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Studying Change in Religious Organizations: A Discourse-Centered Framework

1. Introduction

The sociological study of religion remains centrally concerned with ongoing processes of "religious change" across the liberal democratic societies of the West, and increasingly beyond. A wide range of different types of modern-time changes, transformations, and mutations in the religious field have been studied under this general and somewhat ambiguous rubric. These include (but are not limited to) progressive long term institutional religious decline; the proliferation of "alternative spiritualties;" significant increases in the numbers of people who self-identify as "non-religious;" the growing public presence and visibility of religion; the increasing marketization and/or commodification of religion; and changes in the environments, spaces, and "locations" of religion following continuous developments in new media and digital communication and information technologies. While several additional developments could be added to the list, taken together, the abovementioned processes clearly point to the ways in which the Western religious field has been in a state of continuing change and transformation during a the past five to six decades. These developments are each, in turn, to a significant degree attributable to broader social and cultural processes such as accelerating globalization, the shift from traditional to post-traditional societies, the transition from industrial to post-industrial societies, the financialization of the economy, and the rise of individualism, to name just a few (e.g. Moberg et al. 2015: 1–4).

Like the broader social and cultural processes that have served to propel them, all of the abovementioned processes of religious change have contained significant *ideational* and *discursive* dimensions. Given that many of these processes are still very much ongoing, they could all be viewed as partly *discourse-driven* processes. Yet, although contemporary social and sociological theory has displayed a steadily growing interest in discourse and language and developed understandings of modernity which, in various ways, "center upon language or imply an enhanced role for language in modern social life as compared to pre-modern social life" (Fairclough 2010: 168), the sociological study of religion has so far rarely devoted any serious attention to the role of language and discourse as a key component in contemporary processes of religious change. Indeed, discourse theory and discourse analysis has only fairly recently started to gain a stronger foothold in the academic study of religion more generally. While the first conceptualizations of discourse theoretical or analytic approaches in the study of religion can be traced back to the work of Kippenberg (1992) and Lincoln (1989) (von Stuckrad and Wijsen 2016: 2), work towards the development of a more cohesive so-called "discursive study of religion" did not start until over a decade later (e.g. von Stuckrad 2003). Although the discursive study of religion has since expanded significantly, apart from only a few notable exceptions (e.g. Hjelm 2013; 2014; Author), scholars working in the field have not been particularly keen on explicitly employing discourse theoretical and discourse analytic perspectives for the purposes of advancing our understanding of contemporary processes of religious change.

The main aim of this article is to highlight the analytical utility of discourse theory and discourse analysis for the study of processes of change in religious organizational settings. For this purpose, the article presents and explicates an analytic framework that draws attention to four main "factors" that each tend to play a particularly central role in determining the ways in which new

discursive practices make their way into and serve to bring about changes in the self-understandings, imaginaries, and modus-operandi of religious organizations. The framework is therefore designed to provide researchers with a general model and particular set of tools for empirically-grounded analyses of *why* and *how* certain discourses and discursive practices rather than others make their way into particular religious organizational settings at certain points in time. The article builds on a previous research project on the changing discursive practices of traditional Christian churches in the United States, Britain, and all five Nordic countries (Author).

The framework presented draws on select analytical concepts from Norman Fairclough's (2010) extensive "three-dimensional" discourse analytical framework (discussed further below), coupled with additional perspectives from organizational discourse studies (e.g. Iedema 2003; Cooren 2015). Given the huge variety of different types and forms of religious organizations, the framework presented here is admittedly more conducive for the study of certain types of religious organizations rather than others. It is primarily designed for the study of larger religious organizations in Western societal and cultural settings that have developed relatively complex and dense organizational structures. This in practice means that the focus primarily lies on long-established, traditional, and/or institutional Christian churches. Having said that, the framework is not intended to be limited to the study of these types of religious organizations but should rather be understood as one that needs to remain open to case-specific modifications and adjustments. While most of the discussion that follows will primarily pertain to long-established Western Christian churches, other types of smaller and/or more newly established religious organizations will also be considered at each point along the way.

The article is structured as follows. It starts by providing a brief discussion of the concept of discourse along with a set of key analytic concepts and categories in discourse studies that are of

particular relevance for the discussion in this article. The following sections then proceed to outline each of the four factors of the framework. The article closes with some concluding remarks on the potentials and limitations of the framework.

