

## REVERSING THE CAUSALITY: CONSIDERING THE IMPACT OF POLITICS ON RELIGION

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### Abstract

What are the interactions between religion and politics? The most habitual way to answer this question is to analyze the predicting probability of religiosity variables on political variables. This fundamental causal relation reflects the idea that religiosity “creates” partisanship and ideology. This paper aims to complement this approach by relying on ethnographic methods and show the dialectical relation between religion and politics. We discuss the unidirectionality of the causality (religion → politics) to show that the reverse must also be taken into account (people’s political views play a role in the choice of a religious environment). We then explore how congregants create a space for political content in a religious setting by using humor.

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What are the interactions between religion and politics? The most habitual way to answer this question is to analyze the predicting probability of religiosity variables – denomination, church attendance, doctrine – on political variables – voting behavior; partisanship, participation in social movements, and impact on public opinion. This fundamental causal relation, (A) religion → politics, reflects the idea that religiosity “creates” partisanship and ideology (Guth 2006). This paper aims to complement this approach by relying on ethnographical method and explore the process of the “creation” and exchange of political ideas within a religious environment.

The first argument developed is that in order to fully comprehend the relationship between religion and politics, we must consider the reverse of (A), i.e. we must consider what impact politics has on the religious choices people make, or (A') politics → religion. It is not just the fact of going to an Evangelical Protestant church that pushes people to support the Republican Party; we also have to take into account the fact that people might have chosen their church because of their politics. By keeping in mind that people look for a politically *congenial* rather than a *challenging* church environment, we understand better what kind of political influence churches may exert. The political influence of religion is less likely to be one of radical conversion than one where political beliefs held by people are brought into harmony with those of the rest of the group in a process of *tuning*.

The second part of the argument focuses on the arrow of causality that is of most interest to political scientists, i.e. (A) religion → politics. We explore one of the ways in which this *tuning* is taking place and political content is voiced and shared in churches. In order to analyze the process of *tuning* at work in a congregation, we zoom into a specific mode of interaction: the humor event. We argue that jocular acts enable congregants to create a space for the exchange of political content in a context primarily devoted to the spiritual.

## DATA AND METHOD

### Theoretical insights

The literature interested in understanding the relation between religion and politics has been criticized for its poor conceptualization of religion (Guth 2006). The availability of datasets such as the National Survey of Religion and Politics helps address that challenge by providing information along the two main conceptual perspectives of religiosity. The first one is the ethnoreligious perspective. It classifies respondents into Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Eastern Orthodox. This type of classification was used by Manza and Brooks in their key study of the religious cleavage and its influence on American politics (1999). A second perspective into American religion springs out of the work of Wuthnow and stresses the declining importance of inter-denominational variations, and the increasing intra-denominational polarization between a conservative and a progressive trend (1988). Guth's recent work stresses the importance to use both perspectives – the ethnocultural and what he calls the “restructuring” perspective – to better characterize the impact of religion on political behavior<sup>1</sup>.

This bi-dimensional classification provides tremendous gains in explanatory strength and precision. It constitutes a base for understanding one direction of the causality relation between religion and politics by taking religion as a given/fixed characteristic of people, and using it as a predicting factor of their vote, party affiliation and other political variables.

Some studies have alerted us to the importance of considering the reversed causal relation, (A') politics → religion. One of the hypotheses explored by Hout and Fischer (2002) to explain the significant growth in the proportion of Americans who report no religious preference<sup>2</sup> is the political atmosphere of the 1990s: “Of course, religious preference is usually thought of as a cause of political views [...]. In this trend away from religion, we are inclined to see the usual order as

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<sup>1</sup> A very convincing application of this can be found in Guth's study of the role of religion in determining support for the Bush doctrine, presented at the 2006 MPSA meeting.

<sup>2</sup> Results from the GSS analyzed by Fischer and Hout show that proportion of Americans claiming no religious affiliation increased from 7% in 1990 to 14% in 2000. This is in keeping with results from the NES for the same time frame (8% in 1992 to 13% in 2000).

being reversed by the politics of the 1990s” (p.181). The political context of the 1990s Hout and Fischer are alluding to is the rise of the Christian Right. Using data from the General Social Survey and the National Election Study, Hout and Fischer show that the increase in “no religious preference” answers is not the result of a change in piety, nor a sign of the much-debated theory of secularization (to cite but a few: Casanova 1994; Chaves 1994; Finke and Stark 1992). They argue that the growing minority of Americans claiming no religion is the result of a change in political context, and more specifically the increased visibility of the Christian Right which lead political moderate and liberals to renounce their religious attachment. This is an example of a political variable (the increasing salience of Christian Right groups at the national level) influencing directly a religious variable (the rate of affiliation with organized religion) at the aggregated level. The first part of this article seeks to explore what theoretical gain is made by considering the other arrow of causality, (A’) politics → religion, at the individual level.

