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Congregations:  
An Analysis of Website Links

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# The Social and Symbolic Boundaries of Congregations: An Analysis of Website Links\*

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## Abstract

The role of social and symbolic boundaries has a long history in the sociology of religion. These concepts have taken on more importance with the proposition that religious boundaries are in a state of restructuring. I draw upon theory and research on organizations and religion to create hypotheses concerning the creation and structure of religious boundaries. Using a subsample from the National Congregations Study, I analyze the outgoing hyperlinks of 231 congregational websites as a measure of social and symbolic boundaries. The results show a relationship between theological conservatism and excluding other religious groups from a congregation's boundaries and including religious media, parachurch groups, and religious resources. Religious tradition predictors also produce significant variations in religious boundaries.

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By their nature, religious organizations are deeply involved with theological and ideological beliefs about the relation of individuals and groups to each other, to society, and to the good and just life.

Mayer N. Zald, 1982

Any organization, including a religious one, can be viewed as a boundary-creating and boundary-maintaining entity (Aldrich 1979: 4). The role of boundaries has a long history in the sociology of religion. Durkheim saw religion as primarily defining a boundary between what is considered sacred and that which is profane (Durkheim 1973: 187). The persistent discussion of church-sect typologies centers on the different social and symbolic boundaries formed by congregations (Iannaccone 1988; Johnson 1963; Troeltsch 1960 [1911]; Weber 1991 [1963]). The concept of religious boundaries has recently been employed to understand Evangelicalism in the United States (Smith 1998: 124), ethnic and immigrant congregations (Warner 1997), and changes in congregational participation and growth (Dougherty 2004; Finke and Stark 1992). One important proposition that was recently raised concerning religious boundaries is that they have and are being “restructured” (Wuthnow 1988). For instance, the rise of special-purpose or parachurch organizations is said to have made religious boundaries more complex as groups have adjusted their boundaries to include or exclude these organizations (Wuthnow 1988: 100–133).

If they are in a state of restructuring, it would be valuable to revisit our ideas concerning religious boundaries and the mechanisms involved in their creation. In the discussion and analysis that follow, I draw on theory and research on organizations and religion to explore the boundaries formed by congregations. Using a national sample of congregations that have websites and an analysis of their outgoing hyperlinks, I aim to answer the following questions: What or who is included in or excluded from the social and symbolic boundaries of a congregation? How do congregational boundaries vary? Most important, what are the sources of those variations? Finally, I discuss the implications of these boundaries for congregations.

### *CONCEPTIONS OF RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES*

Religious boundaries have been conceptualized in a variety of ways in the literature. Many of these ideas have their origins in the theories and research on church-sect differences; hence reviewing that literature serves as a useful starting place in our discussion.

Weber’s description of church-sect differences focused on the boundaries created by a group’s membership rules. He defined sects as groups that formed boundaries around those they deemed worthy and allowed only these individuals

to become members. Churches were groups that did not form these membership boundaries and viewed all individuals as worthy of membership or at least worthy of their religious message (Weber 1985). Boundaries in this system are based on exclusivity, distinguishing between members and nonmembers. Echoes of this conceptualization can be heard in Smith's (1998: 124) statement that evangelicals in the United States "operate with a very strong sense of boundaries that distinguish themselves from non-Christians and from nonevangelical Christians."

Weber's colleague, Ernst Troeltsch, elaborated on the different boundaries formed by religious groups in his own church-sect typology. Troeltsch saw religious boundaries resulting not only from the exclusive or inclusive nature of a group's membership rules, but from other sources as well. For instance, churches accept the secular world and work within it, while sects form boundaries between themselves and the secular world. Religious boundaries can also be the result of social class dynamics, with sects including the lower classes in their boundaries and churches including the upper classes. In addition, Troeltsch argued that churches tend to form internal boundaries between clergy and laity, while sects do not form these internal boundaries.

