positions (which they had already agreed not to teach). These men were described as men of integrity, because they were willing to hold themselves accountable to the broader denomination by volunteering that they held nonsanctioned positions.⁴ After a particular communion practice was forbidden, several individuals at the 2015 national meeting rose in support of a man who had formally reported his disagreement. A senior pastor who worked with the man in question stood to assure the assembly by saying, “Over the 5 years that I have known him and have led this church . . . this gentleman . . . has been a great contributor in many, many ways to our church, a great proponent of the gospel . . . and I appreciate the fact that he was willing to state this is something I struggle with.” Another elder argued, “This is an example of someone who, in good conscience, is coming before the assembly and saying ‘I have this position, and you all need to know this, but I’m going to submit myself to the will of this denomination, not teach it, not practice it.’”

Circumscribing space for difference. Though individuals in the denomination engage in concerted efforts to align themselves with official stances, the denomination does sustain space for some dissent and questioning. Even as denominational actors maintain the importance of the prohibition against teaching or practicing nonsanctioned views, they do suggest that it is acceptable to discuss doubts about denominational commitments within private arenas. For instance, a long-time professor at the denominational college stated,

⁴This is only the case for exceptions that are determined to be minor.

Just about any kind of issue is explored in the faculty lounge in a collegial give and take—a casual, informal discussion exploring this or that aspect of something. But if a number of faculty members were to take out an ad in the newspaper saying, “We take this stand on this issue contrary to the college’s stand,” that would get the attention of a lot of people. . . . I think one of them is . . . a public, formal assertion of a belief, [while] the other would be an informal exploration of a belief. There’s an important difference between exploration and assertion.

By this, this professor did not mean to imply that these faculty members held nonorthodox positions. He stressed the faculty’s concern with orthodoxy at several points in the interview. Rather, he suggested that these individuals had freedom to explore contrary positions in private arenas *because* they were already publicly committed to denominational positions. Similarly, a pastor in a large city described the network of pastors with whom he has close relationships.

It’s a safe place to dissent from positions . . . [We have] far better theological conversations because you are safe to color outside the lines. [But] people are [also] safe to challenge you in a really healthy, wonderful way, saying, “Ah, you may be coloring outside the lines on that one. You might want to think about that one again.”

Online forums also serve as spaces wherein pastors and elders investigate controversial views. Though these spaces are contentious as they are used by pastors from all over the country, they are also viewed as spaces for exploration. One of the most trafficked and commented-on posts on a denominational blog in the past several years was a 2013 post exploring whether a split would be good for the denomination. Though some dismissed the suggestion, others applauded the “loving” and “thoughtful” tone of the author and his willingness to broach a contentious topic. Similarly, in 2012, the same blog hosted a conversation with a pastor who had initiated a conversation about the issue of female deacons. He explained that he had initiated this conversation before “doing something overtly political” like attempting to alter the denomination’s constitution, explaining, “I’m seeking to address a tough issue in a biblically faithful and winsome way.”

In general, denominational actors entertain a diversity of ideological positions in instances where individuals acknowledge overarching commitments to orthodoxy. This often means that denominational actors invoke commitments to orthodoxy in instances where they explore contrary positions. In one workshop about gender dynamics at the national denominational meeting in 2013, several individuals made critical observations about the current role of women in the denomination. These individuals (most of whom were themselves women) noted that women are often “sidelined” in the church. One woman complained that despite constant exhortations from leaders about how important women are in the church, “Women are sidelined to the Jackie O. mentality, where she was the beautiful woman on his arm.” However, in making these criticisms about the denomination, all of the individuals involved in the conversation made clear to note that they believed in “complementarian” rather than “egalitarian” relationships between men and women. One elder began his statement by explaining

that he was a “very conservative guy,” but then went on to argue that the Bible is one of the most progressive books ever written and that it was a serious concern to not have women step up in leadership roles and be visible in tasks such as reading scripture from the stage. He argued, “If we’re not teaching this from the pulpit because we’re scared that women will believe it, that’s a problem.” Voicing their concerns by first acknowledging their commitment to symbols of denominational orthodoxy, these individuals were able to voice dissent without arousing fears about liberalism or a desire to break down orthodox boundaries.

DISCUSSION

Recent cultural sociological work on the relationship between temporality and action has considered the ways that social actors’ projections about the future inform the practices in which they engage (Jerolmack 2009, 2013; Mische 2009; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). I describe denominational actors’ understanding of “orthodoxy” in terms of a temporal narrative, and the resultant attempts to maintain orthodoxy as a type of “project” (Polletta 2006; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013; Wagner-Pacifiçi 1987). By considering the project in which denominational actors engage, this research is aligned with Avishai’s argument that participation in religious communities should be understood as a “path to achieving orthodox subjecthood” (2008:410; see also Tavory and Eliasoph 2013; Mische 2009; Schutz 1967, 1978). By engaging with one another on issues of denominational orthodoxy, these actors “do” religion, actively constructing and enacting their orthodox identity (Avishai 2008).