Religion is usually put on the same plane as other socio-demographic variables in statistical analyses of factors influencing voting and political participation (Brooks and Manza 2004). In their study of the impact of the religious cleavage in American politics, Manza and Brooks remind us of a simple fact: “[u]nlike race, gender, and often class, one can change one’s religious identity” (1999 : 37). The increasing rates of denominational switching (Ammerman 1997; Hout, Greeley and Wilde 2001; Roof and McKinney 1987) lead us to consider what we call *freedom from religion*, or the idea that people might choose a religious environment compatible with their politics at the time in their lives when they decide to go back to church or join one: “religion follows a family life cycle; people frequently disengage from organized religion when they leave the family they grew up in and re-attach themselves about the time they start a family of their own” (Hout and Fischer 2002: 167). In the first part of the article, we show that an ethnographic approach to congregations and their members enables us to explore whether people are aware of the political reputation of the church they chose and whether that knowledge played a role in their choice. Considering both directions of the causality, (A) and (A’) equips us with a fuller understanding of the interaction between religion and political behavior.

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The second part of our paper will focus on the arrow of causality that is of most interest to political scientists, i.e. (A): religion → politics, where politics is the dependant variable. In a recent plea for political ethnography, Charles Tilly (2006) lists three types of questions that ethnography can answer. The first one on the list, and the one we think is most pertinent here, is “How does a given cause produce its effects?”<sup>3</sup> For our focus, the cause is “participation to the activities of a Presbyterian congregation” and the effect is “the shaping of political opinions”. In their study of the influence of religion in the 2004 presidential election, Guth and al. conclude their analysis on the idea that “[c]learly, religious groups have distinctive partisan alignments primarily because of the specific political views those religious groups foster” (2006: 235).

One of the variables often highlighted as influencing political behavior is attendance to religious services. In their analysis of the religious cleavage in relation to voter alignments, Manza and Brooks (1999) focus on attendance at religious services and suggest three ways in which it contributes to shaping political behavior:

- (1) it provides a context for reinforcing religious beliefs and ethical precepts; (2) it may reinforce group identities, especially as exemplified in ethnically-rooted churches found earlier in the twentieth century; and/or (3) it provides a context for connecting religious beliefs to the larger world, including politics.

Without discarding the importance of what goes on in religious services, we want to focus here on what happens outside the most prominent church activity, and what according to congregants “constitutes the life of the church”. We found in our fieldwork that most of the interaction conducive to the exchange of political ideas happens outside the service itself, during activities organized in smaller groups (Bible studies, workshops, classes) and during casual interactions between church members<sup>4</sup>. This is in keeping with recent research showing that religious service attendance is a weaker predictor for involvement in civic organizations than participation in congregation activities (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006).

Participant observation and interviews offer a crucial complement to the study of political opinions through statistical surveys. The endeavor to study values, ideologies and beliefs through survey

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<sup>3</sup> The other two types of questions that ethnography can answer are “What explains the variable processes that occur in ostensibly similar situations?” And “How can ethnographers produce valid, credible knowledge of social processes?”

<sup>4</sup> We use “member” in the loose sense of person regularly coming to church activities, not in the strict sense of someone holding an official membership to the congregation. We can note however that the higher level of interaction happens between “members” in the strict sense. Indeed we found that in both congregations, there was a sub-group of people who were involved in most of the activities, and most of them held a membership. It was essential to our entry in the field to become well-acquainted with members in the core group of each congregation.

research has been criticized for imposing a political vocabulary that does not necessarily correspond to the respondents' way of thinking about politics (Eliasoph 1998; Williams 1996). Eliasoph argues compellingly that trying to understand values and ideologies through surveys "bypass[es] the social nature of opinions, and tries to wrench the personally embodied, sociable display of opinions away from the opinions themselves" (1998: 18). Our goal here will be to observe *embodied* politics, i.e. political ideas as they are voiced by people and constructed in interaction.

Observing the process of "meaning making" is one of the main endeavors of cultural sociology (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lamont and Thévenot 2000). A few ethnographic studies published recently study American church communities as important arenas where public debate is shaped (Becker 1999; Djupe and Neiheisel 2006; Moon 2004). In her study of two Methodist congregations and their internal debate on homosexuality, Dawne Moon writes that members "thought that politics was the opposite of church, God, and the spiritual" (2004: 123). We found the same result in our interviews, the same rejection of the category "politics"<sup>5</sup>. However, we did not observe an exclusive focus on the spiritual in the small group activities of the two churches we study. The conversations between church members often departed from the spiritual, and demonstrated that members are keenly aware of the political debates around them and eager to express them in church.

