Chapter 12
Religion and Social Solidarity

A Pragmatist Approach

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Religion and Solidarity: The Neo-Tocquevillian Synthesis

Classical sociology gave religion a strong role as social integrator. Sociology's first and foremost challenge, the problem of social order in a modern society, arose from the assumption that religious commitment was inevitably in decline. What force would strengthen social togetherness in a post-religious world? Powerful criticisms of the secularization thesis (Casanova 1994), not to mention daily news headlines, ushered in the observation, which has since become routine, that religious identity and practice still do play roles in public life around the globe. They promote a variety of collective, civic acts, from charitable volunteering (Wuthnow 1991; Baggett 2000) to broad-scale social welfare assistance (Davis and Robinson 2012), to risky anti-war protest (Nepstad 2004). How should we think of religion as a basis for social solidarity today?

Different approaches answer the question with different understandings of "religion" and "social solidarity." One common approach selectively adopts Alexis de Tocqueville's oft-repeated arguments about American democracy (*Democracy in America,* 1969 [1835]). De Tocqueville argued that voluntary associations, rather than fragmenting the citizenry, cultivated in American citizens a willingness to take political life as well as other citizens seriously and to work together across different interests. In this way, de Tocqueville supposed that over time associations strengthened not only American democracy but cohesiveness or social solidarity, by giving citizens practice in interacting with other citizens and by broadening their sense of engagement in a larger, common project as a public "we." Associations might play weaker or different roles in other democracies; in the USA they were a crucial counterbalance to the habit of Americans of withdrawing from that larger "we" into their small circles of friends and family. Many US scholars have tended to read de Tocqueville's complex arguments selectively, simplifying them in ways that

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complement the needs of empirical researchers (Putnam 2000; Verba et al. 1995; see Berman 1997).

The approach that I will call the "neo-Tocquevillian synthesis" treats social solidarity as an aggregate of individual and collective, "pro-social" acts. In practice, this often means counting voluntary, face-to-face associations, voluntary group memberships, or discrete acts of charitable volunteering or, sometimes, political participation. The thinking is that if associations, memberships or acts of participation in public life are increasing, then solidarity is increasing—if we assume that these groups and acts have some pro-social purpose; a decrease in the count implies the opposite. In the past two decades the neo-Tocquevillian version of the social capital concept (Putnam 1993, 1995, 2000; but see Edwards and Foley 1997) has become a prominent tool for researching voluntary associations and ties. Treating solidarity in terms of voluntary acts of participation that can be counted, it complements research on cross-national data sets that can tell us whether or not religiously sponsored associations contribute a lot or only a little to social solidarity, understood in this neo-Tocquevillian vein.

The neo-Tocquevillian synthesis assimilates currently common understandings about religion. In the past two decades, sociologists (Warner 1993) have come to see religion as a flexible, multi-vocal resource for diverse group solidarities and collective identities, rather than as an overarching "sacred canopy" of meaning, or a guarantor of societal integration, as older views had it (Berger 1967). From this more recent point of view, we expect to find religion's contribution to social solidarity working at the level of small groups or organizations and not society as a whole. We can tally up "religious social capital" (Smidt 2003) as the sum total of religious group memberships or acts of participation in groups that call themselves religious. Like the older sociological view of religion as a sacred canopy, this newer understanding depends on what I will call the "unitary actor model" of religion. According to this model, individuals and groups either are or are not religious, all the time.

Studying religion and social solidarity by means of the neo-Tocquevillian synthesis is a relatively clean, yet risky, research strategy. I would argue that this strategy has become an increasingly inadequate way to understand religion's relation to social togetherness in complex, diverse, socially unequal societies. The neo-Tocquevillian synthesis can produce rough overviews of religious associational life and that is useful for some purposes. As a perspective on religion and social solidarity it also has limits. After reviewing those limits—particularly the problematic assumptions about religious actors in the neo-Tocquevillian synthesis—I propose an alternative, "pragmatist" approach to religion that works better for understanding religion's relation to social solidarity. A case of voluntary, civic action by a church-sponsored organization that advocates for homeless people's needs in a large US city will illustrate the benefits of the pragmatist approach. The case will clarify why we need a conceptual alternative that shows how, if at all, religion plays a part in local acts of solidarity.

Troubles with the Neo-Tocquevillian Synthesis

The Unitary Actor Model of Religion

Designating individuals or groups as religious or not religious, as neo-Tocquevillians have usually done, depends on a unitary actor model of religion.[1] Its guiding assumption is that when religious identity or sensibility is manifest at all, it is not substantially affected by the setting. Religious people, or groups, are always being religious. The unitary actor model is easy to take for granted partly because many people, especially Christians, tend to understand religion as an identity-pervading belief (Neitz 2004), deeply lodged in the self. Typical research practice designates actors as either religious or not religious on the basis of affiliations they name in response to survey questions, or affiliations they carry in contexts other than the one under study. Such research goes on to correlate the presumed religious beliefs or motives of the actors with actions of interest. Invoking the unitary actor model, research ends up assuming that the actors we researchers have designated as "religious" are acting on religious beliefs continuously. Yet everyday life offers many examples of people—clergy as well as laity—who express religious sentiments in different ways in different social circles, and who express it in some settings but not others. Sociological research has tended to neglect this variation until very recently.

