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Silent Disagreement: Microinteractional Solutions to Moral Dissent among Catholic Converts

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Abstract: How do converts manage their disagreements with religious teachings? Previous literature on religious dissent has largely focused on church members advocating change or apostatizing, solutions largely unavailable to initiates. Based on six months of ethnographic observations in a Catholic conversion class and 21 in-depth interviews with converts, sponsors, and teachers, I demonstrate how microinteractional norms encourage an atmosphere of silence around disagreement. I then show how initiates explain this conflict avoidant response by justifying their doubt, engaging in a process of *hierarchical deference*, in which initiates call upon the top-down structure of the Catholic Church to defer control upward, and faulting human imperfection rather than the institution itself. While "culture wars" debates of the past two decades have investigated a purported moral polarization of the American public, this study contributes to a growing literature on how the moderate majority negotiates disagreements between their beliefs and religious teachings.

Keywords: culture wars, Catholicism, conversion, homosexuality, contraception

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INTRODUCTION

Over two decades of “culture wars” debates warned of increasingly polarizing stances on moral issues such as family, education, and politics (Hunter 1991; for a review, see Fischer and Mattson 2009). Yet current scholarly consensus reveals that the majority of the American public is moderate; moral polarization instead occurs among the elite (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2011; Hoffmann and Miller 1998; Uecker and Lucke 2011; Williams 1997). In fact, only 10-14% of Americans hold beliefs at the extremes (Hunter 2006), thus it is essential to turn our attention to how the moderate majority forms their opinions.

Significant research investigates how religious affiliation guides political and social attitudes (Danielsen 2013; Emerson, Smith, and Sikkink 1999; Hout and Wilde 2004; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Woodberry and Smith 1998; Wilde and Glassman 2016). However, religious affiliation rarely comes without doubt (Hunsberger, Pratt, and Pancer 2002; Krause and Ellison 2009; Yamane 2007). Exploring the process by which laypersons doubt or disagree with the beliefs of their denomination can illuminate how the moderate majority forms their stances despite the moral polarization of religious leaders.

The present study focuses on a group of American Catholic converts’ disagreements with Catholicism’s stances on homosexuality and contraception. Based upon six months of ethnographic observation of a Catholic conversion class in an East Coast parish and interviews with 21 converts, sponsors,¹ and conversion teachers,² this paper identifies how microinteractional processes enable Catholic converts to deal with dissent. This study demonstrates how microinteractional norms encourage an atmosphere of silence around disagreement between the Church’s conservative stances on moral issues and converts’ own liberal stances. To explain this conflict avoidant response, converts draw upon three primary processes: they justify doubt, engage in a process of *hierarchical deference* – in which they call upon the top-down structure of the Catholic Church to defer control and resultant blame upward – and fault human imperfection within the institution rather than the institution itself. While “culture wars” debates investigate a purported moral polarization of the American public, this study contributes to a growing literature on how the moderate majority negotiates disagreements between their beliefs and religious teachings, highlighting the importance of microinteractional norms and organizational context in how American converts shape their moral attitudes.

RELIGIOUS DISSENT, CONVERTS, AND MICROINTERACTION

Sociologists of religion have long investigated how religious organizations manage disagreement or noncompliance in their pews (Ammerman 1990; Chaves and Sutton 2004; Kniss 1996; Kniss and Chaves 1995; Wilde 2007). On an individual level, congregants deal with disagreement by advocating change within the organization (Bruce 2011; Dillon 1999; Miller 2014), compartmentalizing competing beliefs (Greeley 1977; Read and Eagle 2011), deeming certain teachings more essential than others (Baggett 2009; Dillon 1999), or leaving the faith altogether (Coates 2013; Davidman and Greil 2007; Davidman 2015; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007). Yet these strategies do not apply to converts, whose precarious social position and nascent religious identity limits their ability to advocate change or prioritize core beliefs.

Scholarship must examine converts' strategies for dealing with dissent for three primary reasons. First, conversion is increasingly common. One-third of all Americans switch religious affiliations (Loveland 2003), and up to 50% of young adults have switched at least once thus far (Smith with Snell 2009). Previous studies of conversion contend that initiation precedes belief (Davidman 1991; Greil 1977; Long and Hadden 1983), but fail to specify what enables converts to overlook disagreements before initiation. Second, resolving disagreements is important during conversion since those joining a faith in adulthood make a concerted choice to do so, perhaps with otherworldly consequences in mind (Yang 2005). Social issues, perhaps peripheral for those raised in the faith (Baggett 2009), remain salient for initiates who have not yet identified which beliefs they deem core. Third, converts provide an opportunity to develop theories on how individuals manage dissent on a local level, given that their strategies may result directly from observable interactions in the conversion classroom. The majority of studies on dissent neglect the contexts that shape strategies for managing disagreement. When scholarship does consider institutional contexts, it explores stances of the elite rather than those of average adherents (Ecklund, Park, and Sorrell 2011; Ellis 2015; Neiheisel and Djube 2008; Olson and Cadge 2002; Smidt et al. 2003; Wilde and Danielsen 2014). By examining the micro level, the present study highlights how institutional settings shape local strategies of dissent.