2. Discourse and social analysis

The concept of discourse has been developed in several different forms and directions and given rise to a wide range of varyingly related, systematized, and contrasting approaches (e.g. Wodak and Meyer 2008). For example, while widely established approaches such as Foucault's (1972) historical and genealogical approach, or Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) post-Marxist discourse theory, or Fairclough's (2010) textually-oriented "three-dimensional" critical discourse analytical framework share many similarities, they also display many notable differences with regard to their respective terminological apparatuses and their more specific theorizations of the concept of discourse. Since the ambition of the discursive study of religion has never been to develop any distinctively "new" theorizations of the concept of discourse as such, but rather to explicate the implications of already existing theorizations for the study of religion and its various sub-disciplines specifically, it too has been characterized by the employment of a wide range of different approaches to discourse and the analysis of discourse (e.g. Moberg 2013).

Most scholars working in the field of discourse theory and discourse analysis would regard "discourse" as a highly malleable concept and point out that any more specific approach or definition will necessarily be contingent upon factors such as the particular theoretical and disciplinary anchoring of a particular study, the particular interests of individual scholars, the

particular type of discourse analytical framework that is used, what previously developed frameworks it builds on, and so on (e.g. Reisigl and Wodak 2008: 89). But as Fairclough (2010: 230) observes, in spite of the abundance of approaches, the concept of discourse tends to be most commonly employed in one or several of the three following senses: 1) as an element of *meaning-making* in social processes; 2) as the *language* and particular types of *language use* that have become associated with particular social domains and types of social practice; and 3) as a "way of construing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective." In an understanding that encompasses all of these three senses, a "discourse" refers to an identifiable cluster of statements, metaphors, and representations etc. that work to construct a certain picture of a particular social phenomenon, state of affairs, group of people, etc. (e.g. Burr 2003: 64). Discourses are also to be regarded as being *constitutive* of social reality – i.e. as always partly contributing to creating what they refer to (e.g. Burr 2003: 65). In this capacity, discourses play a central role in the shaping of social relationships, the positioning of social subjects, and the reproduction and perpetuation of power relations and dominant ideologies in society. Rather than being "inherently ideological," however, discourse always becomes ideologically invested within particular social institutional and organizational settings (Fairclough 1992: 3–4). As such, discourse and discursive practice constitute forms of *social action* and *social practice*, typically situated at the very core of the struggles over meaning that continuously occur across different social domains and institutional and organizational sites in society (e.g. Gergen 1999: 48–49).

The social functioning of discourse and its impact on contemporary religious organizations needs to be explored on several different levels. The "three-dimensional" discourse analytic framework developed by Fairclough (2010) distinguishes between three main, although closely interrelated and partly overlapping, levels in the analysis of discourse: text (i.e. written and

spoken language in itself), practices (i.e. the production and distribution of texts), and broader socio-cultural practices (i.e. issues of ideology and power). The relationship between discourse and *broader socio-cultural practices* is usefully explored on the level of *orders of discourse*, or the "totality of discursive practices (including discourses, genres, and styles) within an institution or society, and the relationships between them" (Chiapello and Fairclough 2002: 43). At this level of analysis, the main objective is to arrive at a more general sociological understanding of the interplay between discourse and social practice as it relates to the religious organizational field on a broader societal and cultural level. In order for such a general analysis to become more firmly concretized it is usefully accompanied by a focus on *discursive formations*. Originally coined by Foucault (1972), the term discursive formation refers to the "linguistic facets of 'domains of thought'" and the "rules of formation" which play a central role in determining the possibilities "for certain statements but not others to occur at particular times, places and institutional locations" (Fairclough 1994: 40). Discursive formations therefore constitute relatively fixed discursive frames of reference within which particular "knowledges" become constructed and "naturalized" in particular social institutional and organizational contexts at particular points in time. A focus on discursive formations therefore serves to highlight the significant degree to which social organizations, including religious organizations, varyingly construct their own understandings of themselves in relation to broader prevalent discursive currents in society. An adequate analysis of discursive formations then needs to be followed by analyses of *practice*, i.e. the particular processes through which particular discourses and discursive formations become (re-)produced, disseminated, and "consumed" within particular religious organizational settings. In light of an analysis of set of concrete examples from religious organizational discourse, we shall illustrate one particular type of practice by which this

typically occurs below: the *re-contextualization* of discourses that originate from “outside” the religious organizations in question and their integration into these religious organizations’ own orders of discourse. At this stage, the analysis also moves to the level of *text*, i.e. the analysis of the properties and grammatical features of actual pieces of official religious organizational discourse as found in various types of official organizational documents (the analysis of text will be accounted for in more detail in section 6).