As we zoom in closer to the interactions themselves, the question arises of what counts as political and what does not. We decided not to use a substantive definition of "politics" which would designate *a priori* some topics as political and others as not political. Moreover, relying only on the "natives" perspective on politics would be limiting, given the disrepute of the category highlighted by Moon. We use Eliasoph's angle of approach and focus on "a public-spirited *way of talking*, not a topic" (1998: 14-16), i.e. we consider a conversation to be political when speakers draw out the public implications of what they say. She calls "etiquette" the process of creating a context for political conversation, and defines it as follows: "citizens' companionable ways of creating and maintaining a comfortable context for talk in the public sphere" (p.21).

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<sup>5</sup> In most of the interviews with congregants in both churches, the term "politics" was used to describe struggles of power between people which were disruptive for the community, corruption, or any sign of struggle of power with negative consequences to the group or to society in general.

In our study of the interaction between church members, and how they create a context for political conversation, we are much indebted to the conceptual tools developed by Nina Eliasoph in her sharp observation of volunteers, activists and their way of *Avoiding politics* (1998). One of her main conclusions – grossly simplified here – is that the groups she studies create a “culture of political avoidance”, where people speak of narrow interests in public, and only voice broad political concerns in private conversations – “backstage”. One of the ways a group can create such a culture of “political avoidance” is by appearing to be “breaking the rules”. Eliasoph devotes a whole chapter to the forms of humor practiced in two of her studied groups. She shows that by constantly making “racist jokes, bathroom, jokes, sex jokes, and teasing” (1998: 87), group members are able to make any kind of political conversation impossible at the “front stage” of group activities (1998: 128)<sup>6</sup>. The style of humor we observed in our two congregations leads us to a different conclusion. We found that jokes were an important medium through which congregants brought the political into the church, enabling the expression and circulation of political opinions in a context where the emphasis is on the spiritual rather than the worldly.

In the course of our fieldwork, we paid close attention to humor events, jokes, remarks presented by the person who voices them as funny and received by the listeners as such. We are less interested in jokes for their function of hierarchy-building (LaFave, Haddad and Marshall 1973) or tension release (White and Winzelberg 1992) than for their role in cohesion building (Francis 1994; Seckman and Couch 1989). With Seckman and Couch, we conceptualize “jocular acts” as calling for “affiliation” (p.329) in the group where they are uttered. We are interested in two aspects of humor events: (1) their capacity to state and reinforce group cohesion around shared values; (2) how humor events enables the speaker to introduce themes that could not necessarily be introduced with serious speech in the context of utterance (Emerson 1969), for instance political themes in a religious environment. We will thus compare in our two congregations what are the values around which affiliation is reinforced through jocular acts, and what their content tells us about the members’ relation to broader political debates.

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<sup>6</sup> One could make the argument that for instance making an anti-gay joke is a political statement. Eliasoph however explains that: “The private people did refer to topics that someone else might define as tied to life, tied to the wider world: race, sexuality, and gender relations, was, work, and housing prices. But their teasing transformed anything one said into a purely personal statement about the individual speaker, not a statement about the world. It relentlessly refused to express attachment to the wider world; teasing let members keep the wider world at arm’s length, secure only about their shared disregard for the world” p.107.

## Study design

Over a one-year period, data were gathered on the congregations and individuals in two Presbyterian<sup>7</sup> churches in Northern California. This research design enabled us to control for denomination, and test the idea that beliefs are more influenced by the dynamics between congregation members than by doctrine (Chaves 1997; Moon 2004). We conducted 40 in-depth interviews with congregants of both churches. The interview questionnaire used several questions from the NES as a starting ground to measure and investigate the respondent's religious practice and their view on Biblical authority, religion in public life, and specific issues (the death penalty, gay marriage, the War in Iraq, global warming etc.). The results presented here are intermediary empirical results and will be completed by a second period of fieldwork.

### *Valley Church*

We call "Valley Church" the large conservative, predominantly White church we studied in the wealthy Contra Costa County. The median household income in 1999 for the town where the church is located is very close to \$100,000, more than twice the US average for the same year<sup>8</sup>. The church is adjacent to the Country Club, and is located in a neat suburban community with opulent private homes. The congregation has its own parking lot, regularly full, populated with four-wheel drives and mini-vans of expensive brand names.

The church has a large campus with several rooms for children's programs as well as meeting rooms for adults. The building extensions were done recently thanks to the growth in membership of the church. Two services are organized on Sunday mornings, one with traditional hymns and robes for the choir and the clergy. It appeals to the older members of the church; the other service has contemporary music and no robes, and appeals to the younger members of the congregation.

