

Conflict Within the Congregation: Lessons from Sociological Theory⁽¹⁾

John W. Hawthorne

The issue of conflict confronts the church on two levels. On one level, the external, the prophetic role of the church calls us to be in constant conflict with "the world". This is seen as a positive role of the church, attempting to call individuals to repentance and societies to justice. But a serious examination of this call, whether practiced by the Israelites fighting idolatry, or the Nazarenes fighting pornography, does not leave us with the satisfying image of the vanquishing church. Our conflicts with the world, on a number of issues, have ended, at best, in draws.

As important as this conflict is on one level, on another level, the internal, conflict is something that is feared, avoided, and suppressed. Within the congregation we sing that we are "one in the bond of love" and ignore any forces of opposition to people or pastor. As important as these two levels of conflict are, time and space considerations limit me to the second.

My primary thesis in this paper is that the inability to deal with conflict inside the congregation results from a lack of proper sociological understanding of conflict. This, I am sorry to say, is even true of sociologists in the church (including myself) who ought to know better.

My approach will be to offer a review in sociological theory, examining the role that conflict plays in the thought of both classical and modern sociologists. Following this summary, I will attempt to elaborate what I see as the implications of this sociological approach for our conflicts within the congregation.

Interpreting Conflict: A Sociological Hall of Fame

For this part of the paper, I need your active participation. Imagine with me that down the road from here we could build a Sociology Hall of Fame. Don't laugh; if they can do it for football and baseball, why not sociology? And, for the record, I don't know why it would be in Kansas City. Everyone knows that if there were a Sociology Hall of Fame, it would be in Bourbonnais, Illinois. But since we are only pretending, I'll let it ride.

Anyway, each of the corridors in the Hall of Fame is the home for a different group of sociologists. As we will see, conflict plays an important role in each of these corridors.

The Corridor of the European Conservatives⁽²⁾

In the very first corridor, we can see that sociology was born in conflict. Henri de Saint-Simon, credited by George Ritzer (1988) as one of the three French founders of the discipline, was concerned with the tensions present in a changing world order. Saint-Simon called for specific social reforms that would lessen the tensions of the conflict while still allowing society to benefit from its advances.

Saint-Simon's secretary and intellectual heir, August Comte, saw sociology as concerned with social structures and social dynamics. The latter, his term for social change, was highlighted in his view of the three stages of society -- the theological, the metaphysical, and the positivistic. The transition between stages was characterized by times of intellectual conflict.⁽³⁾ The conflict was resolved as the old stage was supplanted by the newer, more rational, stage. This intellectual conflict, then was the motivator behind major social change.

The sociologist who really put the discipline on the map was Emile Durkheim. At the heart of *The Division of Labor in Society* (1933) is the transition from a social form based on mechanical solidarity to one based on organic solidarity. As the similarity between individuals declines, there is a tension that arises between them. The conflict between individuals is supplanted by their interdependence through the division of labor.

There is one other classical sociologist in this first corridor. Max Weber, while certainly not in the same theoretical display case as the French sociologists, still is concerned with conflict. His work on bureaucracy pits the individual against the structures within which she lives and works. This "Iron Cage" demonstrates an inherent tension between individual freedom and organizational life. Varied forms of authority can either lessen or enhance conflict.

The Corridor of the Conflict Theorists

As we make a turn in our Hall of Fame (undoubtedly a left turn), we find ourselves in the Corridor of the Conflict Theorists. The first displays involve "classical" conflict theorists while the latter are more "modern".⁽⁴⁾

It is fitting that the first name we come to is that of Karl Marx. Marx, as you remember, claimed that the "history of all human society past and present has been a history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels, 1948). In capitalistic society, the source of this conflict is found in the means of production of the society. Because the owners are concerned about profit and the workers are concerned about their well-being, natural antagonisms arise. The workers become aware of their own class interests, and the fact that those interests are diametrically opposed to those of the owners. Eventually, specific but isolated phenomena bring these covert tensions out into open conflict. The result of this conflict, if it occurs naturally, is the restructuring of the entire social structure so that each individual can achieve her full potential. One other aspect of Marx's work is significant to our discussions here. Marx believed that the entire structure of the society reflected the basic economic conflicts present in the work place. In technical terms, he stated that the "superstructure" (laws, religion, arts, etc.) reflected the "infrastructure" (the means to production). In other words, the basic conflict on economic grounds was reproduced in other, more peripheral, conflicts, according to Marx, is a permanent reorganization of the economic structure resulting in the classless state. But conflict can be found at the very heart of all of Marx's social analysis.