Three major works to-date have drawn upon a microinteractional approach to Catholic dissent. In *The Spirit's Tether* (2013), Mary Ellen Konieczny argues that group processes generating solidarity resolve conflicting attitudes. Likewise, Jerome Baggett (2009) employs a "cultural toolkit" (Swidler 1986) approach to demonstrate how parishioners prioritize core beliefs while engaging in interpretive practices of negotiating, reframing, and innovating to manage potential disagreements with top-down religious teachings. Finally, Michele Dillon (1999) investigates how marginalized pro-change Catholics forge a coherent identity by cultivating common ground while using doctrine to advocate for change within the Church.

However, taken together, these studies do not fully explain the case of converts, given their precarious status as outsiders, at least in the early stages of conversion. Konieczny's Simmelian framing, in which internal cohesion develops as a result of external conflict (Simmel 1971), operates where strong social ties bind an individual to a group identity. Yet converts lack both polarizing boundaries with outsiders and strong ties to their emerging religious identity, restricting their ability to draw upon group solidarity to continue participating despite dissent. Furthermore, converts lack sufficient doctrinal knowledge to advocate change (Dillon 1999) and interpretive tools to negotiate teachings (Baggett 2009). As a result, converts must draw upon alternate strategies to resolve conflict.

Randall Collins' (2009) symbolic interactionist account of violence can elucidate such alternate strategies. Collins argues, contra conventional wisdom, that "conflict is hard." Individuals in contentious situations predominately experience confrontational tension/fear, an avoidant response that facilitates rituals of Durkheimian solidarity rather than conflict. Actors try to avoid conflict whenever possible, particularly among those perceived as equals and particularly in situations of bodily co-presence (Collins 2009; Katz 1999). In this approach, behavior is a product of the situation rather than a product of static principles held by an individual. In the vast majority of potential disputes, then, actors succumb to confrontational tension/fear due to the exigencies of the situation, which favor solidarity over conflict (Collins 2005, 2009). In this paper, I assert that initiates yield to confrontational tension/fear rather than

conflict in situations of disagreement because, while lacking Simmelian group solidarity, they seek *interactional* solidarity with their new coreligionists. Drawing on lessons from Collins' microinteractional approach to conflict improves our understanding of how religious newcomers deal with dissent.

CATHOLIC CONVERSION IN CONTEXT

Perhaps no religious organization is better positioned for inquiry on dissent than the Catholic Church, whose stances on moral issues are explicit and communicated hierarchically. The issue of dissent is also particularly salient since American Catholics disagree at high rates. An estimated 77% of U.S. Catholics believe the Church should condone the use of birth control, and 50% believe the Church should recognize gay marriage (Pew 2014). Rates of dissent are substantial even among highly committed Catholics, of whom 60% say one can be a good Catholic while using artificial contraception and 31% say one can be a good Catholic without obeying the Church's teaching on abortion (D'Antonio, Dillon, and Gautier 2013). The election of Pope Francis and his subsequent statements on family issues make such debates all the more relevant (Povoledo and Goodstein 2014).

A common narrative told about the Catholic Church over the past several decades is its consistent attrition. In 2007, an estimated 32% of Americans raised Catholic had left the Church (Pew 2011). Yet this obscures another vital story about Catholic Church membership: approximately 2.6% of all American adults joined the Catholic Church in adulthood (Pew 2011), mostly from mainline Protestantism (Hout, Greeley, and Wilde 2001). Although a majority of converts join for marriage (Hoge 1981), research suggests that transition to adulthood is a life stage ripe for potential for conversion (Smith and Snell 2009). Furthermore, with the rise of Protestant-Catholic intermarriage, conversion for marriage may be less prevalent than in the past (Kalmijn 1991).

To convert to Catholicism today, initiates participate in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) (Yamane 2012, 2014; Yamane, MacMillen, and Culver 2006). Over two million Americans have been initiated into Catholicism through RCIA in the last 25 years, or 10% of all American Catholics (Yamane 2014). RCIA is led by priests or devoted congregants, with weekly meetings leading up to Easter baptism or confirmation. According to sections 1229-1233 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

The second Vatican Council restored for the Latin Church "the catechumenate for adults, comprising several distinct steps." The rites for these stages are to be found in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA). . . . Christian Initiation of adults begins with their entry into the catechumenate and reaches its culmination in a single celebration of the three sacraments of initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist.³

Studies of Catholic conversion have found that the experience of initiation depends on characteristics of the parish (Maines and McCallion 2002; Yamane 2012, 2014), a point I expand upon by considering the hierarchical characteristics of the Catholic Church more broadly. Teachers adapt conversion classes to the needs of the initiates, bridging institutional norms and situational demands (Maines and McCallion 2002). Furthermore, pedagogical differences in the conversion classroom influence the degree to which initiates engage their new faith and integrate into their new faith community (Yamane 2012, 2014). This research, emphasizing the

key role of conversion teachers in facilitating initiation, points to the necessity of a study such as this, on the other side of the relationship: how converts themselves facilitate engagement with their new faith in the face of potential dissent.