A brief example from the case developed below helps illustrate the problem. In a large US city, 60 community advocates, clergy people, and volunteers met over breakfast to trade ideas on what to do about homelessness in their urban neighborhood. The breakfast was hosted by an association called the Caring Embrace of the Homeless and Poor (CE) which was sponsored by a Protestant church. Its participants included Christian clergy, church volunteers, and religious and secular social activists. The breakfast meeting opened with a welcome to "religious and non-religious" people, followed by a short prayer to an unnamed divinity. Some speakers embraced religious commitments, others criticized religious ideas or people. Some participants were ordained clergy, but it would have been hard to tell purely on the basis of what they said. Were they necessarily religious actors anyway? Should we categorize this as a religiously inspired gathering?

We can find the unitary actor model continually reappearing in the sociology of religion. The privatization thesis that became the current consensus about religion (Lichterman and Potts 2009) at least implicitly if not explicitly depended on a unitary religious self as a lynchpin of moral order. In one version (Parsons 1967, especially pp. 418–421), stable and private religious selves promoted pro-social values; in the more pessimistic view (Berger 1967), modern society's "sacred canopy" of religion was fraying in the glare of modern scientific thinking, voluntarism, and role segmentation. Neither view would sensitize observers to the existence of variety in an individual's or organization's religious identity in different situations. A more

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[1] For a fuller development of this argument, with additional empirical material beyond the case in this essay, see Lichterman (2012b).

recent paradigm of American religion research (Warner 1993) dropped the notion of religion as society's canopy of ultimate meanings and argued that different religious traditions facilitate group empowerment in a pluralistic, fragmented world (Roof 1998; see Luckmann 1967). Change in religious identity from setting to setting still flew under an intellectual radar more attuned to religion as a force for group if not societal integration.

Very recent moves to highlight everyday practices of religion have taken more interest in the ways an individual's or group's religious expression may vary by context or be ambiguous, as in the case of the convocation on homelessness pictured above (Ammerman 2003, 2007; Bender 2003). When contrasted with earlier research on similar topics, these new studies clarify the dangers that result when we consider religious identity as "a singular guiding 'core' that shapes how others respond to us and how we guide our own behavior" (Ammerman 2003, p. 209). Older studies of conservative social movements of women, for instance, imply that a continuous sense of religious self is present across different settings, from national conferences to local church settings, to private interviews (Klatch 1987, pp. 20–31; Press and Cole 1999). In contrast, very recent research on pro-life activists shows that the setting of an abortion protest action can carry religious and/or non-religious meanings for participants who identify religiously in other settings; the action does not rest on a single sense of religious self (Munson 2007).

Unitary actor assumptions in studies of religious groups also at the very least encourage a soft form of "groupism," a tendency to attribute to members of a religiously identified organization the same shared religious sensibilities and identities. As Brubaker conceives it, groupism is the tendency to take "internally homogenous, externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life" and the main actors in social conflicts (2002, p. 164). For one example of this tendency, a prominent study of American local activists generalized that "religious commitments to community caring, family well-being, and social justice inspire and sustain political participation" in citizen's organizations that fight for better schools and more job opportunities (Warren 2001b, p. 4). The study claimed that those religious commitments were shared by clergy and lay members of congregations that supported these citizens' initiatives (191–210). One could infer that these citizen's organizations were pervaded by a shared theology and uniform religiosity. Yet, Warren's study also shows along the way how religiously based, local citizen advocacy must juggle overlapping social identities, especially ethnic identities, that inhibit solidarity based on religious commonalities.

In contrast, other research on citizen organizations shows how local meetings with municipal leaders become powerful forums for "identity work." Instead of "compartmentalizing themselves into a 'secular self' enacted in other settings", participants integrate secular and religious identities (Wood 2002, p. 167). This remarkable observation on the power of settings comes with the quiet assumption that the prayer at these meetings "roots political work in the shared faith commitments of participants." This assumption of group homogeneity may be difficult to leave aside entirely in social research, but again, we can ask more about how religion promotes solidarity if we stop assuming that unchanging religious motives are shared by everyone under study.

Multiple Acts of Solidarity: A Closer Look
at the Meanings of Volunteering

The neo-Tocquevillian synthesis highlights activity in voluntary associations as a society's means to maintaining or strengthening solidarity. It is important to keep in mind, though, that voluntary activity can be structured in widely different ways, with different meanings and potentially different contributions to social togetherness. Let us take the USA as one locus of examples.

Many Americans say they benefit society by "volunteering." A half-century ago, Americans thought of "volunteering" as membership in a local association whose members routinely carried out charitable activities that ordinary citizens could plan, such as raising money for a hospital or a school or visiting the sick (Wuthnow 1998). Some of these associations belonged to the kind of self-organizing, national federations that might lead some local members to develop a broader view of national society (Skocpol and Fiorina 1999).

While this "club"-style volunteering certainly still exists (Eckstein 2001), when Americans speak of "volunteering" today, they often have in mind "hands-on," task-oriented and unpaid acts that serve some charitable purpose and involve short-term, scheduled commitments. They imagine serving homeless people dinner once a week for two hours, or acting as a summer camp counsellor for several hours a week in a program for low-income children (Lichterman 2005, 2006). They fill volunteer slots, carrying out tasks under the management of social service professionals. This "plug-in" volunteering (Lichterman 2006; Eliasoph 2011) is currently one of the most popular forms of voluntary participation in the USA, and one of very few forms of participation found to be growing, not declining, at the turn of the century (Putnam 2000). Americans currently tend to think of it as the act of social solidarity *par excellence* because they consider it apolitical and hence non-divisive, and because they think this kind of volunteering expresses sincere caring "from the heart." Americans tend to disregard the organized planning and administrative oversight that makes plug-in volunteering possible (Wuthnow 1991, 1998; Eliasoph 1998; Lichterman 2005). American religious congregations sponsor a lot of plug-in volunteering and some argue that religious congregations are particularly well suited to host it (Chaves 2004).