Benton Johnson simplified Troeltsch's discussion of religious boundaries by focusing on the division between the secular and religious. He argued that churches "accept" the social environment it exists in, while sects "reject" the social environment (Johnson 1963). This type of boundary has also been referred to as the amount of "tension" that exists between a religious group and the secular world (Johnson 1963; Stark and Bainbridge 1985). This tension usually results in sects avoiding interaction with the secular world, openly attacking or being attacked by actors and events in the secular world, and creating social or behavioral requirements that prevent members from interacting with the secular world.

These requirements were featured in Iannaccone's conceptualization of religious boundaries. He argued that religious boundaries are created by the amount of activity or interaction that is allowed with nongroup members or organizations, defined as the level of "strictness" (Iannaccone 1994). Sects are stricter and limit such interaction, hence forming a boundary between the group's membership and other social actors. In this conceptualization, religious boundaries are more dynamic and fluid, as they are continually reinforced by behaviors and social interaction.

Other recent conceptualizations of religious boundaries combine elements of these ideas to consider how religious groups vary in "exclusive" membership, "extensive" influence, and "expensive" requirements (Stark and Finke 2000). Religious boundaries encompass the boundaries between members and nonmembers (exclusive), the boundary between the religious and the secular

(extensive), and the boundaries formed by the norms and requirements of the religious group (expensive).

How can we synthesize these different conceptualizations of religious boundaries into a single working definition? Although each varies slightly in language and focus, they are all primarily concerned with *whom and what a religious group includes in its social world*. Religious groups may or may not include nonmembers, secular individuals or organizations, the rich or poor, religious professionals, or any other social actor within their boundaries. Including or excluding these social actors may be a result of membership rules, tensions with the secular world, or behavioral requirements. However, regardless of what is or is not included and the reasons behind that decision, boundaries are defined principally by this process of inclusion or exclusion.

*Definition 1:* Boundaries result from the social and symbolic inclusion or exclusion of other social actors from an individual's or organization's social world.

### *CONSERVATISM AND RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES*

A theme that unites the conceptualizations reviewed above is the underlying proposition that the boundaries of groups defined by exclusive or strict belief systems and those characterized by beliefs in relativism, diversity, and dialogue (Kelley 1972: 78–83) differ significantly. Although a continuum connects these two types of belief systems, I will refer to congregations that hold the former as theologically conservative and those that hold the latter as theologically liberal. How do the boundaries of conservative congregations differ from those of liberal ones, and what are the sources of those variations?

The more conservative a congregation is, the more exclusive an organization it views itself as being. This causes the conservative congregation to oppose or reject the secular world and the behaviors and belief systems contained within it. Conservative congregations believe that they provide the only truth their members can find and hence require their members to devote themselves to that truth. The pursuit of religious goods at the expense of secular goods results in a stronger boundary between the congregation and the secular world (Iannaccone 1988). This could take the form of a conflict-oriented “God versus the world” perspective or simply a view that the secular world is of no importance to the goals of a theologically conservative congregation (Troeltsch 1960 [1911]: 331). Either way, the desire to interact with the secular world is lower in a conservative congregation.

By contrast, a theologically liberal congregation has little or no desire to construct a boundary between itself and the secular world. It does not view its mission as being in conflict with the missions found in the secular world. It does not require its members to separate themselves from the secular and allows for the pursuit of both religious and secular goods. Hence liberal congregations will be more likely to embrace organizations and individuals in the secular world.

Recent research has found support for this difference in willingness to include secular organizations within a congregation's boundaries. Chaves (1999) found that conservative/evangelical congregations were less willing to accept funding from the U.S. government under the "Charitable Choice" provision. Weber hypothesized this finding when he stated that the separation of church and state in the United States is a matter of "chance" for the churches but a "religious idea" and "dogmatic axiom" for sects (Weber 1985: 9).

These ideas and research lead to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* More conservative congregations will be less likely to include secular organizations within their boundaries.