In the next display, we find that George Simmel takes a very different view of conflict. First of all, Simmel views conflict as resulting from two sources. On the one hand, conflict comes from a competition for scarce resources. The most common of these resources is power. While this conflict seems to arise out of normal relationships, it is not necessarily the driving force behind social change. Jonathan Turner (1978) states that Simmel

formally conceptualized the variable properties of conflict phenomena in terms of (a) the degrees of regulation, (b) the degree of direct confrontation, and (c) the degree of violence between the conflict parties. (p. 129)

Conflict also may arise out of an "innate hostility". In either case this conflict, rather than resulting in the restructuring of the social system, may result in the strengthening of the organism (more on this later). One of the structural dynamics that increases the likelihood for conflict is the size of the structure. It is in this context that Simmel's work on dyads and triads comes into play. The larger the group, the more likely it is to form factions. The presence of these factions makes conflict, coalition building, and compromise a natural response of the structure.

As we move down the corridor, we approach some of the more "modern" conflict theorists. The first of these is Ralf Dahrendorf, whose work on conflict (1959) is seen as an attempt to incorporate important aspects of Weber's work into Marx's basic schema. From Weber, Dahrendorf picks up the significant concept of authority. However, Dahrendorf changes the idea of authority from being a characteristic of a person or office to that of a structure, which he called an "imperatively coordinated associations" (ICAs). Through the process of institutionalization, all positions in an ICA can be divided into either superordinate or subordinate roles. This distribution of power and authority creates the basis for competition. As the different populations who share a common position ("quasi-groups") recognize their common interests, this competition will play itself out in specific conflicts. The goal of this conflict is to redistribute the authority inherent in the ICA. Unlike Marx, there is no utopian vision in Dahrendorf. Conflict becomes the basis for organizational life. The resolution to one conflict becomes the foundation out of which the next conflict will arise.

There is one other display case we need to examine before we end our little field trip. The recent work of Anthony Giddens⁽⁵⁾, which in my opinion is some of the most promising in modern sociological theory, contains within it some important insights about the nature of conflict in everyday life. One aspect of Giddens's social theory (1979, 1984) details the relationship between social contradiction and social conflict.

According to Giddens, a social contradiction is an opposing or disjunction of structural properties of social systems, where those principles operate in terms of each other but at the same time contravene one another (1979: 141, emphasis in original).

This contradiction, paradoxically, occurs because of the demands of system integration. The forces that bring the system together, that bring disparate structures to bear on any issue, will undoubtedly make visible the inherent contradiction within the system. Conflict, on the other hand, occurs at those specific points where individuals or groups express differences of interest and action. These two are linked, according to Giddens. He says:

Conflict and contradiction tend to coincide because contradiction expresses the main 'fault lines' in the structural constitution of societal systems. The reason for this coincidence is that contradictions tend to involve divisions of interest between different groupings or categories of people....Contradictions express divergent modes of life and distributions of life chances in relation to possible worlds which the actual world discloses as immanent (1984: 198).

Conflict, then, arises as a specific and concrete expression of an underlying problem of the social structure. Any attempt to resolve the conflict may involve structural change, which would inevitably lead to new contradictions. These, in turn, would give way to new conflicts. The dialectical nature of both contradiction and conflict remain central to the work of Giddens.

As we return to the bus for our trip back to the King Center, let me offer some general comments. First of all, I would argue that conflict, in some form, lies at the heart of the sociological enterprise. Any time we analyze a piece of social structure we recognize the tensions between the various pieces of that social structure. Whether we are considering the temporary conflict present in Saint-Simon or Durkheim or the inherent conflict present in Marx or Giddens, conflict is still an important sociological reality. Second, all of these sociologists locate the conflict as present within the organizational structure rather than in individual personality (although Simmel does leave that option open). Finally, it seems evident that conflict is an important mechanism in social change. Structures are revised, reformed, and replaced due to the conflicts experienced within them.