The church organizes several ongoing programs: Men's and Women's Ministries, small groups for members to meet in each other's homes, a Children's preschool and elementary school. There is

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<sup>7</sup> The congregations were members of the more liberal PC(USA) branch of the Presbyterian denomination.

<sup>8</sup> The US median household income in 1999 is \$41,994. US Census. URL: <http://factfinder.census.gov> [accessed on March 27, 2007].

also a Prayer team gathering a handful of people who meet in a small room at the back of the sanctuary and “lift up” the written prayers collected after the service and group activities.

### *Clearview Church*

This congregation is well-known in Alameda County for its liberal politics. It is predominantly White, and the median household income in 1999 for the town is around \$47,000, a little over the US average.

The church is located between a gas station, a modest private house, and a public high school. Congregants use the school’s playground as a parking lot to park their Toyota Prius<sup>9</sup>. A pole at the front of the church bears the rainbow flag, and a little flyer taped on the wall in the entrance lobby reads: “JOY [the word is in rainbow colors] We welcome and affirm all people, including people of every race, gender, sexual orientation and place of origin. Join us in celebration and community”. The Pastor and the associate Pastor are women and do not wear robes, nor does the choir.

The church has a preschool, and several committees: Eco-Steward, Drama, Family Life, Global Concern, More Light, and an Art Gang. A small Bible study group meets weekly. Service attendees meet for a “social hour” in a large room after the service, where they can find containers to recycle their batteries and buy “fairly traded” coffee.

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<sup>9</sup> During one of the workshops on “Global concerns”, a church member said he had counted 32 of the hybrid car in the congregation, and was himself thinking about buying one.

## FINDINGS

### **Political sorting of congregants: a closer look at church-shopping behavior**

The temporality in which an ethnographic study unfolds is both a limitation and an asset. The first months of a study are devoted to gaining acquaintance with the field (Briggs 1986) and selecting which sites are going to be studied in depth. This preliminary stage may seem unproductive, but in our inquiry to understand better the interaction between religion and politics, it helped us formulate a preliminary finding. People who are looking for a church community have no difficulty finding one that fits their political preference. And we found that they will actually be looking for one that fits their political taste. Information about the political reputation of a church is widely available and circulating, hence enabling people who might wish to do so to choose a church community congruent with their political views.

People looking for a church and with little knowledge of the church landscape of their living area (as was the case when we started the study) can rely on several sources of information to guide their choice.

The first source of information we relied on was the pastors of nearby churches, who readily answered our questions about where to find a politically conservative and a politically liberal church. Several pastors pointed us to Valley Church in the wealthy county of Contra-Costa for a conservative church, and to Clearview church in Alameda County for a politically liberal one. Neither of the two churches openly supports one party over another. During our 12 months fieldwork, we never heard any of the Pastors in neither church openly suggest that one party or one candidate was in any way better than another. This political neutrality on the part of the clergy of both churches had not been breached according to the people we interviewed in both congregations<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> During the interviews, we systematically asked whether “this church or the Pastor [had] ever recommended supporting a political candidate rather than another?” and “Does the church hand out voting guides when there is an election?” All interviewees responded negatively to both questions.

A quick look at the self-description of the two congregations on their website gives an indication of their respective priorities. The first words describing Clearview in Alameda read as follows: “We are an open, inclusive community where we celebrate: Social Action, Art, Music and Drama, Intellectual Challenge, Spiritual Growth, and Children & Youth”. The word “inclusive” is used by churches to declare their acceptance of “a diversity of racial and economic background as well as of gender identity and sexual preference” (Stevenson 2001). When interviewed about the meaning of the word “inclusive”, congregants in Clearview stressed the importance to welcome a diversity of sexual orientations, and to a lesser extent the importance to welcome a diversity of “ethnic background”, one might guess because they were not so successful in the latter endeavor. The presence of the rainbow flag in front of the church is another sign of congregation’s endeavor to appeal to gay Christians.

This contrast with the description on the Valley Church website: “What we affectionately call ‘Valley Church’ is a family of all ages and stages seeking to follow Jesus Christ as Savior, Lord and Friend. Valley Church is an open family, open to your spiritual aspirations”. The church emphasizes its connection to the figure of Christ, and characterizes the “openness” as an openness to “spiritual aspirations” rather than to a diversity of sexual or ethnic or socio-economic “backgrounds”. The programs of the church are also printed out in the service bulletin and emphasize family values and spirituality: Mom’s Council, Family Enrichment Classes; separate Men’s and Women’s Bible study, which are described on the church booklet as “Christ-centered enrichment classes”.