A conservative congregation views itself as not only separate from the secular world, but also separate from other groups in the religious world. Sources of competition from the religious sphere are not going to be embraced by a conservative congregation. The relativity of religious worldviews is not accepted. Hence, these competitors will not be included within the boundaries of a conservative congregation.

Both history and recent research support this idea. Many fundamentalist groups opposed ecumenical movements or organizations throughout the 20th century. The objections of conservative congregations to interdenominational organizations were wide ranging. The ecumenical movements were accused of being "socialistic," theologically flawed, and supporting "modernist" ideas about God and Jesus (Haldeman 1988 [1920]). Conservative groups saw ecumenical organizations as threatening the "individualism and independency" of their congregations (Haldeman 1988 [1920]: 45–46). However, the most problematic aspect of ecumenical movements was that it would make them cooperate with religious groups of whom they did not approve, especially Catholics (Gray 1988 [1919]: 3; Marsden 1991: 102).

In his study of Buddhist congregations in Chicago, Numrich (2000: 192) found that congregations with theologically "exclusivist notions" did not participate or interact with other Buddhist congregations that were of a different theological orientation. Similarly, a study of faith-based social service coalitions in Houston found that only 22.2 percent of the participating congregations were from conservative Protestant denominations or traditions, while 59.5 percent were

from moderate or liberal denominations or traditions. Several of those conservative congregations left the coalitions after congregations that they considered outside of acceptable theological traditions joined (Pipes and Ebaugh 2002).

This aversion applies not only to religious organizations outside of a congregation's denomination or "official" affiliation, but also between the congregation and the denomination itself. Keeping the official organizational entity of the denomination within the boundaries of a congregation means that the congregation's control will be weakened (Hougland and Wood 1979). Hence even if a conservative congregation is affiliated with a denomination, it will be less willing to maintain strong ties with that denomination. The "development and compromise" that are inherent in mass organizations run counter to the strong boundaries that theologically conservative congregations strive to maintain and cause these congregations to limit their participation in such large organizations (Troeltsch 1960 [1911]: 337).

This leads to the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 2:* More conservative congregations will be less likely to include other religious groups within their boundaries.

*Hypothesis 2a:* More conservative congregations will be less likely to include denominational organizations within their boundaries.

Because they have theological, behavioral, and social requirements that are more extensive and expensive (Stark and Finke 2000; Weber 1985: 8) than those of liberal congregations, conservative congregations must define acceptable organizations, individuals, and resources by which their membership can fulfill those requirements. For example, if individuals are expected to consume specific types of media and avoid others, then the congregation must provide acceptable media sources within their boundaries. A congregation that does not demand much from its members does not need to provide these entities within its boundaries, as external agents are assumed to be acceptable. In sum, a conservative congregation that demands much from its members in the "sacrifice of external (nongroup) resources and opportunities" must offer replacements or substitutes within the group's boundaries (Iannaccone 1994: 1203–1204).

Furthermore, research has shown the importance of conservative parachurch associations for conservative clergy in providing an identity and supporting theologically conservative goals in their congregations and denominations (McKinney and Finke 2002), so we would expect these associations to appear within the boundaries of conservative congregations as well.

These insights lead to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3:* Conservative congregations will be more likely to include parachurch organizations, religious media, religious resources, religious retail sites, and religiously affiliated political sites within their boundaries.

### *OPERATIONALIZING BOUNDARIES*

How should the boundaries of a religious group or any organization be recognized and measured? There are undoubtedly different approaches to measuring this concept. However, given the definition above, a seemingly natural method would be to consider the ties between the organization of interest and other social actors with which it interacts. If boundaries reflect who or what an individual or organizations includes or excludes from its social world, then ties between individuals or organizations would be a natural measure of those boundaries.

Yet boundaries are both symbolic and social. Boundaries can include both actual and potential interactions between social actors. A congregation may include another entity, such as a parachurch organization or religious media outlet, within its boundaries even if there is no explicit relationship between the two. The congregation may not have actually had any interaction or communication with the parachurch group or media outlet but may consider that entity as a potential or symbolic part of its boundaries.