In the following, we move to outline the four main factors of the framework presented, starting with the functioning of discourse on a broader socio-cultural level.

3. Factor 1: The impact of “cultural dominants”

As a useful starting point, any discourse-centered study of the dialectical relationship between social (and by extension religious) and discursive change can usefully begin by considering a “historical variable” for the purposes of drawing attention to general “qualitative differences between different historical epochs in the social functioning of discourse” (Fairclough 1993: 138). Following Fairclough (1993: 138), this is done in order to aid the further identification of more specific “qualitative shifts in the ‘cultural dominant’” with respect to the “nature of the discursive practices which have most salience and impact in a particular epoch.” The main task, in other words, is to strive to identify the particular sets of discourses and discursive formations that can be shown to hold particular prominence and salience *across* different social and cultural domains, including religion, during certain points in time. This level of analysis therefore corresponds to Fairclough’s dimension of broader socio-cultural practices. Since it is primarily

through the medium of discourse that new "knowledges," values, and ways of conceptualizing social and cultural reality make their ways into and become internalized within the orders of discourse of social domains, institutions, and organizations, most types of social changes tend to include manifest and clearly identifiable discursive components (e.g. Chiapello and Fairclough 2002: 195). While social processes and social changes cannot be reduced to discourse, it remains important to recognize their (sometimes strongly) "discourse-driven" character. For example, as Chiapello and Fairclough (2002) point out, several of the most significant social changes of the post-World War II era have been directly driven by economic factors and economic ideologies. Indeed, looking at somewhat more recent developments, it has become completely plausible to argue that the global spread and establishment of neoliberal political economy since the early 1980s has served to propel a set of interrelated and highly consequential social and cultural processes "through which economics has dislodged politics as a structuring and embedding force" (Gauthier 2015: 71).

For the purposes of the argument advanced in this section, the main point to note is that, although neoliberalism has been instrumental in bringing about a wide range of tangible social restructurings across a range of societal domains, its ideational and discursive impact has been equally significant (Author). Accompanied by the proliferation of closely related phenomena such as New Public Management and the definitive establishment of consumerism as the principal cultural ethos of modern capitalist liberal democratic societies (e.g. Slater 1997: 24–25), the spread of neoliberalism has served to put in motion an accelerating general process of *marketization* that has now come to extend over nearly all social and cultural domains. As a central part of this process, past decades have witnessed the gradual spread and perpetuation of economistic and consumer-capitalist associated discourse and terminology (e.g. on "enterprise,"

"flexibility," "cost-effectiveness," "total quality management," "managerialism") across a range of traditionally "non-economic" social and cultural domains, including education, healthcare, the non-profit organizational sector, and religion (e.g. Moberg and Martikainen 2018). There are thus ample grounds for arguing that accelerating processes of marketization have gone hand in hand with an increasingly widespread establishment and normalization of neoliberal and consumer capitalist discourses in the form of what Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001) have termed "NewLiberalSpeak" or a new "planetary vulgate" (see also Mautner 2010: 4). The religious field has by no means remained untouched by these developments. Quite to the contrary, as will be illustrated further below, long-established traditional Christian churches have increasingly reconfigured their organizational structures according to New Public Management-inspired criteria of organizational "effectivity" and "performance" while many smaller, more newly-established religious communities and organizations have fully embraced practices such as marketing, advertising, and branding (e.g. Einstein 2008; Stolz and Usunier 2014; Author). To single out marketization as a forceful contemporary cultural dominant is therefore to argue that it should be regarded as one among the most influential ideational and discursive forces shaping religion today.

Accelerating processes of marketization have also served to propel the further intensification of already ongoing processes of *individualization* across modern societies. Individualism constitutes one of the most (perhaps *the* most) ideationally forceful and largely discourse-driven cultural dominants in Western societies that finds expression in a wide variety of different forms across the social and cultural spectrum, including religion. Indeed, as argued by Vermeer (2012: 107), considering the cultural salience of individualism in its many forms, it has become ever more fitting to regard *individuation*, understood as the "tension between the

development of a unique personality on the one hand and social integration on the other," as the "core of socialization" in modern Western societies. In its ideational and discursive dimensions, individualism centers on personal autonomy and self-determination as supreme social values, it emphasizes the primacy of the unique individual as the "basic unit of social reproduction" (Adams 2007: 7), and highlights the importance of values such as individual rights, individual choice, and self-determination. The effects of individualism/individualization on contemporary religion, religious life, and practice have been the subject of a great deal of scholarly debate and been studied under many different headings (e.g. Wilke 2015). To single out individualization (whether it be under that precise heading or related headings such as "subjectivization") is therefore to identify individualism as a contemporary cultural dominant that exerts a highly notable, and primarily ideational and discursive, influence on the contemporary religious field.