We found that many clues were available to newcomers in each congregation so that they could easily detect whether the emphasis in the congregation is on the side of conservative or liberal themes. Interviews with congregants confirmed that Clearview is overwhelmingly Democratic, with some Independents and Greens; and that congregants at Valley Church are Republicans or Independents leaning towards the Republican Party.

The fact that information about the political orientation of a church is readable does not necessarily imply that people are in the same position as sociologists looking for the right cases to do their fieldwork, and that they are going to use these information to inform their choice of a

church community. However, this very idea was suggested to us during a casual conversation with one congregant at Valley Church. When we explained to him the project in broad terms – understanding how religion shapes politics – he recommended that we pay attention to the opposite process, and to the idea that people choose their church according to their politics, an impression he had about his fellow congregants. We followed his advice, and added the following question to the questionnaire: “when you chose this church, were you aware of its political reputation?” as a way to launch a discussion on the topic.

We found that the motivations behind church choice were congruent within each congregation. Almost all of our interviewees told us that they came to Clearview because they were looking for an “open church”, because they thought that it was “a good match” or because their friends thought it was “a good match” for them and invited them to join. When asked what the matching was based on, several members explained that they left their previous church because it became “too conservative”, “not liberal enough”, and came to Clearview because of its political reputation. Several of the older members of the church recounted the episode during the Vietnam War when the sanctuary served as refuge for a conscientious objector, and the younger members were well aware of the episode.

Members of Valley Church mostly cited “convenience” as the reason why they chose the church. Jeff, a middle-aged man explains why he chose Valley Church: “I didn’t want to drive so far. If it were just my wife and I, we might have worked a little harder, might have been willing to drive more, but we’ve got two small kids, and we really did want them involved in a church that was in our community, the kids from the church go to school together.” Most of the interviewees from Valley Church were raising or had raised their children in the church, and for them raising them “in this community” was the most important. One of the interviewees describes the community as a “Republican enclave” (she was herself a Republican), a “village” where everybody knows everybody. Both the political reputation of the church and of “the community” around it were well-known to Valley Church congregants, and their decision of going to that church shows that they were looking for a *confirming* rather than a *challenging* political environment.

In our sample, we have a few interesting cases of “migration” between the two churches. Nancy, a lady in her late 60s, went to Clearview for two decades before she decided to leave it because of its political stance during the Vietnam War. We met her in Valley Church, and she explained that

many other people had left Clearview around the time she did because of its turn towards liberal politics. Reciprocally, we interviewed a woman in a lesbian couple with two children, and she explained that she preferred to drive to Clearview even though she lives much closer to Valley Church. She cites the “feeling of belonging” in Clearview, the emphasis on social justice, and the More Light Program<sup>11</sup> as the reasons why she prefers Clearview. She said she just went once to Valley Church but “didn’t feel comfortable there”. During the interview, she joked that it would be “even worse for [her] if my girls became Catholic than Republican” (she spent quite some time explaining that she was raised in the Catholic faith, Eastern rite, and the bad memories she had of her childhood church).

Our research design enables us to compare what motivates people to choose one church over the other controlling for doctrinal orientation. What differentiates the congregations, and is quickly identifiable by newcomers, is the priorities they promote. We argue that those signs render the churches appealing to people on opposing sides of the political spectrum, and creates a phenomenon of *political sorting* that leads people to “sort themselves out politically” when they choose a congregation (at the individual level, (A’) politics → religion). The cases of “switching” between the churches reinforce what we think is a simple and yet important fact to keep in mind: when people are in a situation of looking for a church community, because of geographical mobility or because their life trajectory brings them back to wanting a church environment, they will look for a congregation that is *confirming* rather than *challenging* their political preference, and politically sort themselves out.

Surveys and quantitative studies are crucial because they help us to measure how much religion participates in the creation of political opinions. But they do not enable us to see that in the case of Protestants in particular, a religious environment may have been chosen in accordance to the political views of people. This tells us that in the cases when people effectively choose their congregation to match their political preference, the influence religion in shaping political opinions is not one of radical conversion, but rather of reinforcement.

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<sup>11</sup> More Light is a program seeking “the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith in the life, ministry and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA)”. <http://www.mlp.org/>. Accessed on March 18, 2007.

The second part of this article will explore the conditions in which this reinforcement is taking place. We characterize it as a process of *tuning*, a process by which clues about the dominant political views of the group are circulating and being listened to by people.

### **Humor, or the political tuning of a congregation**

There are many ways through which churches can exert a political influence on their members. To cite but a few, they can create a sense of civic duty, raise concern for a specific interest, increase political knowledge, develop civic leadership skills (Cassel 1999). When we started the fieldwork, our expectation was that the influence would be directed from the clergy to congregants. The time spent interacting with church members, and watching them interact, lead us to explore small-group interaction as a key place where political ideas are debated and influence may be exerted. Keeping in mind the main argument developed in the first part – that many congregants self-select themselves to join a congregation that matches their political orientation – we focus in the second part on one way through which political influence is exerted once people have joined the community: humor events.