Hence to properly measure religious boundaries, we need a measure of not only social ties, but also symbolic ties. One source of data that would allow for a measure of both types of ties and provide a more complete picture of religious boundaries are Internet hyperlinks. Hyperlinks between a religious group and other social actors could represent for a formal or explicit social tie or simply an implicit or symbolic tie.

### *DATA AND METHODS*

The sample that is used here comes from congregations that stated that they had a website in the 1998 National Congregations Study (NCS) (Chaves 1998; Chaves et al. 1999). The identifying information that was used to search for the websites was acquired from the principal investigator of the NCS, Mark Chaves. There were 357 congregations out of 1236 in the NCS sample that stated that they had a website. Of these 357 congregations, 296 were able to be located and analyzed in this study. The data collected from the websites in 2004 were combined with the NCS data collected in 1998, and after listwise deletion was used, the final sample size was 231 congregations. The NCS data provide a profile of the congregation, and the website data provide a measure of their boundaries.

There are a couple important caveats to provide about this sample. First, because the sample was drawn in 1998, it represents congregations that were the



pioneers of congregations on the Internet. These congregations differ in ways that parallel the differences among all early users, later users, and nonusers of the Internet. For instance, the NCS congregations that had websites in 1998 have members that are younger, more educated, and of a higher socioeconomic status than the NCS congregations as a whole. This is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Comparison of Demographics of Congregations Online with Total Congregational Population**

<b>Denominational Affiliation</b>	<b>Mean of Congregations Online</b>	<b>Mean of All Congregations</b>
Percent with 4 year degrees	44.58	24.89
Percent over 60	23.85	28.84
Percent making over \$100,000	7.987	4.45

*Note:* Cases weighted to adjust for large congregations being overrepresented in the NCS.

However, despite these potential biases, using the NCS sample of websites has some significant advantages. Most important, combining data collected from the websites with the NCS data allows for a much larger amount of information to be available about the congregations than would be possible if just one of the sources were used (i.e., websites and/or NCS data). Furthermore, it had proven very difficult to obtain a nationally representative sample of congregations. The NCS overcame this challenge for sampling congregations through hypernetwork sampling (McPherson 1982). Similarly, obtaining a representative sample of websites has been a challenge to Internet research (Best et al. 2001; Hewson et al. 2003: 36). Fortunately, because the NCS was a representative sample of congregations in the United States, the NCS congregations with websites are a representative sample of congregations online in 1998. In other words, in contrast to the unrepresentative nature of most Internet research, the NCS website sample was at least a truly representative sample of congregations on the Web when it was drawn.

Using hyperlinks as a measure of boundaries has its own benefits. Although still a fairly new method (DiMaggio et al 2001: 328), using Internet hyperlinks has previously been done in analyzing ties between hate groups (Burris, Smith, and Strahm 2000), between nations (Brunn and Dodge 2001), and between women's organizations (Pudrovska and Ferree 2004). This type of data is of particular use for the study of boundaries, since it provides a measure of both social and symbolic ties between social actors. That is, links from websites can represent actual relationships and contact between the congregation and another actor, or they could represent a symbolic connection that is not supported by any actual social interaction. For this reason, website links represent a different type

of social tie than social network ties, which are typically thought of as being based only on physical or verbal interaction between actors.

### *Locating Websites and Coding Links*

The name and address of each congregation in the sample were searched for, using multiple search engines. In some cases, a site was located by going to a denominational website and examining its online directory. The missing cases mainly consist of websites that were unable to be located, but there were a handful of instances in which a website address was located but the page was no longer active. It is also possible that some of the congregations misinterpreted the question in the NCS study as referring to the website of their national denominational site or that some of the missing cases no longer exist at their physical location.