It is important to point out that marketization and individualism constitute but two among many cultural dominants of modern societies and thus but two among several other forces shaping religion today. Depending on their disciplinary backgrounds and various interests, scholars might certainly (or are perhaps even likely to) single out different cultural dominants and also disagree about the significance and relative impact of particular cultural dominants across different social and cultural domains. Whatever the case, as in scholarship generally, sufficiently convincing support has to be marshalled for each view. As illustrated by the examples of marketization and individualization, the purpose of the above discussion has first and foremost been to underscore the need for research into contemporary processes of religious organizational change to recognize the impact of those broader social processes, forces, and phenomena that can be *persuasively shown* to exert a particularly strong *ideational and*

discursive influence across large parts of the social and cultural institutional and organizational field as a whole at a particular point in history.

While the identification of cultural dominants takes place at a relatively high level of abstraction and generalization, it plays a central heuristic role in determining the macro-theoretical basis for a particular study. For example, a stronger focus on the ideational and discursive dimensions of the cultural dominant of marketization and its impact on the contemporary religious field will require a firmer engagement with both previous and current theorizing on the impact of broader socio-economic factors on the religious field. Conversely, a focus on the cultural dominant of individualism will require a different type of broader theoretical grounding. In both cases, however, different disciplinary or sub-field specific theoretical perspectives will be wedded with an explicit focus on discourse theory and analysis. This, then, corresponds to Fairclough's (2010: 225–226) view of a transdisciplinary and social analysis-oriented analysis of discourse as a "theory-driven process of constructing objects of research /.../ for research topics" that cannot be reduced to discourse or adequately be analyzed through a focus on discourse alone.

4. Factor 2: The proximity of organizations to the center of the social formation

Any study of processes of change in religious organizations has to be pursued on the basis of an adequate understanding of the complex webs of societal and cultural institutions and organizations in which they are embedded. While society and culture is never static, some periods in history nonetheless tend to be marked by more significant social and cultural changes

than others. Many of those ongoing processes of religious change that were listed in the introduction were set in motion by the social and cultural changes of the 1960s. The established Christian churches found themselves perplexed and taken aback by the social and cultural upheavals of the decade, epitomized in a range of strongly discourse-driven phenomena such as the civil rights movement, changing perceptions on family structures, new views on sexuality and sexual mores, calls for gender equality and the civil rights of sexual minorities, increasingly widespread religious indifference, and a general new emphasis on individual self-determination (e.g. Manza and Brooks 2002; McLeod 2007). As the confusion in the churches eventually settled, their responses were decidedly accommodating in spirit (e.g. Davie 2014: 31). Among many other things, the churches adopted increasingly liberal and inclusivist positions on core theological issues, became increasingly supportive of progressive social causes, opened up for the ordination of women, and took an increasingly positive stances towards sexual minorities (e.g. Lantzer 2012: 63; Woodhead 2012). Although the response of the global Catholic Church was more restrained, the Second Vatican Council nevertheless resulted in a series of wide-ranging modernizing reforms. From the perspective advanced here, it is important to acknowledge the significant degree to which all of these various responses were inspired by changes that were strongly ideational and discursive in character. Consequently, the responses of the churches, which were themselves strongly ideational and discursive in character, served to bring about notable and long-lasting changes in their orders of discourse, including the ways in which they talk about and understand themselves and their places and roles in society.