Throughout our fieldwork, we were struck by the frequency at which jokes were exchanged between congregants. We first took those exchanges to be a sign of congeniality between congregants – which they are – but quickly noticed a pattern, an unchanging style of humor dominant in each congregation respectively. Comparing the type of humor used in both congregations tells us a lot about how members in each church think about what is appropriate and what is not, how they assess and reaffirm the common ground for interaction with their fellow congregants.

We argue that a successful humor event, one that elicits laughter from its audience, contributes to the *tuning* of the group<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> It would be interesting in further research to analyze examples of failed humor events (jokes intended to be funny but received with awkward silence)

From the perspective of the joke-maker, the laughter that the joke elicits is a “reward”<sup>13</sup> and a sign that his or her point of view is shared by the other congregants. Joking is a way through which the congregant can probe whether his or her views are in tune with the rest of the group. In case of success, the humor event validates their choice of a confirming congregation, as described in the first part of the article. Here, we specify one manner in which the more general concept of “footing” can occur. With Eliasoph, we borrow Goffman’s notion of “footing” (Goffman 1979; Goffman 1980) which she describes as the process participants use to assess the ground for interaction. As Eliasoph (1998: 21) puts it: “The footing draws on that ‘inexhaustible reservoir’ of ‘common knowledge’ on which participants rely for interpreting each other’s conversations, which members intuitively understand to be giving meaning to the interaction”. By “risking a joke”, congregants are symbolically in the dark, extending their foot in front of them to see what the ground of interaction feels like and test whether they are in tune with the rest of the congregation. From the perspective of the audience of the successful humor event, group bonds are reinforced through the act of laughing together about the same content. The “cohesion-building” function of humor (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001: 140) is fully at work here.

### *Clearview*

The Bible study in Clearview takes place on Wednesday mornings. Before going to our first session, we had called the Pastor to ask for her permission to join the group and to inquire whether she knew anyone who might be willing to give us a ride there. She gave us Ellie’s phone number. In the ride to church, we learn that Ellie, a lady in her early 70s, got her PhD in psychology at the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, that she and her husband both lived three years as Presbyterian missionaries in India, and that she is very involved in church activities. The atmosphere in the Bible study room is very relaxed. There are about 12 people, all women, from a variety of age groups (half of the group is over 60 years-old). We are sitting in a circle on comfortable chairs and armchairs. The Pastor, a woman in her mid-forties, comes in with a coffee mug and a couple of Bibles for people who might not have their own. Most people do have their own copy though, penciled through and commented on in detail. Before the official start of the

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of strategic use of humor according to high/low status in the group, see Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001: 139-140.

meeting (going around the room to introduce ourselves), members are casually talking with each other, giving time to late-comers to settle down. Ellie, who is sitting to my right, says that she heard a funny joke on the radio and that she wants to share it with the group.

It goes like this: What's the difference between Rush Limbaugh and the Hindenburg?  
[pause] One's a flaming Nazi gasbag. The other's a zeppelin.

People start laughing and one of the ladies said “oh, that’s really funny!” The informal discussion then moves on, and another elderly lady utters a remark which is received with nods and smiles: “when Pat Robertson dies, he’ll be disappointed that there is so many of us there”. The “us” clearly refers to progressive people in the context of the discussion.

Both jokes were received with laughs and smiles from the attendees. With Seckman and Couch (1989: 329), we consider that this type of reaction from the audience of the jokes (laughs and smile rather than embarrassed looks or polite silence) is a sign that the jokes have not “failed” and that their “asking for affiliation” is successful. Listeners understood that the statements were offered as jokes, and their reaction confirms the shared understanding of the matter as laughable.

We only mention here a couple of the jokes exchanged during one Bible study (approximately one hour and a half), but they are typical of the joking that went on between church members at Clearview, and were always well received. We reproduce in the appendix some of the jokes exchanged by email between church members. These jokes are a sign of the full understanding people have in Clearview that they are in a group composed primarily of political liberals. Sharing those jokes confirms that understanding, and reinforces the symbolic group boundaries (Lamont and Thévenot 2000) around a clear political preference.

### *Valley Church*

Jokes in Valley Church are quite different. One of the small groups which meets on the church campus before service on Sundays is called Prime Time, and is frequented by the older members of the church. Around 40 Prime Timers meet weekly in a room where chairs are lined up to face the leader, Doug. Doug is in his early 60s; he stands behind a lectern and is always dressed in a shirt and tie. The sessions begin with small talk. The topic bouncing around is whether saying

“God bless” when someone sneezes should be considered blasphemy. After a short exchange between members, Doug concludes that “this is one of the few times in our society where we can say ‘God bless you’ without being ridiculed!”. People nod.