Individual choice-driven, temporary voluntary action is not unique to the USA. It also is an important form of participation for young people in Belgium and the Netherlands (Hustinx et al. 2012).[2] In the USA too, individual-driven, choice-enhancing participation continues to compete with other, more group-centered forms of voluntary action, inside as well as outside the arena of groups we might call "po-

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[2] Different studies (for instance, Hustinx et al. 2012; Lichterman 2006; Eliasoph 2011) have identified individual choice-driven volunteering with somewhat different examples. They are not all exactly the "plug-in volunteering" illustrated in US examples by volunteers who sign up for short shifts of voluntary work once a week under the direction of a volunteer recruiter. They are similar enough to warrant being considered together for this discussion's purposes, especially when compared to club-style or "collectivistic" (Eckstein 2001) volunteering.

litical" (Lichterman 2005). Highly personalized forms of participation in political and religious groups have become widespread since the 1960s in a variety of other societies (Lichterman 1996; Juris and Pleyers 2009; Melucci 1989; Mische 2008). Though different in various ways, they share with plug-in volunteering a focus on individual choice.

Compared with clubs in national federations, plug-in volunteering results in fewer projects of ordinary citizens collectively organizing themselves since it relies on expert management. Whether or not the club-style of volunteering represents a stronger act of social solidarity than the task-oriented one is at least partly a matter of moral or political viewpoints.[3] Empirically, it is safe to say that plug-in volunteering is a very distinct form of contributing to social solidarity, and is not universally widespread. While common in the Low Countries among the college students that Hustinx and colleagues studied, it might still confound expectations among members of the same demographic in Germany, who are used to volunteering financed and regulated by government through the *freiwillige Soziale Jahr* program (Kaiser 2007). Treating any single form of voluntary action as a prime indicator of social solidarity may short-circuit our understanding of cross-national differences in religion's contribution to social solidarity, if by solidarity we mean a mutual regard among socially unequal or culturally diverse groups that results from intentional acts.

Despite its limitations, the Tocquevillian synthesis can produce worthwhile research. If our goal is mainly to correlate types of religion or religious institutions and types or rates of voluntary action, then the neo-Tocquevillian synthesis does the job. It may suggest hypotheses regarding religious influence on associational life or on solidarity that deserve further research. We simply cannot use it to say a lot about how religion relates to acts of social solidarity or what religion means for people who share those acts, whichever way we discern the presence of religion. These questions benefit from an alternative framework that detaches religion from unitary actors and uses a larger theoretical category of civic action to encompass historically and culturally varying acts of solidarity such as volunteering.

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[3] In the USA, widely read social critics argued in the 1980s that a growing focus on individual expression and choice was diminishing social solidarity, perhaps weakening collective efforts for social change too (Bellah et al. 1985); from this viewpoint, the growth of plug-in volunteering might signal declining solidarity. From a different point of view, another critic (McKnight 1996) argued, analogous to Habermas, that administrative planning disempowered the collective will of American citizens. Given that plug-in volunteering depends on planners and recruiters who direct volunteers and often are state-employed (Wuthnow 1998), we might infer, again, that participating in this kind of volunteering is a weaker act of solidarity than the older kind, in which citizens decided on and carried out charitable or pro-social deeds together. On the other hand, plug-in volunteering accommodates a highly mobile society (Wuthnow 1998) and other kinds of individualized participation welcome socially diverse people who do not all share the same expectations and cultural experiences (see Lichterman 1996).

Religion and Solidarity in a Post-Tocquevillian Scenario

Solidarity Amidst Porous Boundaries

Classical social theorists such as Durkheim and Marx imagined society as a unitary if perhaps deeply fractured or strained social formation. The neo-Toquevillian vision of social solidarity imagines diverse voluntary associations pursuing pro-social ends from inside the sphere of civil society, counterbalancing the market and state. Robert Putnam's much-cited research on declining associations and memberships in the USA has been read as a paean to an age of social solidarity and civic virtue that is now past (Cohen 1999). Other work, however, takes into account changing American cultural and institutional conditions.

Robert Wuthnow suggests that we conceive of a highly modernized society as a loosely connected society of "porous institutions" (Wuthnow 1998). He uses metaphors of network and loose connections to imagine solidarity in the contemporary social order. Social cohesion in a loosely connected society is much more a matter of detachable, portable, and multiple social ties than enduring loyalties to groups that all embody the central symbols of a single societal community (for instance, Hustinx and Lammertyn 2003). That does not mean solidarity is necessarily diminished in some absolute sense; rather, it has a different form from that of solidarity in a society with bonds that are tight (but therefore exclusive) and institutions that are less porous (but therefore inflexible). Shared tasks, temporary projects, and individual choice, more than compulsory communal values and certainly more than shared religion, sustain such a loosely bound society (see Merelman 1984). In this vision, it makes less sense to expect that actors will sound and act either religiously or non-religiously, at all times and in all settings whether institutional or informal. Some settings may invite implicit or explicit religious expression while others do not, and the difference does not always depend on an organization's identity as secular or religious (Ammerman 2007). Individual actors may cross the porous boundaries between religion-friendly and secular institutional spaces with relative ease (Lichterman 2012b). In this post-Tocquevillian scenario, it is better to ask how religious expression relates to civic or voluntary action differently in different kinds of settings. From this view, the unitary actor model of religion reifies religious actors and over-simplifies the contexts that enable and constrain religious expression.