A Sociological Approach to Conflict in the Church

For this section of the paper, I want you to assume that I don't know anything about congregations or religious life (I know that some of you will find this very easy to do!) As a novice to religious studies, I want to use the insights of the sociologists discussed above to make some suggestions about where conflict should appear within the congregation and how we should respond to it in order to create healthier churches.

As I examine where conflict should occur, it seems to me that these theorists would call for me to predict conflict in some specific places. I will state each of these in the form of a more or less testable hypothesis.

Drawing from the work of Saint-Simon and Durkheim, conflict is a temporary adjustment to problems of social or structural change. Applying this approach to the local congregation yields the first hypothesis:

H1 Conflict will emerge at times when the congregation is going through major transition (building program, pastoral change).

Compte's approach to sociology focused on the difficulties inherent in changes in systems of understanding the world. As the theological was replaced by later forms, conflict resulted until the new form was established. This relates to the congregation as:

H2 Any time a pastor attempts a major change in the ideology of a congregation, conflict will result.

If the congregation is comfortable with a view of the world that is heavily steeped in a "folk theology" that is essentially experimental and gets a new pastor whose attempt to introduce his ideas fresh from seminary, conflict will certainly result. This does not mean that the pastor should necessarily ignore the tensions, but rather that there will be conflict until the congregation adapts to the new ideological approach.

A conflict theme that shows up in both Simmel and Durkheim is that increasing the size and complexity of a social unit will cause conflict. In the congregation this is most likely related to the size of the congregation:

H3 A church that is experiencing significant growth will experience more conflict than one that is relatively stagnant.

H4 Conflict is most likely when the growth of the church is occurring from a population measurably different from the original church membership.

Church growth, for all of its desirability within religious circles, may contain the seeds of internal struggle. The congregation that is sensitive to this potential early in the process may be able to lessen this conflict.

Simmel observes that conflict results from either a personality conflict ("innate hostility") or because of competition for scarce resources. Because conflict within the congregation is seen as negative and violent outbursts are never tolerated, the conflict in the church should be fairly limited:

H5 Conflict will be most likely to occur on specific issues of disagreement between the pastor and the church board.

The only place that direct confrontation is allowed is in the private meetings of the church board. The issue may not be particularly salient, but will probably occur at a point where there is a struggle of control between pastor and people.

In a similar vein, Dahrendorf identifies the potential for conflict as resulting from authority relationships within the social setting. This, in some ways parallels Weber's work on the nature of authority and power. There is always a dialectical tension between the superordinate and subordinate parties in an ICA. In the church setting, this may translate into a tension between the clergy (at various levels of organization) as religious "experts" and the laity as religious "amateurs":

H6 There is an ongoing tension between the religious positions of the clergy and those of the laity within the congregation.

This instability is a part of the ongoing life of the church.⁽⁶⁾

One aspect of Marx's approach to conflict depended on the differing interests of the owners and the workers. As the workers realized that their interests were diametrically opposed to those of the owners, revolution would result. While in our church revolution is not likely, a division between the denomination and the congregation does exist with respect to the ownership of the church and property. This may, at certain times, result in specific conflict:

H7 Conflict between the denomination and the local congregation will occur at those points where ownership (in either legal or identity terms) is at stake.

H8 When the focus of obligation is turned from the local level to the denominational level, conflict will result.

When a District Superintendent is seen to put his priorities over those of the local congregation, trouble will result. Similarly, as general, district, or educational budgets increase, or the focus of the denomination is perceived as moving to Kansas City instead of local ministry, there will be conflict.⁽²⁾

Giddens sees the important element of social analysis to be more dependent on the idea of contradiction than it is on conflict. Conflict is only the specific manifestation of a deeper structural contradiction. The essential contradiction in the church, as I see it, lies in the difference in the experiences between the clergy and the laity. The contradiction exists because while the laity are struggling to combine sacred and secular worlds into an integrated package, the clergy spent most of their time in the sacred realm, largely removed from the secular world of their parishioners. This essential contradiction will give birth to specific conflicts:

H9 Conflict between laity and clergy is most likely to erupt over the pastor's ability to understand the specific issues the laymen is facing.

H10 Conflict is likely to emerge over differences between the occupational demands of the clergy and those of the laity.

All ten of these hypothesis are only my suggestions of what the sociologist who have preceded me would have expected within congregations in the Church of the Nazarene. They are not intended to raise a furor. It is my hope that by being attentive to them, we can develop a more positive approach to church conflict than I think we have seen in the past.