METHODS

This study is based on six months of participant observation of an RCIA class at an East Coast urban parish that I call St. Augustine and in-depth interviews with 21 participants in this class. Between October 2012 and April 2013, I conducted observations at St. Augustine twice a week for approximately three hours per visit.⁴ Additionally, I observed a handful of social activities planned for participants, including spaghetti dinners and gatherings at the rectory, and attended Mass with initiates on most major Catholic holidays. In total, I amassed 200 pages of single-spaced field notes based on nearly 100 hours of observation. I coded and analyzed these data inductively using the qualitative analysis program *Nvivo*.

RCIA classes at St. Augustine ran for one hour and 15 minutes, followed by Sunday Mass, attended as a group. Four lay Catholics worked as a team to teach the class of 13 Catholic initiates and four of their sponsors. A typical session began with a lecture on the Bible or Catechism, or a 45-minute long video followed by group discussion. Dimitri,⁵ an initiate, cheekily described the class: “[The teachers] would ask us what we learned from the video and then we would give our two cents about abstract Catholic concepts.” Optional supplementary sessions on Thursday evenings ran for an hour and a half; two seminarians training for priesthood served as additional teachers, leading prayers and lending expertise in open forum discussions.

After Easter initiation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 participants, including all four RCIA teachers, both seminarians, and 13 of the 17 regular attendees, comprised of 10 initiates and three sponsors, one Catholic who participated in RCIA to enrich her faith, and one convert from the previous year’s RCIA. The number of converts in the sample totaled 15, including 13 initiates, one teacher, and one sponsor. Initiates joined the Church through baptism for those never baptized, through “full communion” for those baptized Protestant, or through “confirmation” for those baptized Catholic who had not completed the sacraments to become full members of the Church. The initiates in the interview sample expressed a diverse array of reasons for joining the Catholic Church: some were introduced to Catholicism by a friend (four out of 15), romantic partner (four out of 15), or family member (two out of 15), while others described a period of intellectual searching before choosing Catholicism (five out of 15).

Case Selection

A Catholic parish is an ideal site to examine the local negotiation of moral attitudes, as “parishes are ordinarily the primary way in which most Catholics experience their church” (Konieczny 2013:7), and Catholic initiation is an ideal setting to examine how converts grapple with potential dissent. In an interview, Allison, one of the conversion teachers laughingly relayed that before RCIA was reinstated at the second Vatican Council, “people would [say] ‘I’d like to join the Church,’ and they’d be like, ‘Okay! Here’s some water.’” Contrasting this perceived instant baptism pre-Vatican II, the RCIA program I observed introduced initiates to beliefs, practices, and rituals over the course of six months.⁶

I selected St. Augustine in part because its RCIA program is atypical. As a “student parish,” its members were predominately from area universities, with the remaining share coming from the lower-middle class, racially-diverse surrounding neighborhood. As such, the vast majority of the Catholic initiates in the sample were highly-educated young people, largely in their 20s, exposed to a liberal, secular environment in tension with conservative religious values (Ecklund and Scheitle 2007; Wuthnow 1985). These Catholic initiates adopted liberal positions on social issues, conflicting with their newly-acquired religious tenets, representing a clear case of tension between Church teachings and secular values. Despite this, St. Augustine’s RCIA teachers viewed their program as more traditional than other RCIA programs. For instance, Simon, a cradle Catholic and RCIA teacher, articulated a perceived difference between St. Augustine and other parishes:

[W]e’re very intellectual here, which is probably good because most of our [initiates] are students . . . I’ve heard of RCIA groups in a normal parish where “God loves you” [is] all they ever really talk about, and they don’t really talk about what it means to be a Catholic. . . . I’ve heard of the more happy-clappy, the feel-good stuff.

Allison, the lead teacher of the RCIA program, herself a law school student, corroborated, “[W]e’re on the more orthodox side of typical. You read on blogs horror stories about, ‘In RCIA I asked about abortion, and they were like, ‘Abortion is great.’ I read that and I’m like, ‘oh man, let’s not be like that.’”

FINDINGS

The initiates at St. Augustine largely disagreed with Catholic teachings on homosexuality and contraception. Despite these disagreements, initiates avoided conflict; classroom interactions with conversion teachers facilitated this avoidance. To reconcile avoidant behavior with internal disagreement, initiates justified the existence of doubt, relied upon a strategy of hierarchical deference, and recognized human imperfection within the institution. Before proceeding with the analysis, I outline initiates’ disagreements with the Catholic Church.

Initiates’ Disagreements

Behind closed doors, all but one of the 15 converts (13 RCIA participants, 1 converted teacher, and 1 converted sponsor) in my sample admitted to disagreeing with some Church teachings. Nine of the 15 converts struggled with the Church’s teaching on homosexuality. Only two converts agreed with the Church on homosexuality; the remaining four were silent on the issue.⁷ As Bryan, a young white initiate and pre-med college student, told me, sighing in defeat:

I didn’t like when we talked about the moral things like what you should believe as a Catholic in regards to gay marriage or homosexuals in general. . . . I grew up being very liberal and I still am very liberal, so a lot of those things made me uncomfortable and almost question the whole thing.