The theme of the meeting is the definition of sin and the idea of a gradation of sin. After looking at selected verses in the Bible, congregants comment freely on the theme. Jerry, a retired executive from Chevron, comments that “society’s definition of sin has changed...marriage used to come before kids!” People nod to his comment. Doug picks up on Jerry’s comment and jokes about how times today are different from what they used to be: “it used to be that the ladies’ bathing suits were one-piece!” As he is uttering this sentence, he is making a gesture with his arms to show how much smaller bathing suits have gotten since his youth. People in the assembly laugh and start commenting to their neighbor about what Doug has just said, about how society around them is falling apart. The normal course of the session resumes 5 minutes later.

A few weeks after this, Doug comes into the Prime Time room wearing jeans and a Tshirt. This is so unusual compared to his usual attire that he starts the session by making a joke about it: “I decided that I was too warm during the class so I decided to come in a short-sleeve shirt...” Everybody laughs because they know that this cannot be the reason. The reason for this change of attire is that he is helping move furniture in the high-school where he works during the week.

On Tuesday mornings, a group of about 35 women between the ages of 30 and more gather for the Women’s Bible study. The passage that day is the Book of Ruth. After commenting the verses to her audience, Sandra, who is one of the three rotating leaders for the Women’s Bible study, says that she is going to read what she presents as “a joke”:

Satan is holding a conference of demons, and they’re plotting for ways to steal time from Christians so that they don’t have time to create a relationship with God... “we’ll flood their mailboxes with commercials to keep them consuming, we’ll keep their husbands seeing beautiful models on the cover of magazines so that they think that outward beauty is more important, we’ll keep their wives tired so that they won’t give their husbands the love they want, we’ll give them headaches!

Her “joke” is met with approving “hum” and nods.

The same group of women meets once a month at Valley Church for the Women’s Supper, an evening of “fellowship” and “sharing” over a cooked dinner. Conversations are often very personal. One of the women at our table (there are approximately 10 women at each table)

recounts the difficult times she is having because of the really bad health condition her one-year-old baby is in. Another woman asks her how she manages to pay for the expensive health care (since the mother does not have a paying job but is working as a missionary for the church, and her husband is in Spain working). The woman replies that since she has no income and her husband is considered an “absent parent”, she qualifies for healthcare. “I’m a welfare mum!” she exclaims on a satirical tone which elicits laughter from the rest of the women there. One of the women then says: “it’s good that you learn to cheat when there are so many people who shouldn’t and who do it”.

This woman received the confirmation from the rest of the group that she was one of them, and the idea that she could be a “welfare mum”, with all the stereotypes associated to it, was just laughable. The “us” (deserving women who are entitled to use the system) is reinforced against the “them” (“welfare mums”, the undeserving ones who cheat the system).

\* \* \*

The style of humor is idiosyncratic to each congregation. In Clearview, the content of the jokes is openly political, and targets always the same political party – the Republican Party. The joke teller knows that they are not taking any risk by sharing the joke with the group because they know that the group is going to agree with the explicit attack contained in the joke. The form of humor in Clearview shows two things about the group: (1) people are well aware of the political preference of the members of the church; (2) they re-affirm this preference through humor which strengthens group bonds.

In Valley Church, the content of the jokes is not explicitly political. There is no mentioning of one party or another. But the common ground for most humor events in Valley Church is a form of discontent against the current moral welfare of American society, and the feeling that Christians are the target of that increasingly hostile society (negatives comments about the ACLU or “liberals” were recurrent in the interviews for instance).

For both churches, we only give a few examples of the numerous humor events which we observed. The first thing we observed is the infallible recurrence of the themes we briefly exposed here, and the pattern-like quality of the forms of humor in each congregation.

We also observed that jokes were made by the members who had the higher status in the congregations, with status increasing with years of membership and level of participation in church activities. This has some importance since members with higher status are able to set the tone of meetings, and are often asked for advice on “what to think about this topic”. One woman in Valley Church who was in the process of joining a weekly group, Mom’s Council<sup>14</sup>, explained how she was told what the appropriate opinion about homosexuality was during a lunch with the woman in charge of the program<sup>15</sup>.