The post-Tocquevillian scenario views social solidarity in a somewhat different light too. It starts with the valuable Tocquevillian idea that social cohesiveness in a democracy grows from participation in the civic realm of voluntary, face-to-face associations that act for some public good (Warren 2001a). In the contemporary USA, however, it makes sense to include within the realm of "civic" or voluntary action the informal networks and individual choice-driven projects of a "loosely connected" society, projects that use plug-in volunteers as well as complex, "non-profit" organizations or NGOs and local, face-to-face volunteer and advocacy groups (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2013). The civil sphere of social solidarity (Alexander 2006), then, includes a variety of relationships intended "on behalf of society" in

some sense.[4] Researching relations between religious expression and any of the sites of civic action reveals important and varying aspects of the relation of religion to social solidarity.

A Pragmatist Focus on Religious Expression

Once we recognize a society of porous institutional boundaries and diverse civic settings, the unitary actor model of religion seems increasingly inappropriate. Contemporary writing on culture and institutional relations bolsters the argument for an alternative to simple ideas about individuals as unitary actors. As Ann Swidler argued (2001), people are rarely consistent in their use of the cultural repertoires they have available to them; they use different repertoires of action to address different kinds of problems in different contexts. From this point of view, it makes more sense to trace actions to the different kinds of institutional relationships within which actors find themselves instead of treating actors as first-movers (Jepperson 1991).

Building on these kinds of insights, my alternative to the neo-Tocquevillian synthesis is a "pragmatist" approach in a very restricted sense of the term. It focuses on situated action and situated identities in settings (Mead 1934), in this case, the settings of civic action. Rather than follow the performance of religious or other texts (for instance, Burke 1945), this approach starts with everyday action, similar to Goffman's studies of interaction (1961, 1959). The pragmatic approach, similar to many studies using the unitary actor model, treats religion as culture, one that is not fundamentally different from other kinds of culture. In this perspective, religious culture is not a set of silent beliefs, as popular common sense still has it, but patterned communication (Riesebrodt 2008; Ammerman 2003; Lichterman 2008). The pragmatic approach goes on to say that those patterns of communication—whether we call them vocabularies, discourses, or narratives, for instance—are always inflected by specific social settings (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2005, 2007). The following discussion offers elements of a method we can use to study how settings enable and constrain what people can say and do religiously.[5]

Settings are structured by group styles. Group style is a concept from recent cultural sociology that improves the Goffmanian approach to settings. Group style is a pattern of interaction that arises from a group's shared assumptions about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the group setting. While Goffman treated culture mostly as a static backdrop, more recent work finds there are loose patterns of creating "group-ness" which have their own histories and make up part of a society's cultural repertoire. Sets of understandings about what constitutes appropriate participation in a setting, or group styles, are sometimes shared by many groups across a society. Group style is what gives settings their power to shape interaction

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[4] For a much fuller development of these claims in theoretical and methodological terms, see Lichterman and Eliasoph (2013). A partial, preliminary sketch of some of these ideas is available in Lichterman (2012a).

[5] For a full presentation and conceptual justification, see (Lichterman 2012b).

and identity, in ways potentially different from how they would unfold outside the setting (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). By setting I mean the social and material coordinates of an interaction scene (see Lichterman 2012b). The same setting, however, may host more than one group style, if the participants' implicit idea of adequate participation were to change. In my research, a church sanctuary may become the scene of private devotion, then a citizen's meeting, and then a service of worship, all in the same evening. Each of these is coordinated by a different group style. Neither does the same group style always characterize the same "group" of people. Rather than saying that a group exists and has a style, it makes more sense from this viewpoint to say that the same people may coordinate themselves and define the meaning of membership in different styles, creating different kinds of group each time. Different group styles elicit different abilities, perspectives, and even religious beliefs, which individuals may not exercise or express outside the group.

For the scholar of religion it is important to recognize that a group's style has a reality of its own. It is not simply a derivative or logical consequence of the religious beliefs of members or sacred texts. A new body of research is showing that group styles shape not only how people work together but how people interpret their beliefs differently in different settings and how the same people welcome or eschew religious or political claims in different settings.[6] When we study different settings for public religion, we are studying how group style, the meaning of membership in a setting, itself shapes opportunities for religious expression. To discover group style, a researcher can focus on several aspects of action in common; for present purposes, two are the most important. Firstly, organizations draw boundaries around themselves on a wider social map; those boundaries bring "the organization" itself into being, defining what is "inside" or "outside" it, who it is like, and who it avoids. Secondly, organizations sustain bonds that define a set of obligations good members have towards each other.

To assess boundaries and bonds in relation to religious or potentially religious culture, the observer may pursue two related questions. What implicit understandings guide the actors' ways of relating to the (potentially) religious identities of others in the setting? And how do individual actors relate to their own potentially religious identities in the setting? The task, then, is not to figure out "what religion the participants have" or "how strongly they hold their religion," but how they construct religious identities and how they relate their religious commitments to those of others in a setting. Why should we bother focusing on settings rather than groups and individual actors?