Just as Bryan’s disagreement about homosexuality challenged his decision to join the Church, as a teacher, Allison’s disagreement about homosexuality made her question whether she was fit to lead RCIA. Allison is a late-20s white law student who had converted to Catholicism a few years ago. With a nervous chuckle, Allison divulged that she took “a shot of alcohol so that I

would be able to talk about it with Father Patrick [the parish priest]. And [he said] to me, ‘This is a question that any thinking Catholic should be asking themselves’ [which] made me feel much more at home in this community than I had.”

Two initiates described family ties as reasons they disagreed with teachings on homosexuality. Natalia, a Latina initiate and PhD student, told me, shaking her head, “[About] homosexuality, two of my cousins are gay so I cannot hate. I cannot be like, ‘Well, you’re going to Hell,’ because they’re not.” Similarly, during my interview with Regina, a 30-something graduate student initiate, she sighed and gazed down at her lap, where she cradles her infant during RCIA class, telling me:

[On] gay marriage I still felt the same way after [RCIA] as before, because when I look at [my baby son] I don’t know what he’s going to want, and I want him to have a partner he loves deeply. I don’t want him to be the affable gay uncle. I have skin in the game.

Eight out of 15 converts voiced disagreements regarding contraception. Five of the remaining seven converts were silent on the issue; two agreed with the Church teachings on contraception. Christine, a white college freshman, was the most visibly eager initiate of the group – she frequently boasted about attending Mass weekly for a year before starting RCIA. Christine never expressed doubt of any kind in the conversion class, yet in our interview, she was forthcoming: “There are some rules that I don’t agree with, like things that are a little bit too ancient that need to be revised. But I just don’t say anything about it to people.” She went on to specify, “Like the thing with contraception. I don’t personally use any of that, so it doesn’t really pertain to me, but I just have different views for certain people that I know. They would be pregnant or getting an abortion if they weren’t using it.” Likewise, Brittany, an African American medical intern and initiate, once confided, “I’ve been worried about what will happen when [the teachers] bring up certain social issues because I’m pretty progressive [about] issues like birth control.”

Two female initiates admitted they used contraception. As Darcy, a white college senior, reasoned, “The way I look at it is, God’s not going to hate me if I want to use contraceptives.” Regina, married with one child, explained her use of birth control pills in light of teachings on natural family planning:

I still take birth control every day. When I talked to my sponsor about it, she was telling me that the rhythm method⁸ that they practice as Catholics is just as effective as artificial birth control. [By using this method] you’re impeding God’s will just as much as I am, so I’m not splitting hairs about this, and I’m not risking the economic wellness of my family to be pushed into something I’m not ready to do.

Conflict Avoidance

Despite expressing disagreements in the interview setting, in the conversion classroom, the Catholic initiates in my sample most often avoided conflict. Conversion teachers were complicit in this process. When disagreements with institutional rules might have elicited confrontation in the conversion classroom, microsituational demands won out. Initiating conflict required circumventing confrontational tension/fear (Collins 2009), a path most avoided in favor of civil

interaction (Smith, Phillips, and King 2010). These microinteractional pressures cultivated an atmosphere of silence surrounding potentially contentious issues.

As Bryan, the pre-med student initiate, described it:

I had so many questions when I first came in, and I feel like a lot of them weren't answered 'til the very end. I wanted to ask big questions right in the beginning and get some answers, but I didn't really get that chance 'cause I didn't want to ask them in front of everyone else.

Teachers were aware that students might feign agreement. Lead teacher Allison admitted to succumbing to conflict avoidance:

Sometimes I have the sense that we would go over a complex topic and people would be like, "Yeah, that makes total sense." And I'd [think], "No, it doesn't. You don't actually think that." . . . there was a temptation to whitewash things on both sides, because if somebody agrees when I ask a question, they're tempted to just pretend they completely are on board with everything and then I'm tempted to just move on, because that's easy.

A session devoted to learning about Mary, Jesus' mother, exemplified Allison's point. Simon, one of the teachers, himself a white college student, repeatedly mentioned that non-Catholics struggle with the Catholic perspective on Mary. He listed Catholic doctrines on Mary, asking the converts to challenge whatever they found problematic: "That she was the mother of God? That she was ever-virgin?" The room fell silent. Initiates averted their gaze and bowed their heads, avoiding eye contact with the teachers. Most students sat hunched, some with their arms crossed. After an extended silence, Maggie, another white college-age teacher, acknowledged the lack of questions with a quick nod, uttering: "Awesome." Class was dismissed shortly thereafter.