Since the 1960s, established traditional Christian churches have, of course, been forced to adapt to a range of additional societal and cultural changes that have served to bring about further transformations of their structures, modus-operandi, and orders of discourse. For

example, past decades have witnessed significant restructurings of earlier state and government policies vis-à-vis religion, modified church-state legislation, and "a growing interest of public authorities in instrumentalising the charity done by religions" (Martikainen 2012: 179). New digital media technologies, as epitomized in the proliferation of social media, are revolutionizing the communication habits of individuals and organizations alike. Although most established Christian churches still find themselves in a continuing state of decline, many of them have nevertheless so far managed to retain strong structural ties to states and national social establishments. Many also continue to be actively engaged in various types of social work in close cooperation with governments and other civil society and third sector organizations (e.g. Wuthnow and Evans 2002: 19; Woodhead 2012: 13). While most traditional Christian churches are acutely aware of the predicament they find themselves in, they often still retain an "establishmentarian" mindset and view themselves as integral parts of the very social and cultural fabric of their respective societies, which can also clearly be observed in their orders of discourse. At the same time, their orders of discourse have also become increasingly marked by a general language of crisis and need for thoroughgoing renewal and organizational change (Author).

Given the weakening societal positions of religious organizations more generally, any exploration of the order of discourse of a particular religious organization needs to be based on an adequate understanding of its degree of integration, dependence, or autonomy within the broader social formation in which it is embedded (i.e. its position vis-à-vis other central social domains such as the political, economic, educational, etc. establishments). In the words of Fairclough (2010: 51), one needs to consider where it would be most appropriate to situate the organization in question "on a hierarchy of relative importance to the function of the social

formation, and how this relates to influences from one institution to another on various levels, including the ideological and discoursal." Put another way, one needs to consider the position of a particular religious organization within a wider web of inter-organizational/institutional flows of discursive and ideational influence. Such considerations become particularly important when the object of inquiry is a long-established religious organization (in Western contexts most commonly a Christian church) that has developed concomitantly with developments in a particular society over a longer period of time and developed complex bureaucratic structures. This is because religious organizations that continue to occupy higher degrees of relative importance to the functioning of their respective broader social formations also tend to both exercise and be susceptible to a higher degree of inter-organizational ideational and discursive influence. Since the civic engagements of traditional churches are increasingly carried out on contractual bases within broader cooperative networks that encompass a multitude of different types of social organizations, including states and local governments, the pressure towards the consolidation of discourses around shared "nodal discourses" such as New Public Management is ever-present (Fairclough 2005: 933). While a consideration of this factor still pertains to the level of broader socio-cultural practices, it also pertains to the *structure* of the institutional and organizational field of a given society. A consideration of this factor thus serves the important function of situating subsequent analyses of practice (i.e. the (re-)production, dissemination, and "consumption" of discourse) as part of wider webs of inter-organizational influence.

The situation for smaller, more newly established and less socially influential religious organizations tends to be markedly different. Put simply, in the absence of a sense of established historical "societal position," general "societal mandate," or "public utility" function there is less of an incentive to align one's discourse with those of other central social organizations and

institutions. While they also tend to be interested in growing and attracting new members, smaller religious organizations rarely aspire to be able to cater to a society or national population as a whole. Their civic engagements also tend to be focused on specific causes and be confined to certain local areas. It is therefore considerably more common for more newly established smaller religious organizations to align with socially and culturally prevalent discourses that support their more particular interests. For example, in what reflects the ideational and discursive core of broader individualist and consumerist cultural dominants, many more newly established religious organizations – ranging from neo-evangelical and Pentecostal congregations to organizations in the fields of alternative spiritualities and new religious movements – have both purposely and successfully merged their own teachings with broader culturally prevalent discourses on personal development, successful living, and the "entrepreneurial self" (e.g. Miller 1997; Carrette and King 2005; Heelas 2008). Such organizations have also increasingly adopted organizational structures reminiscent of commercial firms and enterprises (e.g. Einstein 2008). This, however, should not distract us from the fact that there also remain plenty of examples of smaller religious organizations that maintain highly exclusivist and regulated orders of discourse.

The main point to take away from this section is that the particular character of the dominant discourses and orders of discourse of different types of religious organizations will to a large extent become determined by their relative importance, degree of embeddedness, and proximity to the center of a particular social formation, as well as by their relative sizes and own respective understandings of their societal positions and roles.

5. Factor 3: The ideological discursive formations (IDFs) of organizations

The previous section highlighted the need for any exploration of the changing discursive practices and orders of discourse of religious organizations to be based on an adequate understanding of their respective societal positions. This section proceeds to highlight how this can usefully be further complemented by exploring the character of religious organizations' own dominant discourse and the ways in which they talk about and discursively construct themselves and their own place, role, and agency in society. Considering this factor therefore brings analysis to the level of practice.