Jokes are a way for members to escape the tacit understanding that churches are a space for the spiritual and not the worldly. Humor enables them to address political questions, position themselves about those questions, and invite their fellow members to receive their position as valid and signify their affiliation through laughing – a sign that the humor event is successful. We argue that studying forms of humor is particularly important in a religious context, because they are the channel through which the non-religious can be expressed, shared, and agreed on. Newer members of the group can learn from the jokes exchanged between senior members of the group what political opinions prevail in their group. If the humor event is successful, i.e. if the group laughs when a joke is pronounced, a newcomer in the group understands that the opinion expressed through the jocular act is affirmed by the group. Jokes are a way for church members to share political ideas without completely sabotaging the primary purpose of the group – spiritual endeavors. Given what we observed in the first part of the paper – that there is a phenomenon of political sorting when people decide on what congregation to go to – the way political beliefs are shaped in church is not a process of radical conversion, but more a process of *tuning*. We argue that jokes play a key role in this *tuning* process, since they are a way for people to voice and reaffirm group bonds around shared values. In the congregations we observed, the political influence came from interaction within members as they learn from each other rather than the

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<sup>14</sup> Mom’s Council is a weekly meeting of about 70 women, not restricted to Valley Church members, though most of the women running the program are Valley Church members. Attendees sit in tables of 10 to 12 women, and each table has a “table leader” responsible of leading the discussion.

<sup>15</sup> Extract from the interview: “I had lunch with Katie, this is when I was not a leader and I was still kind of working through my faith and all of that [...] I asked her a question, or somehow it came up, about homosexuality. And I said ‘well, as a doctor, as a pediatrician, what is your feeling about it? Are kids born with it? Is this a biological thing at all?’ and she was definite ‘no!’ Which shouldn’t surprise me, because of ... that’s the strong Christian view point. She said that it’s a choice. That it can be changed. I just remembered going ‘oh? Ok?’ and I remember I didn’t talk a lot, I just listened. And I kind of thought “ok, that’s the way we’re supposed to feel about it... ok... that’s kind of the impression I got, she didn’t say that. But that’s kind of the impression I got. And I think it’s that way about a lot of issues in general”.

influence of the clergy. We found that the specificity of the religious environment (as religious) does not so much impact the ideological positioning of church members (both congregations have an identical theological foundation) as the way through which a context for expressing and affirming political ideas is created.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The interaction between religion and politics is clarified if we consider that they stand in a dialectical relation to each other. A political ethnography of two Presbyterian congregations shows that both arrows of the causality, (A) and (A') must be taken into account in the analysis.

The first part of the research throws light on the process of political sorting that happens when people make the decision to join a congregation. Our research design – two Presbyterian congregations of comparable size and geographically close – enables us to gain a better understanding of what guides the choice of a church environment. We found that the perceived political atmosphere of a church (through the type of activities it promotes and its reputation) does influence this choice, and that congregations tend to attract people from different segments of the political spectrum.

This claim must be limited on several grounds. First, church shopping behaviors are more likely to be observed in Protestantism than in other religions given the greater diversity of the offer than in other religions (diversity of denominations, choice between small independent congregations or large Megachurches). Second, for people who had a religious upbringing, it may be difficult to distinguish the influence of their political preference as adults and the sedimentation of religious education received in childhood. We think that with those limitations in mind, holding that political preferences may influence the choice of a congregation throws light on the type of influence that religion has on political beliefs. If people look for a *confirming* rather than a *challenging* political environment as we are suggesting, then the influence of religion on political behavior is better understood in terms of reinforcement of political opinions, rather than conversion to other opinions.

In the second part of the paper, we presented one way through which political reinforcement may happen in churches. We call this process *tuning* because it conveys the idea that core Republicans will hardly be convinced to vote for a Democratic candidate and *vice versa*, but rather the idea that if a person is indecisive about an issue, group interaction in a church environment will function a source of respected knowledge about that issue, and serve as a reference point.

A church environment may at first seem contrary to the voicing of political themes. Looking at the jokes that are being made in small-group activities shows us that members do create a space for the expression of political opinions while preserving the religious setting of the event.

In future research, it might be interesting to test quantitatively the extent to which individuals self-sort politically as they choose congregations, and investigate other ways to monitor tuning in action.

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## APPENDIX

*Email from a church member of Clearview received on April 9, 2006:*

“After numerous rounds of "We don't know if Osama is still alive," Osama himself decided to send George Bush a letter in his own handwriting to let Bush know he was still in the game. Bush opened the letter and it appeared to contain a single line of coded message: 370HSSV-0773H Bush was baffled, so he E-mailed it to Condi Rice. Condi and her aides had no clue either, so they sent it to the CIA. No one could solve it at the CIA so it went to the FBI, then to the NSA. With no clue as to its meaning they eventually asked Britain's MI-6 for help. Within a minute MI-6 cabled the White House with this reply: "Tell the President he's holding the message upside down.””

*Email attachment circulated in Clearview on April 10, 2006:*