How then can we respond to conflict in the church? Working from some of these hypotheses, allow me to make a few more personal observations. First of all, we need to develop a shared approach to ministry. To the extent that the clergy and laity are see as interdependent (as Durkheim would expect of Organic Solidarity), the problems mentioned in H6, H9, and H10 can be lessened.

Second, the Marxian problem (H7 and H8) can be lessened if the denomination (as represented by Kansas City) can be seen as facilitator in ministry rather than a bureaucratic entity interested in self-protection. Don't panic! I didn't accuse you of being hierarchical. I'm talking about the perception which can, in itself, generate conflict. Not to steal from Chuck Gailey, but if "Headquarters" was called a "Resource", conflict might not reach the levels it does currently.

Third, the first five hypotheses must be recognized as "normal" conflict. These will occur. But they are not necessarily negative. As Coser's work (1956) illustrates, conflict may actually help to identify group boundaries and assist environmental adaptation. Conflict, in this light, is not a bad thing. It is a temporary aberration in the normal, healthy development of a congregation. It may be analogous to the way the family system is battered with rebellion in

teenagers as a temporary problem on the way to mature relationships between adults within the family.

Out of this observation, please allow me to make one final observation. I recently finished a class session in my sociology of religion class on the importance of myth in religious life. These myths provide us with a way of understanding the present world and anticipating the future world. Myths do not have to be supernatural. I believe that they are simply a choice of stories that we pass along. (The missionary doctors on the "Today Show" or Scott Chamberlain in his skid row church are both mythical in their own ways.) What I realized was that I do not think I have ever heard a good story about conflict in the church. They all seem to end with the pastor leaving, and the church either becoming stagnant or splitting. However, if I am right in only some of my observations about conflict, there must be many more churches that have successfully dealt with a conflict situation and had a healthier body for it. If we as sociologists can assist church leaders in recognizing the positive benefits of conflict, and give concrete examples that can become the basis for future myths, the denomination will be stronger because of our meeting here together this week.

Works Cited

- Coser, Lewis. 1956. *The Functions of Social Conflict*. New York: Free Press.
- Dahrendorf, Ralf. 1959. *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. New York: Free Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. 1948. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. New York: International.
- Ritzer, George. 1988. *Sociological Theory (2nd Ed.)*. New York: Knopf.
- Turner, Jonathan H. 1978. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.

Sources In Sociological Theory

Ashley, David and David Michael Orenstein. 1985. *Sociological Theory: Classical Statements*. Newton, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Collins, Randall and Michael Makowsky. 1984. *The Discovery of Society (3rd Ed.)*. New York: Random House.

Kinloch, Graham C. 1977. *Sociological Theory: Its Development and Major Paragigms*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Martindale, Don. 1981. *The Nature and Types of Sociological Theory (2nd Ed.)*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Ritzer, George. 1988. *Sociological Theory (2nd Ed.)*. New York: Knopf.

Turner, Jonathan H. 1978. *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.

1. Presented at the Ninth Annual Meeting of the Association of Nazarene Sociologists of Religion, Kansas City, Missouri, February 9, 1990.
2. Since I am providing in this paper a general coverage of a variety of theorists with respect to conflict, rather than an in-depth examination of one theorist, I am going to break my normal pattern and not cite my sources except for direct quotes. I provides some general primary and secondary sources in the bibliography.
3. This is surprizingly similar to the argument made by Thomas Kuhn (1970). Kuhn pictured paradigmatic changes as resulting from political fights over the "right" view of reality.
4. As you know, it is hard to be specific given the young age of the discipline. The "classical" sociologists wrote about 100 years ago while the "modern" are a mere 40 years old at most.
5. I first discovered Gidden's social theory at an ASA meeting in 1984. As entranced as I was with his arguments at that time, I lost track of his work until last semester, I cannot claim to do justice to Gidden's theory, but it has too much potential for me to leave it out of this paper.
6. Preliminary support for this hypothesis may be seen in the gap between the clergy and the laity in the perception of how well the laity make moral decisions that appeared in the Christian Action Commission version of the Listening Post. While about 85% of the laity felt that laity were capable of making these decisions, only about 67% of clergy agreed.
7. I tend to see the 1985 General Assembly in Anaheim as a good example of the latter.