Less than two weeks later, Roberto, a Latino college student initiate, raised a disagreement about Mary in a roundabout fashion, circumventing confrontational tension/fear by deferring conflict to his Protestant family members. Stumbling over his words, Roberto described his mother's incredulity at Catholic worship of Mary: "It makes sense to me that Mary is Jesus' mother, why not worship her? But my family seems to really not understand Mary. . . . How should I explain it to them?" The teachers' immediate response was to remind Roberto that Catholics do not worship Mary but rather "worship Jesus *through* Mary." More telling than their reply was Roberto's insistence that his family's confusion was not his own—one way to avoid direct confrontation.

Occasionally, conflict avoidance manifested as performed apathy. Instead of appearing nervous to disagree, role distance (Goffman 1961) conveyed disinterest. Some initiates cast their eyes downwards during the majority of a class session. One initiate habitually examined her fingernails. Another perpetually gazed down at the cell phone hidden in the crux of his knee. When I asked Philip, Christine's sponsor, himself a white college student, to describe an RCIA session he disliked, he laughed, "The one where Monsignor Somebody came in [to lecture on indulgences]. . . . A lot of people fell asleep. I woke up and looked around the room, 'Oh, I feel so much better. I'm not the only one [asleep].'" Performed apathy in the classroom served as another method of conflict avoidance.

Conflict Avoidance at the “Current Moral Issues” Session

“We’ll cover what the Church believes about certain issues and why. But it’s important to keep in mind that you don’t have to agree yet. Make sure to come in with questions and concerns. Not agreeing with a Church teaching does not make you ‘not a Catholic’ or ‘not a good Catholic,’” RCIA teacher Allison assured Brittany, an initiate, in a conversation about the upcoming Sunday class devoted to “current moral issues” of abortion, contraception, homosexuality, and capital punishment.

This sentiment was repeated the night before the Sunday session, when teachers and initiates convened at the city’s cathedral for the Rite of Election. Braving the blustery February winds to take a group photograph, Allison prepared the group for the following day’s session, saying, “This is a time for deep reflection. You should come with questions and doubts.” Maggie, one of the quieter RCIA teachers, muttered, “We’d be surprised if you didn’t have any.” The RCIA teachers verbalized the appropriateness of dissent at this stage of conversion.

The following afternoon, the “current moral issues” section began with a short lecture on sin, complete with a handout explaining the difference between mortal and venial sin. For the subsequent discussion, teachers arranged chairs in a circle to facilitate an open forum. However, facing each other merely highlighted the number of bowed heads and averted gazes. Only five of the eight RCIA participants spoke at all. In the overheated basement classroom, the air hung heavy, stifling an already strained conversation marked by prolonged pauses.

Cheeks flushed, Regina, a candidate preparing for confirmation, asked whether voting in favor of gay marriage was appropriate: “I’m married and am obviously not going to enter into a same-sex relationship, but are we expected to vote [in elections] to impose the same on others?” The teachers squirmed in their seats, but ultimately discouraged voting for same sex marriage. Later, after fielding a question about abortion in the case of rape, Max, a white college student and RCIA teacher, smiled and shared, “Maggie and I are in [a pro-life organization] and we actually found out that the proceeds from Girl Scout cookies go to Planned Parenthood, so we don’t buy Girl Scout cookies. But when someone asks if I want to buy them, I just say ‘no,’ rather than saying why.” Here, Max’s engagement of a contentious issue aligned with traditional “culture wars” approaches to moral polarization.

Although she typically avoided conflict, at the current moral issues session, Cassandra, Dimitri’s fiancée and sponsor, herself a 20-something white graduate student, chimed in immediately after Max’s Girl Scout cookie comment. Increasing her volume, fixing her gaze directly in front of her at no one in particular, Cassandra declared that she disagreed, and that “God is merciful, and whatever people do, He understands.” Even though Cassandra contradicted Max’s remark, the teachers remained silent. When Max later chronicled the session in our interview, he admitted to grappling with competing desires to explain the Church’s stances more fully and avoid alienating potential members. Describing his reaction to Cassandra’s comment, Max hedged, “I struggled at that moment. I was like, ‘Do I say something?’ And you try to calculate your words very carefully because those sorts of topics can be really kind of tense. I don’t think I ended up saying anything at that point.” This rare instance of overt confrontation was met with silence, stopping disagreement in its tracks.

Unprompted in their interviews months later, Cassandra, Natalia, and Dimitri all cited the Girl Scout cookie incident as an instance of disagreement. Cassandra used it to denounce the strictness of RCIA teachers. Furrowing her brow, she described the incident in her own words: “We were having one of our discussions and I think Max said . . . he doesn’t buy Girl Scout cookies because Girl Scouts have some sort of donation for Planned Parenthood. . . . It’s like, do not sit there and tell me you boycott Girl Scout cookies because of that. I think that’s utterly ridiculous.” Dimitri, a young white war veteran, joining the Church as Cassandra’s fiancé, likewise responded negatively to the incident: “Who was that one guy that talked about how he didn’t buy Girl Scout cookies because they indirectly gave money to Planned Parenthood? Come on man, I don’t even know how you can buy anything then, if you’re going to trace it that far back.”