All outgoing links on the congregations' websites were located, recorded, and placed into one of the following categories: secular sites (i.e., no religious affiliation or subject matter), links to official denominational sites, links to other congregations or religious groups, religious resources (e.g., online bibles, daily devotionals), religious media (e.g., magazines, radio stations, journals, television stations), parachurch groups (e.g., Promise Keepers, Campus Crusade for Christ), politically motivated religious sites (e.g., pro-life sites), religiously affiliated educational institutions, commercial sites selling religious goods, or "other" religious sites. Links could be located anywhere on the page and on any of the pages of the congregation's site. This coding scheme will produce measures of boundaries between the congregations and actors in different spheres of society

### *Dependent Variables*

The dependent variables that are used in the analyses are the number of links to each specific type of site, such as secular links, official denominational links, links to other congregations, parachurch groups, religious resources, religious media, and so on. This will allow for a comparison of differences in the content of congregational boundaries.

### *Independent Variables*

The independent variables that are used in the analyses include a control for the size of the website measured by the total number of printed pages required to print the entire site. This will account for the different possibilities for the number of links on a small site versus a very large site.

Because access to the Internet was and is correlated with education and income, I will be controlling for the percentage of adults in the congregation with incomes over \$100,000 and the percentage of adults with a four-year degree. Congregations whose membership has greater access to the Internet may provide more links than those whose membership does not have access.

In addition, I am including controls for the size of the congregation's staff, whether the staff is full-time and part-time, and the size of the congregation. The latter is measured by the number of adults and children who "regularly participate" in the congregation regardless of membership. To adjust for the skewed distribution of congregational size, a natural log transformation will be used in the analyses. Both of these controls are relevant because the size of the staff could affect how much time and effort can be devoted to the maintenance of the website, and the size of the congregation could affect how much content is placed on the site. In addition, staff members bring with them professional ties that may translate into more individuals or organizations being included in the congregation's boundary. Professional staff members gain social capital during their training in places like seminaries, and these ties to peers continue when they join a congregation (Finke and Dougherty 2002). Indeed, there is at least a bivariate correlation between total staff size and total number of links ( $r = .213, p < .000$ ).

Since being affiliated with a denomination may affect the total number of links, because the denomination may suggest or require certain links, and will affect whether a congregation links to official, denominational sites, I will include a control for whether the congregation is "formally affiliated with a denomination, convention or some kind of similar association." This is a dummy variable coded 1 for "Yes" and 0 for "No."

Religious tradition dummy variables will also be included. The categories of these variables are "Roman Catholic," "White liberal or moderate," "White conservative, evangelical, or fundamentalist," "Black Christian," and "non-Christian."

Finally, and most important for the hypotheses presented above, I am including a variable for the theological conservatism of the congregation. Specifically, the question asks, "Theologically speaking, would your congregation be considered more on the conservative side, more on the liberal side, or right in the middle?" I have coded the responses 1 for liberal, 2 for in the middle, and 3 for conservative.

Descriptive statistics for all variables are shown in Table 2, on the following page.

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Dependent and Independent Variables**

	<i>N</i>	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
<b>Dependent Variables</b>					
Secular	231	1.46	5.78	0	63
Official denomination	231	1.32	1.34	0	6
Other congregations	231	2.01	20.16	0	143
Religious media	231	.74	1.71	0	17
Political	231	.35	1.22	0	11
Commercial	231	.74	1.89	0	19
Educational institutions	231	.49	1.39	0	10
Parachurch groups	231	1.41	2.93	0	26
Religious resources	231	2.50	5.55	0	61
Other	231	.34	.932	0	6
<b>Independent Variables</b>					
White liberal, moderate	231	.3506		0	1
White evangelical, conservative, fundamentalist	231	.3810		0	1
Catholic	231	.1905		0	1
Black Christian	231	.0087		0	1
Non-Christian	231	.0693		0	1
<b>Theological conservatism</b>					
Theological conservatism	231	2.22	.768	1	3
<b>Total links</b>					
Total links	231	9.91	18.76	0	145
<b>Size of website (in pages)</b>					
Size of website (in pages)	231	39.72	34.94	1	225
<b>Has denomination</b>					
Has denomination	231	.89		0	1
<b>Size of congregation (natural log)</b>					
Size of congregation (natural log)	231	6.57	1.31	3.22	9.92
<b>Size of staff</b>					
Size of staff	231	20.16	25.27	0	210
<b>Percent with college degrees</b>					
Percent with college degrees	231	48.86	26.72	.20	98
<b>Percent rich</b>					
Percent rich	231	14.09	16.61	0	90