These actors engage in a range of actions on behalf of orthodoxy—including strategies intended to preserve orthodoxy in the future (such as “tethering” themselves to actors symbolically identified with denominational orthodoxy), as well as the management of ideological diversity. These actions indicate an important dimension of ideological identities—the regulative practices engaged in by actors in order to preserve them over time. By redirecting attention from the relationship of the orthodox to the past (Gross et al. 2011; Hunter 1983, 1991; Wuthnow 1988), I demonstrate how members of one Protestant denomination engage in behaviors that are motivated by a desire to maintain orthodoxy in the future. Like many conservative Protestants, the denominational actors I consider are motivated by beliefs about human sin and the tendency to move away from eternal truth over time. When these actors invoke images of doctrinal “drift” and the “slippery slope,” they do so to frame current decisions in light of future repercussions. These denominational actors also highlight the centrality of self-regulation to orthodox identity. Existing conceptualizations of religious orthodoxy emphasize the compulsory power of religious organizations—they hold power because they control means of symbolic and intellectual production and can impose beliefs upon lay people (Berlinerblau 2001; Bourdieu 1987). However, as the behaviors of these denominational actors indicate, individuals

who play a role in the creation of religious orthodoxy may also contribute to the perception of orthodoxy by engaging in behaviors that limit their own freedom. These actions have the further effect of reifying the perception that the denomination is moored to unchanging truths—even if the particular concerns of the denomination change over time.⁵

Therefore, this study also provides insight into the cultural rules and strategies by which orthodoxy is constructed and reified within a religious community. The denominational actors I consider actively construct orthodoxy by connecting it to symbolically central concepts—such as the identity of conservatism (Brittain and McKinnon 2011; Chaves 1997). The manner in which these actors privilege conservatism indicates the power of a generalized organizational identity. Even as many of the actors I describe frequently find themselves in disagreement with some of the most conservative members of the denomination, they are able to imagine these individuals in terms of their role in the long-term project of denominational orthodoxy rather than their positions on discrete issues. Denominational actors also act in the interest of the project of denominational orthodoxy by enforcing standards based on imagined centers of denominational power (Shils 1997). The variability in how such standards are imagined and implemented indicates another means by which denominational actors enact commitments to orthodoxy. Enacting commitments in this way serves to construct orthodoxy and denominational power as interrelated.

I argue here that temporal narratives may enable organizational actors with different perspectives to coordinate action in ways that sustain the perception of orthodoxy. Tavorly and Eliasoph (2013) discuss modes of “future making.” Central to their argument is the idea that all interactions involve a relationship to the future—in order for human actors to sustain interactions, and to “make sense of action together,” they must coordinate their futures (2013:908). This coordination does not require individuals to agree about everything. As Jerolmack has demonstrated, “multiple trajectories can coexist in interaction as long as both actors can productively (mis)understand each other’s projects” (Jerolmack 2009, 2013; Tavorly and Eliasoph 2013:924). In the case of the orthodox community discussed here, actors engage in coordination to move past internal dissent in ways that enable them to maintain the self-perception of orthodoxy. The project of orthodoxy is constructed through the active managing of internal ideological diversity. Ideological heterogeneity—and as a result, debate and compromise—is a characteristic of all social groups. In order to maintain the “project” of orthodoxy, denominational actors work not only to bring their views into

⁵This, of course, does not mean that these actors are necessarily successful in preventing shifts in belief (Mische 2009). As Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) have demonstrated, institutional actors can and do shift dominant institutional logics through language that draws on central symbols of a tradition. However, by engaging in actions intended to preserve orthodoxy, the denominational actors I consider do reinforce their self-perception of stability, and their identity as an orthodox group.

alignment with one another, but also to determine the amount of ideological diversity that can be sustained while preserving central value commitments (Ammerman 1990), and how to prevent this ideological diversity from compromising central symbolic commitments over the long term. Denominational actors achieve ongoing unity by contextualizing submission to official organizational stances within broader commitments to the denomination and by circumscribing particular contexts and rules for articulating questions or dissent. By engaging in questioning, or “coloring outside the lines” offstage (such as in private settings with other pastors or elders, rather than in public), denominational actors underscore the importance of orthodox commitments for organizing their community over the long term. Additionally, the perception that there are “safe spaces” where denominational actors can explore nonsanctioned positions serves to strengthen the belief that denominational actors can both authentically submit to the denomination and avoid the threat of the “slippery slope.”

Denominational norms about how to engage in dissent and questioning delineate how actors can explore controversial ideas while remaining committed to the project of orthodoxy. Chaves (1997) discusses the politics around women’s ordination in fundamentalist and evangelical churches. Though rejection of women’s ordination has become an important symbol of the antiliberal identity, this does not mean that women are consistently excluded from ministry. Often women do perform tasks and roles reserved for congregational leaders. They are able to do so within contexts where these tasks and roles are not identified with struggles for gender equality. Likewise, the denominational actors I consider are capable of raising dissenting positions as long as they do not do so in a manner that suggests that this dissent is motivated by progressivism, or a desire to dismantle orthodox commitments. By voicing critiques and questions about denominational issues in language that acknowledges overriding commitments to orthodoxy, denominational actors affirm their shared cultural identity and underscore the importance of the shared project of maintaining orthodoxy.

A model of orthodoxy that is structured around the performance of activities that sustain the perception of this identity has potential value beyond the study of religion. Orthodoxy—and related concepts such as heterodoxy and heresy—are not, in their essence, religious phenomena. The terms are most closely associated with religious authority “because of the religious institution’s central position in governing the discourses of a particular historical moment” (Berlinerblau 2001; Zito 1983:126). However, the terms have broader reaching implications. Insofar as organizations imagine themselves to have enduring commitments to be preserved over time, the concept of orthodoxy developed here might be used productively to interpret the activities that organizations and institutions engage in on behalf of central commitments and symbols. The concept of “orthodoxy” has, of course, been used outside of religious contexts to explore organizations’ interests in preserving symbolically central traits (see, for instance, literature on professional purity, identity in the social movements literature, and empirical studies that make use of the Bourdieusian orthodox/heterodox distinction).

Future research might consider not only which traits are imagined as symbolically central but also focus more specifically on how these communities engage in future-oriented projects, theorizing, anticipating and responding to current issues in light of perceived future threats to organizational identity.

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