Natalia, another Catholic preparing for confirmation, took issue with the Girl Scout cookie comment, teasing, “I was like, ‘But I love the cookies and I was going to buy them!’ How could you say no to a girl [who] looks at you with those big eyes, ‘Come buy my cookies?’” Then Natalia’s smile faded: “But in all seriousness, I didn’t like the way he said you shouldn’t go and buy cookies [since] they support Planned Parenthood. I think they should have approached it in a different way. Those are hard topics to talk about, especially with hardcore Catholics like the instructors.” The Girl Scout cookie incident served as a lighthearted way to spark a conversation about “culture wars”-style disagreements. Although these critiques were never raised in the classroom, they lay heavy on the minds of some initiates, even several months later.

Immediately after the “current moral issues” class session, the group shuffled silently from the basement classroom to Mass. After Mass, I struck up conversation with Bryan, who had stayed silent in class that day. Bryan chortled, “I didn’t want to speak up and say I disagree with everything.” In general, despite private disagreements with Church teachings, the current moral issues session passed with little overt conflict. One of the teachers, Maggie, felt satisfied by the lack of conflict: “It went surprisingly well. Somehow I was expecting [it to be] more [like] debates I’ve had with other people including other Catholics where it gets heated really fast.” Max, however, judged the absence of conflict a negative light, worrying that the initiates withheld questions: “Maybe people don’t want to ask a question because they feel like it reflects badly on them, or worse that we’re going to hold them back, which isn’t going to happen unless there’s something fundamentally that is un-Christian.”

Initiates, too, noticed this absence of conflict in the classroom. As Dimitri told me, “[The teachers] handled it in a way that avoided being judgmental I think, kind of avoided picking a fight about it. But they basically glossed over it, so it was a very PC way of doing it. Nobody really objected to it, so it didn’t get too in-depth.” Similarly, Abe, a sponsor in his late 20s, who himself converted three years prior from Evangelical Christianity, explained, “Everything [the teachers] said was in line with the Church, but I think that people don’t ask these sorts of questions typically. It was sort of like, ‘So what do you guys think about that?’ And then no one said anything. There was a lot more silence [than I expected].” Overall, faced with a microsituational imperative to remain non-combative, initiates rarely deigned to ask direct questions. On the rare occasions they ventured questions hinting at dissent, initiates appeared reluctant or apathetic, or pinned the source of disagreement on an external source, such as a Protestant family member.

Justifying Doubt

In our interviews, disagreement did not raise deep concern. As Dimitri, the war veteran converting for marriage, asserted, “There’s things I disagree with, but there’s no right or wrong. Like that’s what the Church says, [but] this is how I feel. Whether it really matters or not, I don’t think anybody knows except God.” Natalia, familiar with Catholicism insofar as she attended Mass occasionally with her grandmother and aunts growing up, first aired a number of critiques then leaned over the table to confide, “If you know there’s a God and if that God is a loving God, He cares about us. He won’t care that you don’t agree with some things that a religion is teaching. I don’t think He’s going to punish you.” Likewise, Darcy, a white college senior perpetually brimming with smiles, took a sip from her Frappuccino and furrowed her brow, explaining that disagreement should be permissible to avoid alienating otherwise interested individuals:

It would be more beneficial for those teaching [RCIA] to have more of a stance like “this is what the Catholic Church teaches, but it’s okay for you to have other feelings,” because I don’t think those issues are worth having good people not be part of the Catholic Church. If someone who was good and kind and loving and has great morals wants to join the Church, but they don’t agree on our stance on gay marriage or contraceptives, why should that be a deciding factor?

For some, doubt brought converts closer to their new faith. Paige, an Asian-American college student who returned to Catholicism several years ago after a three-year period as a Mormon, explained the benefits of doubt:

I think the fact that I can question what the Church has said and establish what I really believe makes me stronger as a Catholic because I can say, “Hey, I actually thought about it and I believe it.” I’m not just saying, “This is what the Church said so I believe it.” I think that questioning things makes me more rooted to the faith.

Likewise, Philip, convert Christine’s sponsor, who attended RCIA weekly, shared with a smile in our interview:

Questioning isn’t bad. I don’t know where people got this idea. They’re like, “Doubting is horrible. You’re going to go to Hell if you doubt.” Doubting in and of itself isn’t bad as long as you go seek other information to make an educated decision. . . . It ends up creating a deeper relationship with God and a deeper foundation in your faith. It helps you understand what you believe.

Identifying certain religious teachings as core beliefs, and others as peripheral, has been viewed as a strategy for dealing with dissent (Baggett 2009; Dillon 1999). Yet only one initiate drew upon this strategy: Alexandra, a PhD student and convert from the Nazarene church, felt confident about her decision to convert despite disagreeing with the Church on social matters because “it’s more like the important things like believing Jesus rose from the dead or like Mary was a virgin—it was a virgin birth, more than believing something about gay rights.”

Hierarchical Deference

Another primary way initiates made sense of conflict avoidance was through a process of hierarchical deference. When initiates disagreed with Church teachings, they used the concept

of top-down Church hierarchy to defer control and resultant blame upward, away from the teachers and parish priest. This finding demonstrates how resolving dissent relies heavily on organizational context, building upon prior studies of RCIA, which have considered how parish characteristics matter in the implementation of initiation (Maines and McCallion 2002; Yamane 2012, 2014).