The most common type of link is to religious resources, such as online bibles and devotional sites. The second most common type of link is to other

congregations or religious groups. This is deceptive, though, because a few congregations that link to a large number of other religious groups skew the mean to the right.

**Table 3: OLS Models Predicting the Number of Links to Secular Sites, Denominational Sites, and Other Religious Groups**

<b>Dependent Variable</b>	<b>Model 1: Secular</b>	<b>Model 2: Official Denomination</b>	<b>Model 3: Other Congregations</b>
Religious tradition*			
White evangelical	-.041	-.119	.009
Catholic	-.128	.029	.028
Black Christian	.164†	.010	-.015
Non-Christian	-.029	-.134†	-.072
Theological conservatism	.070	-.023	-.185‡
Total links	.464‡	.396‡	.690‡
Size of website (pages)	.038	.083	-.104†
Has denomination	.044	.215‡	-.084
Size of congregation (natural log)	.030	.002	-.043
Size of staff	-.046	-.058	.195‡
Percent with college degrees	-.006	.208‡	-.032
Percent rich	-.106	-.111	-.110†
Adjusted $R^2$	.217	.282	.502
$N$	231	231	231

\*Reference category is “White liberal, moderate.”

† $p < .05$ .

‡ $p < .01$ .

## RESULTS

Models 1 and 2 of Table 3 disconfirm Hypotheses 1 and 2a that conservative congregations are less likely to form ties with secular organizations and less likely

to maintain ties to official denominations. The former finding is particularly interesting and will deserve discussion later. Not surprisingly, having an affiliation with a denomination increases the number of ties to official denominational sites.

Model 3 of Table 3 confirms Hypothesis 2 that conservative congregations are less likely to include other congregations within their boundaries. Since the dependent variable for this particular model was skewed to the right by a few outliers, I ran this model again but excluded those cases. Doing so only increased the strength of the theological conservatism coefficient. Since the outliers do not affect the significance, they are kept in the model to maintain consistency with the other analyses presented.

Another interesting finding in this model is that staff size increases the number of ties to other congregations. This result complements other research that has shown that staffing, especially staff with professional training, tends to increase the external social ties of congregations. Professional staff members bring with them social capital acquired during training with colleagues, and this capital remains in the form of social ties when training is complete (Finke and Dougherty 2002). For instance, Nancy Ammerman (1990: 214) has noted how, despite its ideological aversion to cooperating with organizations such as the National Council of Churches (NCC), the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) has occasionally worked with the NCC because of professional connections among SBC and NCC representatives.

Table 4 shows the analyses predicting number of links to religious media sites, religious resources sites, parachurch sites, religiously affiliated political sites, religiously affiliated educational institutions, and commercial sites that sell predominantly religious goods. Models 1, 2, and 3 partially confirm Hypothesis 3. Theologically conservative congregations do provide more links to religious resources, parachurch sites, and religious media. However, theological conservatism does not affect the likelihood of linking to political, educational, or commercial sites.

Model 1 of Table 4 also shows that beyond any relationship with theological conservatism, both Catholic and non-Christian congregations include more media outlets within their boundaries than liberal Protestant congregations. In addition, Models 4 and 6 of Table 4 show that non-Christian congregations include more educational and commercial sites than white liberal congregations do.