This pragmatist approach to religion may sound counterintuitive. Its focus on religious communication rather than "religion" *per se* is a strong departure from the common understanding, especially among ordinary Christians, that religion is

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[6] For the main expositions of this viewpoint and methodological guidelines for using it, see Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003), Lichterman (2005, 2012b), and Eliasoph (2011). For other applications of the group style concept to cases in the USA, South America, and western Europe, see Lichterman (1995, 1996, 2007, 2008), Mische (2008), Faucher-King (2005), Yon (2009), Luhtakalio (2009), Citroni (2010).

a deeply internalized core of the self that drives action. Drawing as it does on the interactionism of Erving Goffman along with contemporary cultural sociology, this approach does not claim to access the deep internal self that psychologists—and many religious people—may assume is central to religious experience. Neither does this approach deny that many people would say they are consistently deeply motivated by religious teachings. The pragmatist focus on religious communication is a matter of methodological and theoretical principle (see Wuthnow 2011; Lichterman 2012b). From this pragmatist viewpoint, we would not phrase research questions in terms of "the social effects of religion," as if religion already exists as a psychological force and then has social effects. Instead, we investigate how religious communication, conveyed in the context of different group styles, can facilitate or hinder different kinds of relationships. The same religious teaching on paper can facilitate or hinder different kinds of action depending on the group style through which it is conveyed. Certainly, theological and other approaches to religion define "religion" and its consequences differently; scholars and citizens too gain from a pluralist appreciation of different approaches to such a fraught topic.

Some scholars inquire into the social effects of religion because they want to know which religious groups summon people's charitable impulses most effectively, especially if they suppose that religious traditions are repositories of humanitarian concern. Correlating religious groups or traditions with different rates of voluntary participation can be informative from an instrumental point of view, if our main concern is to know what religions "do for society." The neo-Tocquevillian synthesis complements that point of view. Scholars concerned with religion and solidarity should also want to ask the pragmatist questions: How do religious teachings and language work in everyday acts of solidarity? How do they become part of action? Otherwise we risk just inferring very simple accounts of motivation from correlational models that leave out meaning.

A Case of a Religiously Sponsored Voluntary Association

The case example, Caring Embrace of the Homeless and Poor (CE), was a loose-knit group of congregational leaders, housing, and homelessness advocates. A shifting core of members met monthly at an urban Protestant church with a decades-long history of engagement in progressive causes, located near a university in neighborhood of working-class residents and students. Monthly meetings gathered between five and twelve people who expressed different religious identities or no religious identity during meetings. The group's facilitator, Theresa, was the lead staff person for the hosting church's network of social advocacy projects and identified as a liberal Presbyterian. Other core participants included the hosting church's pastor, a long-time Lutheran pastor of a nearby congregation, a graduate student intern who professed no particular religious identity, a Korean evangelical real estate agent, two members of a theater troupe made up of homeless and formerly homeless people who did not identify themselves in religious terms, the congregational liaison person for a charitable organization who identified simply as Christian, and, early

on in the study, two activists from a citywide housing advocacy organization who expressed no religious identification at the meetings.

CE's main activity was a campaign to educate religious congregations about myths regarding homelessness and to advocate that the real solution to homelessness is affordable housing. The Nails Project, as it was named, asked local religious congregations to collect nails, which CE would then donate to Habitat for Humanity®, the large non-profit organization that builds houses for low-income families. CE set the goal of collecting 74,000 nails so that the number of people homeless on an average night in the sprawling city could be symbolized dramatically. During this study the group collected roughly 55, 000 nails, at a pace that the group's facilitator considered slow. The group also kept members informed of meetings and protest events related to housing and homelessness, and became a stop-off point for a variety of homeless and community advocates looking to involve religious groups in their own projects.

CE does not sound like "volunteering" in the currently common sense of a "hands-on," task-oriented activity, and it was not. It is, however, an appropriate example of civic action, that is, a conceptual and less culture-biased category of action we can use in cross-national research on social solidarity regardless of whether the citizens tapped in the study were all familiar with plug-in volunteering. As a voluntary association of citizens committed to educating non-homeless citizens and promoting problem solving about homelessness, we can reasonably state that CE's activities were acts of social solidarity, ones that both Alexis de Tocqueville and pragmatists such as John Dewey (1927) would have recognized as such.

Data for the case came 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, I volunteered for outreach and other tasks, and tried to get two congregations interested in hosting a speaker from CE on homelessness.

Personalized Inspiration in a Community Education Project

Orchestrated Ambiguity and Inclusiveness

The unitary actor model bids us see individuals or groups as carrying religious culture in monovalent ways. The ethnographic scenarios that follow would frustrate that attempt. We can now return to the breakfast meeting sponsored by Caring Embrace of the Homeless and Poor. The director planned this meeting in order to share ideas on how to deal with the growing presence of homeless people in the neighborhood surrounding the church. It included pastors or representatives from a variety of Protestant churches, both mainline and African American, a Catholic homeless shelter employee, several homeless or formerly homeless people from the city center, a rabbi from a Jewish college student organization, an affordable housing developer and two affordable housing advocates from a city-wide housing

coalition, an imam from a local mosque, and several African American Muslims. Though many of the participants were clergy or religious leaders, their varied ways of professing, alluding to or ignoring religious identity make it very difficult to apply the unitary actor model. I quote from field notes at some length to illustrate the great variety of ways people related to religion at this meeting:

> Theresa, the meeting director, asked the pastor of this church to make some opening comments. Pastor Frank W. said that "more and more [homeless] people are coming to our doorstep…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 he listed several qualities including "compassion" and "courage." Then he asked us to pray: "Thanks for the children" he said, first of all…and "thanks for the food we have today." There followed a mild petition to bless our work together, "and we ask in your name, amen." The prayer contained no specific names for the divine.
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> Theresa then asked us to do a go-around of introductory statements so that everyone could say a little bit about "what group we are from and why we are here." This go-around session took the great majority of the meeting time. Following are a sample of responses.
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> Rabbi Kenneth from Campus Hillel: "…Instead of thinking of the campus as a fabulously wealthy university—let's think of homelessness (in this area) as an opportunity to learn about social consciousness."
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> Thomas: He said that homelessness has grown so that now it included "people who used to be middle-class who are getting pushed down—on the verge of being on the street." He also described homeless people as "people trying to deal with issues alone, rather than getting together and working collectively."
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> Wes, pastor of a nearby mainline Protestant church: "I came here to learn, and to pray."
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> Two pastoral interns from St Mark's introduced themselves. The second one described her church as "open all the time for people in need."
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> Two actresses from a theatrical troupe made up of homeless people said they were from "the other LAPD"—the Los Angeles Poverty Department. (This is a local, bitter joke in reference to the Los Angeles Police Department). Each said she was homeless, lived downtown, and that "I'm a child of God, a social activist, a prayer warrior."
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> Francis, staff person with a housing advocacy organization:
> "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."
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> A man from the "homeless artists local foundation" talked about them himself, saying that he "had been homeless, but ten years ago spiritual principles were applied" and now he no longer was homeless. Later he said "we need to do more networking with other churches. A lot of us don't realize that when we detach ourselves, our families still want us—they may be looking for us…it's an emotional issue…I didn't realize how much people wanted me back."
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> The leader of a nearby mosque said there "was more need" than there used to be, and that homeless people were not all on drugs but that rather it was "people down on their luck." He told us also that his mosque started a charter school.
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> Henrietta: She told us how when she was homeless, she and her family lived in their car. They parked it outside a church in Hollywood. She recounted to us how she told her children, "if these are good Christian people, they'll say something to us". Then she told us bitterly, "No one said anything. Children laughed and pointed at us!"

It is extremely difficult to generalize about the religious or non-religious character of the setting as a whole, and hard to infer confidently the presence or absence of religious identities or motives in individuals as they are speaking. Speakers ranged from two "prayer warriors" and a man who "came to pray" to those who made no

clearly religious comment at all. Some of the people were ordained, but one would not be able to guess that solely on the basis of what they said. For instance, Thomas, the man who said some homeless people were once middle-class but had been pushed down the social ladder, was associate pastor of a large, mainline Presbyterian congregation. His comments and his appeal to collective action made him sound more like the (non-religious) housing advocate Francis than his fellow mainline Protestant pastor, Wes. We cannot know if Thomas was more motivated by social justice activism than religious piety or if Brown was more motivated by the power of prayer than the image of collective political action; staking these claims would require inferring basic, continuous motives, religious or irreligious, and then using those to explain speech—making the kind of epistemological move associated with the unitary actor model.

The pragmatic perspective would ask, instead, how participants collaborated in creating a kind of setting for both religious and non-religious expression. The style that coordinated this setting featured fluid boundaries and an affirmation of individual voice. Pastor Frank set the stage to begin with. "How can we work together as religious people, as non-religious?" he asked. *The stage allowed us at the meeting to decide whether or not we wanted to sound religious or not, and to decide whether or not someone else meant to be religious or not*.

In terms of group style, the pastor's comment bid us make the boundaries between religious and secular fluid. This was not a "religious group" bringing religious compassion to a secular world; it was a group of caring people who may or may not claim religious identities. At the end of the session, Theresa validated all of the comments, from appeals to treating homeless people with dignity to calls for collective political action, saying that each had a place in an overall response to homelessness. The group's "map" welcomed a wide variety of caring responses into the circle of "we" who address homelessness.

Some individuals, like the homeless women from the theatrical troupe, interpreted the meeting as an opportunity to testify to their religious conviction; others, including pastors, did not. Others spoke in language easy for many Americans familiar with congregational life to associate with religion, such as "people in need." The pragmatic approach does not ask what their deep religious or secular motives were. Rather, it helps us study how people co-created a setting that could accommodate religious, non-religious, and even anti-religious identification. It tells us to listen to what people say about themselves in relation to religion—how they sustain boundaries between different kinds of religious or irreligious expression.

This stage invited participants to relate to their religiosity in a very personalized way. In terms of group style, the bonds holding together the participants in this setting were very personalized. They obligated each to hear the other respectfully as individuals with personal inspiration, not necessarily as representatives of a creed or community, whether religious, irreligious, or anti-religious. Pastor Frank set the tone when he said we all have resources to bring to the problem of homelessness, and then named some which non-religious or religious people might just as easily contribute, such as "courage." Whether or not people expressed strong opinions—

as Henrietta did, above—no one tried to convince anyone else to adopt hers or his. Everyone got a hearing.

Ritual go-arounds of individual sharing will not sound remarkable to anyone familiar with the personalized style of bonding common in contemporary American group life (for instance, Wuthnow 1994; Lichterman 1996), but this way of coordinating a group does not have any natural affinity with religious people. Some individuals on this stage perform as religious people in different ways in other settings and those performances are not nearly as individualized. Pastor Thomas, for instance, participates in faith-based community organizing efforts groups whose members all promote a shared, obligatory collective identity as "people of faith" who identify with Judeo–Christian traditions, not individuals who may or may not be "of faith" as in the case of CE's homelessness effort.