Several participants noted the importance of hierarchy in explaining conflict avoidance. Stephanie, a convert from Evangelical Christianity, herself a graduate student, explained that she appreciated Catholicism's structural unity, contrasted to her perception that Protestantism fractured in the face of disagreement: "As soon as those differences arise [in Protestantism] we can say you're someone else, you're a different congregation, we are no longer like you." Maggie, a conversion teacher born into Catholicism, likewise appreciated the "set of answers" the institution provided: "That was one of my hobbies in high school, . . . [to] talk to the Protestants and see what they believe. . . . I'm used to having an institution that provides a lot of set answers instead of 'well, my congregation says this,' more fluidity and just difference." Abe, a sponsor, agreed, "It's an institution that Christ himself established and there's not much wiggle room."

Dimitri appreciated structure, declaring that his favorite part of his new faith is "how it's standardized and very formalized, and I like that there's an overall structure to it." Hierarchical deference gave him comfort, knowing that all religious texts would be carefully interpreted by higher-up officials. Dimitri explained, "There's a group of people that are there to interpret it and break it down for the masses. . . . I think it's important that there's a group of people that do this professionally to distill the real meaning of it."

Stephanie, who above described appreciating the Church hierarchy, provided a poignant anecdote of why she deferred to hierarchical structure: "[At Mass] in January, there was a circular letter being read. It was about the new healthcare plan that would require employers to provide health insurance for employees that gives them access to contraceptives and I think also certain forms of abortion." She continued, "I felt a little bit weird about it at the time. As a feminist and as someone who's interested in making sure that people have access to healthcare generally, the status of that just seemed really politically fraught, like, are you going to not provide healthcare?" To resolve the mismatch between her beliefs and the lesson from the circular letter, Stephanie emphasized the central role of hierarchy:

I acknowledged that it was a responsibility to read it out loud. And precisely because it was something that was dictated from the next person up, it was handed down from, say, the bishop of this area, and it was handed to him from the person above him. Maybe it went all the way to the Pope, who knows?

The top-down structure of the Church helped Stephanie reconcile her disagreements by deferring to hierarchy:

It's a relief that it comes from somewhere way high up and it doesn't come from the person standing in the pulpit ahead of me . . . that the position is not coming from the person who's going to be giving me the little wafer.

Thanks to hierarchy, institutional change is generally slow, occurring through internal reform (Finke and Wittberg 2000; Wilde 2007). Slow institutional change further enables

hierarchical deference by legitimizing the institution writ large. As Roberto, the early 20s Latino initiate, ventured, “The way that the Church changes is like a river. It flows around but the river itself doesn’t change.” Paige, the former Mormon convert, told me she disagreed with the Church’s stance on gay marriage, but when I asked if she thought the Church would change its teachings, Paige shook her head:

I don’t think so ‘cause they’re deep-rooted in what they believe. I would actually prefer a church like that. . . . [O]ne of the things with the Mormon faith that I didn’t agree with was . . . they would change whatever they said based on what other people said was not right I feel like if [the Church] stays strong, there’s a reason they’re staying strong.

For Paige, slowness of change lent legitimacy to the Church.

Teachers likewise used hierarchical deference when encountering potential disagreements. As Allison, the lead teacher, explained, “[Although] Jesus didn’t directly make pronouncements on a lot of these [current moral issues], . . . there are solid reasons for the Church making claims to such high authority.” Furthermore, Allison asserted that Church hierarchy removes the onus of attracting converts away from teachers. From her perspective, RCIA classes that deviated from Church teachings arose from “[Teachers] putting too much responsibility on themselves, like it’s my fault or the program’s fault if somebody decides not to join the Church at this moment in time. We don’t get the credit when they do join the Church and we don’t get the blame when they don’t join the Church.” Allison relied on the structure of the organization to alleviate some responsibility for dealing with dissent.

Human Imperfection

To further explain conflict avoidance and bolster hierarchical deference, initiates called upon human imperfection in the Church institution to rationalize joining a religious group with which they disagree on some issues. Mentioned in five of the interviews I conducted, this sentiment reflected a prominent cultural narrative among Catholic converts. As Bryan explained, “It’s not like everyone’s perfect [The Church is] still a human-run institution. It’s not like God is running this place. I mean, God is not there actually doing stuff, so obviously the flaws of humanity [are] going to work [themselves] into it.” The logic followed that disagreeing with teachings meant disagreeing with imperfect humans, rather than with the institution itself.

Philip, a sponsor, told me how he describes human imperfection to skeptics:

We have a perfect system – God, Church – but it’s being run by imperfect people, so it’s going to mess up every once in a while. Which is how stuff like the priest scandals happen, because we’re human. We’re not God.