Through many of the analyses, the percentage of the congregation that had an income over \$100,000 had a significant and positive effect. This is likely an issue of access. Congregations with a wealthy membership provide more of these links because the congregation is more likely to be able to access the website and actually use those ties. If the congregation's authorities know that it is unlikely that their members have access to the Internet, then the website becomes less

effective and less important for defining boundaries for their membership through their website; hence they provide fewer links.

**Table 4: OLS Models Predicting the Number of Links to Religiously Oriented Sites**

Type of Link	Model 1: Media	Model 2: Para- Church	Model 3: Religious Resources	Model 4: Educational Institutions	Model 5: Political	Model 6: Commercial
Religious tradition*						
White Evangelical	.134	-.088	.036	.119	-.029	.010
Catholic	.196‡	-.131	.069	.088	-.023	.007
Black Christian	-.035	-.063	-.066	-.014	-.026	-.032
Non-Christian	.121†	-.059	.093	.211‡	.088	.173‡
Theological conservatism	.143†	.200‡	.185‡	.092	.103	.020
Total links	.547‡	.503‡	.631‡	.294‡	.330‡	.446‡
Size of website (pages)	-.025	.121	.014	.103	.098	.233‡
Has denomination	.077	-.024	.081	.072	.035	-.008
Size of congregation (natural log)	.056	.013	.004	-.050	.107	.026
Size of staff	-.118	-.071	-.225‡	-.059	-.093	-.252‡
Percent college degrees	.018	.094	-.046	.046	-.009	.024
Percent rich	.183‡	.111	.190‡	.148†	.225‡	.010
Adjusted $R^2$	.396	.315	.452	.177	.199	.301
$N$	231	231	231	231	231	231

\*Reference category is "White liberal, moderate."

† $p < .05$ .

‡ $p < .01$ .

As could be expected, Tables 3 and 4 show that the total number of links is the strongest predictor of the number of links to each specific type of site.

## *DISCUSSION*

The social and symbolic boundaries of religious organizations play an important role in the functioning of the organization and the lives of its members. At the individual level, the boundaries reflect and regulate the identities and behavior of the religious group. At the organizational level, the inclusion of secular and religious entities can create system feedback and isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) for the congregation (e.g., Chaves 1996; Wood 1972). Because of the vital role boundaries have in the life of congregations, it is important to understand the factors that contribute to their creation.

The analysis here provides several insights into those factors. Theologically conservative groups differ in the boundaries they form in several specific ways. They are less likely to include other religious groups within their boundaries, and they are more likely to include religious media, parachurch groups, and religious resources. The exclusive nature of a conservative group creates boundaries between the group and other competing theological perspectives. The demands or requirements that are placed on the members of conservative groups means that those groups must provide outlets for the fulfillment of those requirements (Stark and Finke 2000; Weber 1985: 8). Therefore the boundaries of conservative groups include religious media, resources, and organizations that their members are expected or allowed to consume.

The tendency of theologically conservative groups to include parachurch groups and religious media outlets within their boundaries provides some insight into the sources of innovation for these groups. It has been noted how network ties can be the catalyst for religious organizations to introduce innovations that can help them to succeed in a changing environment (Finke and Wittberg 2000). If parachurch groups and media outlets are contained within the boundaries of conservative groups, then innovations originating from these sources can be easily introduced into the congregation (Finke 2004). This may help conservative groups adapt to their environment, since they have more sources of environmental feedback and more options for making corrections to the changing environment. The inability to organizationally “sense” environmental change and innovate from within their boundaries could be seen as a complementary explanation for the decline of the more liberal mainline denominations (Finke and Stark 1992).

The long-recognized importance of religious institutions for minority groups, especially immigrants, in maintaining an ethnic or cultural identity is also reflected in the boundaries of congregations. Non-Christian congregations include more educational institutions and commercial outlets. Given the importance of both education and consumerism in producing and maintaining identities, it is not surprising that these are of particular importance in the boundaries of non-Christian congregations. Through their participation in the educational system and



through the economy, individuals are socialized into the dominant culture. If a group wants to maintain its own identity, whether ethnic or religious, then it is necessary to actively define acceptable paths through these institutions. For example, while it is not difficult for members of Christian groups to find numerous retail outlets to purchase religious goods, it is more difficult to find similar outlets for Spiritualist and even Jewish or Hindu resources. As both a practical and a defensive action, minority groups define their boundaries to help ensure that their members are kept within the group. If these commercial and educational institutions are not included within the boundaries of a congregation, individuals will look beyond the group's boundaries to fulfill those needs.