One might ask if the pragmatic approach works mainly when the people we study are "performing" in the conventional sense—trying to be polite in interfaith settings. Examining the group's monthly meetings suggests that a focus on the setting is useful even when the stage is much smaller and has a less diverse cast.

Personalized Inspiration at Monthly Meetings

Personalized inspiration was the norm for monthly meetings, and new participants learned it even if they expressed religious identity or reasoning differently in other settings. Lines between religious and secular inspiration continued to be ambiguous. An awkward moment for the facilitator at the start of one meeting helps illustrate:

> At the start, Theresa was talking about a friend of hers with a terminal illness, muscle degeneration, who was at the point that she could no longer move anything but her eyes and her mouth enough to talk. Theresa said this woman's daughter, also a family friend, carried pent–up anger at her mother and said her mother's illness seemed not to upset the daughter, but Theresa knew better. Theresa took off her glasses and wiped her eyes.
>
> Theresa: "So whatever you do—pray, mediate, send energy—do it for them."
> Raquel, the representative from Habitat for Humanity® asked, "What's her name?"
> Theresa: "Marta, and Rita."
> Raquel wrote down the names. I thought of the evangelical Protestant practice of taking names and praying for people.
> Theresa took her glasses off and wiped her eyes again.
> Chuck, the student from School of Social Work: "Will their names be able to get into the program (at Theresa's church, which hosted our meeting in the Peace Center library) for Sunday worship?"
> Theresa said they already had.
>
> We still were waiting for the printed agendas for our meeting, which were not ready yet.
> Theresa: "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."
> Raquel gave her an understanding look.

Theresa signalled here that the stage was one for people with religious commitments, or spiritual commitments, or maybe humanistic and non-theistic ones. She invited us to see "our shared humanity." The appeal would have sounded out of

place at a corporate business meeting or school board meeting, and probably at many meetings where friends might gather (Bakhtin 1988). Theresa's appeal might suggest that this was a stage for subtle religious expression. The professed Christian woman Raquel might have written down the names of Theresa's unfortunate family friends because she intended to pray for them. It is safer to observe, however, that the participants on the stage here were maintaining a forum with fluid boundaries. It was a forum in which people could guess wrongly each other's motives, yet keep going, as long as all sincere, individual expressions of inspiration were safe. Identifying with religious faith was welcome though not mandatory, as long as any kind of inspiration, including faith in "our shared humanity" was welcome too.

On this inclusive stage, participants could affirm a religious teaching directly as long as they did not use them to promote some faiths to the exclusion of others. One of very few direct endorsements of religious conviction during two years of field research was an inclusive-sounding interfaith affirmation as well:

> Raquel, a Christian, told us about a comment she heard a rabbi make about homelessness:

> If we are all made in the image of God, then the image of God sleeping on the street should be unconscionable." Raquel said her own pastor had said almost exactly the same thing. Raquel: "When people from two completely different directions say almost the same thing—Wow, that is a truth!

Throughout my time with CE, facilitator Theresa worked to keep the group's identification with religion inclusive. Often she used the phrase "churches and synagogues and mosques" to describe both CE's audience and its own potential constituency. Since no one engaged with a mosque ever came to any of the monthly meetings I attended during 24 months, and only two, short-term participants identified with Judaism, I inferred that the phrase symbolized the intent to project a diversely inspired, inclusive effort.

Non-clergy as well as clergy members participated in more tightly bound religious groups and promoted more specific religious identities in settings outside CE meetings. Conversations with Theresa after meetings made clear to me that she identified with liberal Presbyterianism, and not only inclusive spirituality in general. Yet she never suggested or implied CE members should care about Presbyterianism. At a volunteer session for CE members at a Habitat for Humanity® builders' warehouse, Raquel read from the Bible and applied the reading to her non-profit organization's work. At CE meetings, in contrast, Raquel presented herself as a churchgoer but never used Biblical language to articulate either her own or CE's stance on housing and homelessness.

Since religious identity was not mandatory but welcome as long as it made no claims on others, "personalized inspiration" also took interactional work for participants who distanced themselves from religious faith in other contexts. I never heard housing advocate Francis identify himself openly in religious terms during this study. Yet he spoke in the first person plural when he urged religious people at the breakfast meeting pictured earlier to address homelessness in more political ways than by sheltering homeless individuals. Non-religious community advocates quietly stood by when CE participants identified themselves in religious terms.

While observing the office of the housing advocacy organization that employed Francis as a participant, I heard his co-worker Zina express disappointment that a core CE member was religious. But neither Zina nor Francis or any other participant questioned the value of basing homeless advocacy on religious identity during my observations at CE meetings.

Religious Expression, Settings, and Social Capital

Neo-Tocquevillian scholars laud religious congregations as rich stores of "social capital"—the networks and mutual trust that make collaboration between citizens possible (Putnam 2000; Smidt 2003). Social capital is a much used, much debated concept that has strongly influenced the way social scientists think about voluntary associations, governance, and economic development, to name just three areas.[7] When we focus on group styles in settings rather than on religious actors and look beyond congregations, we learn more about conditions that may disable as well as enable religious people's networking for civic ends. We learn that social capital is situational and not something actors carry continuously with a continuous value for social ties.

The example of the Nails Project in CE shows that it is not religion, or religious expression itself, but one's preferred style of relating to religion in specific settings that determines whether or not people can use religion to recruit others for acts of solidarity. The director of Caring Embrace, for instance, knew many local leaders in her city's social activist and religious circles. Theresa attended a large variety of meetings and events related to homelessness, affordable housing, gentrification, and urban redevelopment by different organizations. Through her, CE should have had access to a lot of religious social capital since she was known widely as an activist who led her church's social justice center and had access to its phone lists, administrative staff, and money. Two mainline Protestant pastors who attended CE meetings said at different times in the same words that getting congregations to collect nails for an awareness-building project on homelessness "should be a no-brainer."