Indeed, the concept of human imperfection came up poignantly during interview discussions of the priest sex abuse scandals. Paige, the former Mormon, deferred blame to imperfect individuals rather than the system itself: “[E]very church is run by man and man is less than perfect [Regarding the sex abuse scandals,] I feel like the actions of a few people shouldn’t talk for the entire Church, and for me, whatever other people think doesn’t really matter because the doctrine was right.” Ji-young, a graduate student initiate from Korea, likewise charged “bad apples” for the system’s problems:

We are not perfect and even the priests cannot be perfect. I know there's some bad priests, but they're just a couple of bad apples, and then you cannot point to the couple bad apples and say, "The Church is corrupt."

He went on to cite the Church's longevity as evidence of its value:

Look at the history: the Catholic Church has had its ups and downs, and there's corruption obviously. It's run by humans, right? But then it survived over these years and there are millions of people who have followed the belief of the Catholic Church, so I'm sure there's got to be a good reason behind it.

Similarly, Abe, himself a convert and Ji-young's sponsor, likened priests to politicians:

Just because the President does something terrible does not mean the idea of America is invalid. I came to that conclusion after a long, very difficult time trying to understand that. I came to realize there's a difference between the people in positions of authority and the ideal that they're presenting.

Individuals within the institution, rather than the institution itself, are responsible for some factors with which initiates disagree.

Giving credence to this view, when describing his role as an RCIA teacher, Max pointed to his own imperfection as a limitation: "You're put in the hot seat. People are looking to you as Catholic leadership. Father Patrick's looking at you to lead these people, and that's a huge thing." Max explained that Father Patrick once told him, "We put our best people on the front lines." Brimming with laughter, Max went on, "I was like looking at him like, 'Oh geez, am I the best person for this job? But thanks for your confidence.'" The interplay of human imperfection in the context of a perfect institution further underscores how mechanisms related to organizational context facilitate avoidant strategies for dealing with dissent.

DISCUSSION

Microinteractional processes facilitate the negotiation of religious dissent among Catholic converts. In the conversion classroom, converts suppressed conversation topics with which they disagreed. To explain this avoidance, initiates justified doubt, engaged in hierarchical deference, and faulted human imperfection rather than the religious institution itself. These findings extend current theories of how the moderate majority forms their stances on moral issues by examining the case of converts and by bringing analysis to a microinteractional level to examine dissent locally.

These findings contribute to literature on the sociology of conversion. The general consensus that initiation precedes belief (Davidman 1991; Greil 1977; Long and Hadden 1983) is supported. Yet prior studies fail to specify what enables converts to sweep disagreements under the rug before initiation. Furthermore, existing research emphasizes the key role of social ties in facilitating conversion (Gartrell and Shannon 1985; Lofland and Stark 1965; Richardson 1978; Rochford 1986; Snow and Machalek 1984; Stark and Bainbridge 1980), but does not specify how social ties function to help initiates grapple with potential disagreements. Addressing that gap,

this study proposes how local interactions between RCIA teachers and initiates facilitate conflict avoidance.

Finally, microinteractional norms of silence cohere with prior research on avoidance of political talk as a prevalent frontstage phenomenon within religious congregations (Moon 2004) and in contemporary American society broadly (Baumgartner 1988; Eliasoph 1999). The microinteractional processes described in this paper may manifest differently in other religious contexts. For instance, in RCIA programs led by a priest, initiates may engage in an alternate form of hierarchical deference to priestly authority rather than to top-down decision-makers. In fundamentalist Protestantism, hierarchical deference may manifest in the form of deference to biblical literalism (Perry 2015). Latino Protestants may draw upon the structurally voluntaristic nature of their affiliation to motivate their social attitudes (Bartkowski et al. 2012). Among orthodox Jewish women and converts to Sunni Islam, with their decentralized religious organizational contexts, gendered scripts may enable conflict avoidance (Avishai 2008; Rao 2016). While continuing to investigate the moderate majority's beliefs in light of elite "culture wars," future scholars must acknowledge that a substantial proportion of laypersons who disagree with religious teachings manage dissent individually, through everyday interactions in a specific institutional context.

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ENDNOTES

¹ A sponsor is a practicing Catholic who guides the initiate through the process, attending RCIA classes together and meeting one-on-one to discuss faith and the Church.

² I use the term "conversion teacher" for clarity and consistency. Those who led the RCIA program called themselves "teachers," "leaders," or a "team" interchangeably.

³ The complete Catechism of the Catholic Church is available on the Vatican's website. This specific section is located here: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a1.htm.

⁴ My role in the field was "inquirer," the formal title for a non-Catholic RCIA participant interested in learning more but not preparing to convert.

⁵ All names are pseudonyms.

⁶ St. Augustine's RCIA adhered to the academic calendar year, a common practice in student (Yamane 2014) and urban (McCallion and Maines 2002) parishes. The six-month duration is typical for a subset of RCIA programs.

⁷ I allowed interviewees to raise dissent of their own volition by asking, "Has there ever been a time when you had trouble accepting certain Catholic beliefs or practices?"

⁸ Some initiates used the term "rhythm method" as a synonym for "natural family planning," although these contraceptive methods differ.