It is also possible that some of these non-Christian congregations, especially the two Hindu groups and to some extent the Jewish congregations, are serving immigrants to the United States and therefore provide more links to assist in the assimilation process and maintenance of ethnic identity (Warner 1993:1062; Yang and Ebaugh 2001a: 270; Yang and Ebaugh 2001b: 367). This provides further evidence to support Will Herberg's statement that it is through religion that immigrants "[find] an identifiable place in American life" (Herberg 1960: 27–28; Warner 1998: 16).

Non-Christian congregations, along with Catholic groups, were also more likely to provide links to religious media, such as religiously affiliated magazines, television stations, and radio sites. Evangelical congregations come very close ( $p = .056$ ) to reaching the significance level for the religious media dependent variable. Although not quite at the significance level, there is a sizable literature on the role of evangelicals in media production and consumption, including publishing (Longinow 2000; Nord 1984) and television (Hoover 1988). Case studies have shown how evangelical or fundamentalist congregations are often so connected to religious media and recreation outlets that it "nearly eliminate[s] the need for secular entertainment" (Ammerman 1987: 115–116).

While many of these results reinforce previous theory and research, there were some unexpected findings as well. For instance, the analyses did not show that conservative congregations are more likely to form a boundary between themselves and secular entities even though the church-sect literature and recent empirical findings (e.g., Chaves 1999) supported this hypothesis. Future research should explore this apparent contradiction. The answer likely lies not in the total number of ties to secular entities, but in the quality or content of those linkages. Under what circumstances do conservative groups form ties to the secular world, and how do these circumstances compare to more liberal groups?

## CONCLUSION

The concept of boundaries has had a prominent, if often implied, role in our thinking about religion. Given this prominence and the suggestion that religious boundaries are shifting and being restructured, it is necessary to systematically measure those boundaries and the factors that shape them. What causes a religious group to include or exclude certain social actors from their social world?

The hypotheses that had been proposed concerning the mechanisms of religious boundary formation were partially confirmed, but other results either did not support the hypotheses or created new insights. Theologically conservative congregations do include fewer religious groups within their boundaries. This is consistent with the idea that congregations with more exclusive beliefs will limit interaction with competing groups. It also supports previous research showing that conservative groups tend to limit their interaction and associations with other religious groups (e.g., Numrich 2000; Pipes and Ebaugh 2002).

Theologically conservative congregations also include more religious media outlets, sources of religious material and resources, and parachurch groups within their boundaries. Because conservative groups are more extensive and expensive in their requirements regarding behavior, beliefs, and practice, they must define and provide network ties by which members can fulfill the demands that are made of them. If a congregation requires its members to watch religious television, read religious magazines, read religious texts, or participate in specific types of groups, then the congregation must define the paths that members can take to fulfill those requirements.

On the other hand, the analysis did not show any impact of theological conservatism on the number of secular entities within a congregation's boundaries. However, it is important to recognize that while the number of links may not be affected by theological conservatism, the type of links may be. That is, the number of secular entities included in the boundaries of liberal and conservative groups may be the same, but the qualitative nature of those ties may be very different. This is true for the other models presented, such as links to political sites, which did not show a quantitative difference due to theological conservatism even though there may still be a qualitative difference.

Although this study provides a step in understanding the content of religious organization's boundaries, further descriptive research using different methods or sources of data could go far in confirming or supplementing these findings. It is also important to continue trying to understand the implications and significance of these social and symbolic boundaries for the religious organization and its members.

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