Yet the inclusive, personalized style of setting that Theresa preferred prevented her from attracting a wide range of religious people, even from liberal Protestant churches, to work together on the project. The Nails Project realized relatively little benefit from the director's potential social capital. The simple quest to collect 74,000 nails was still in progress after two years, many months behind its projected schedule. Theresa hesitated to make her inspiration the guiding inspiration of CE; she wanted hers to be one of a variety of voices. The director may have had lot of

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[7] The discussion here refers to Robert Putnam's distinctive version of the social capital concept, the most widespread one. For extensive reviews and critiques, see Somers (2005), Lichterman (2006).

social capital in an abstract sense, but the group style that she preferred in settings of religious people made it difficult to prevail upon other people even for a good cause.

Social capital does not empower voluntary, pro-social action by itself. Rather, social ties empower collective action depending on how people create settings for mobilizing those ties. Studying religious people teaches us about how different forms of group cohesion can lead to powerful campaigns that sway governmental leaders, or to well-intentioned group efforts that frustrate even the own goals of their members.

Discussion: Public Religious Style in Different National Contexts

A neo-Tocquevillian focus on unitary, individual, or collective actors would leave some public expressions of religion beyond our grasp and distort the meaning of others. The pragmatic approach bids us ask how people create a social space for expressing religious sensibilities and linking them to acts of social solidarity in a diverse, unequal society.

I propose that this approach is also useful for studying public religion across national contexts, not only in the USA. It can illuminate the variety of public religious expression in different religious "regimes" (Lichterman and Potts 2009), or the institutional configurations that give citizens routine expectations for the public presence of religion. As widely institutionalized relationships, often taken-for-granted (DiMaggio and Powell 1991), religious regimes do not change easily, but local actors enact different group styles that may roughly re-instantiate the regime over time without simply reproducing mass uniformity. In societies that play out something like the post-Tocquevillian scenario briefly sketched here, such as the USA, boundaries between potentially religious and non-religious settings are ambiguous and sometimes people may even work to maintain the ambiguity. The US religious regime calls for governmental religious non-favoritism alongside an expectation that citizens may affirm religion in general—or "faith" in brief, non-exclusive terms—in public outside governmental settings. Generic religious appeal is in fact a basis for solidarity across social differences in the USA as long as it aligns with vaguely Judeo–Christian understandings of religion.[8] Some openness to ambiguity is, in effect, built into this regime. In everyday life, Americans might occasionally puzzle over which style of religious expression is appropriate in which setting. Ambiguity can lead to mutual tolerance or respect, or simply uncertainty, as in the case of the local civic association observed here, much as overt avowals of specific, exclusively religious precepts by high political officials in the USA is polarizing.

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[8] Alexis de Tocqueville (1969 [1835]) made the argument elegantly 170 years ago; modern observer Robert Bellah (1967) re-articulated and updated the argument in a classic essay on American "civil religion". Research suggests that Americans hold atheists in lower repute and trust them less than many other widely identifiable groups, such as African Americans or Muslims (Edgell et al. 2006).

Table 12.1 Two ideal typical models of religion and social solidarity. (This is adapted from a fuller table in Lichterman 2012b)

	Neo-Tocquevillian synthesis	Pragmatic model
Main unit of analysis	Actors, individual, or collective and their shared religious beliefs	Religious communication in settings
How actors carry religion	Individual and collective actors "are religious"—they carry religion continuously, monovalently	Religious communication is setting-specific for individuals and collectivities
How religion shapes public action	Religion suffuses identity and action for the actor under study	Actors cue each other in to a shared group style that shapes religious communication. Religious communication embedded in a style, in turn, enables or constrains public action
Examples of research themes: 1. Religion's effects on public action. 2. Religion and social solidarity	Questions representing a neo-Tocquevillian approach to the theme: 1. Which religious groups pursue which kinds of voluntary action? 2. Which religious traditions create more or less social capital?	Questions representing a pragmatic approach to the theme: 1. Which settings and group styles enable people to link religious identity to collective action? 2. Which settings and group styles allow participants to use religious identity to mobilize others for acts of solidarity?

In the context of a different religious regime, tolerance for ambiguity is narrower and public religious identification more easily invites, not flexibility, but harsh disagreement, at any level of public life. Recent controversies over Muslim women's headscarves in France offer a quick, compelling example. The current religious regime in France is constituted culturally and legally by a version of republicanism that proscribes most performances of religious identity in public spaces. French republicanism makes the headscarf into a contentious display, much as republicanism says nothing about whether or not French citizens may hold Muslim beliefs privately. French citizens with Muslim beliefs nimbly craft different performances of religious visibility, some self-consciously resistant to the regime of *laïcité* or secularity, and others far more circumspect and selective (Amiraux and Jonker 2006).

This is but one more reason to study public religion from the pragmatic perspective rather than start from the common sense assumption that the religious beliefs of actors tell us everything we may want to know about what they do with religion and where. The neo-Tocquevillian and pragmatic models build on different assumptions about religion's influence in public and lead to different kinds of research questions (see Table 12.1). If we want to know how religion acts as a resource or a facilitator of voluntary action in public, then the pragmatic model offers a more precise view.

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