From the perspective of discourse theory and organizational discourse studies, an organization can be approached as partly constituting "an apparatus of verbal interaction, or an 'order of discourse'" (Fairclough 2010: 40). Organizational discourse can, in turn, be understood as "the structured collections of texts embodied in the practices of talking and writing (as well as a wide variety of visual representations and cultural artefacts) that bring organizationally related objects into being as these texts are produced, disseminated, and consumed" (Grant and Hardy 2003: 6). It is important to point out, however, that even though discourse constitutes a "powerful ordering force" within organizations, the agency and maneuvering space of organizational actors and subjects will always be constrained by organizational structures, which cannot be reduced to discourse (Grant and Hardy 2003: 6).

The general orders of discourse of social organizations tend to be "pluralistic," often containing clearly identifiable assemblages of what Fairclough refers to as "ideological-discursive formations" (IDFs), each of which tends to be particularly associated with certain entities and subjects within a particular organizational setting. An IDF can thus be thought of as an intra-organizational "speech community" that is characterized by its own "discourse norms"

and “ideological norms.” All IDFs thus essentially work to direct the agency of organizational subjects, providing them with certain “frame[s] for action” (Fairclough 2010: 41). In spite of the common co-existence of multiple IDFs, most organizations nevertheless tend to be dominated by either one or a smaller set of particular IDFs that have accrued hegemonic status and gained the power to marginalize and subvert other alternative IDFs within the organization in question. The domination of a particular IDF over the order of discourse of an organization serves to “naturalize” its “(ideological) meanings and practices” (Fairclough 2010: 27) and thus also to render them opaque, i.e. as no longer recognizable as ideologies but rather as taken for granted “common sense.” Moreover, since discourse always comprises a certain “knowledge base,” and since knowledge always includes an ideological component, adopting certain normative ways of “talking” simultaneously also involves adopting certain ideologically infused normative “ways of seeing” (Fairclough 2010: 44). IDFs therefore exercise a powerful ideological influence on the perceptions and identifications of organizational subjects. IDFs come in many different forms. Typically, IDFs argue either for or against certain types of organizational renewal and reform; strive to either establish, maintain, or resist particular types of organizational cultures; or promote or resist particular types of broader social engagements. Which types of IDFs that end up achieving dominant positions at certain points in time is dependent on the outcome of intra-organizational hegemonic struggles (for a more detailed discussion of the concepts of ideology and hegemony, see Fairclough 2010: 56–68).

Dominant IDFs have a stabilizing effect on organizations as they offer effective means of managing internal disruptions and tensions (Fairclough 2005: 931). Dominance and hegemony are, however, never absolute but rather unstable by their nature and always only temporarily achieved (e.g. Fairclough 2010: 61–62). There is always the possibility that unexpected broader

extra-organizational developments (e.g. of a social, cultural, economic, or political character) might come to pose such serious challenges to the dominant IDFs of an organization that they end up throwing the organization into crisis. Situations of crisis are particularly conducive of organizational change since they are likely to spark hegemonic struggle between competing organizational actors who devise their own opposing ways of dealing with and resolving the crisis (Fairclough 2005, 930–931). Such struggles may result in a realignment of power relations within an organization and the establishment of new dominant IDFs. A focus on discourse and discursive practice is therefore key to an adequate and more precise understanding of how and why organizations undergo certain types of changes rather than others at certain points in time. In this perspective, the social and cultural upheavals of the 1960s as discussed above posed such serious challenges to the dominant IDFs of the established Christian churches that they were cast into crisis. The churches' wide-ranging responses and reform-efforts should, in turn, be viewed as the outcome of hegemonic struggles between opposing conservative and reformist IDFs within the churches.

The dominant IDFs of an organization normally permeate its "official" discourse in a range of different areas. "Official" discourse in this context denotes the types of discourse that organizations themselves produce to direct their own activities or to communicate with external partners or stakeholders (Author). The official discourse of an organization thus encompasses discourse directed at both external and internal audiences. Such discourse is primarily found in various types of strategy and steering group documents, protocols, guidelines, statements, publications, website content, etc. Generally, the larger and more complex an organization is, the more extensive and varied its official discourse also tends to be. Traditional long-established Christian churches with complex organizational structures produce a great deal of official

discourse of this kind. Examples include documents dealing with various aspects of church organization, statues, policies, communication, positions on social issues, the organization of social activities, etc. In addition to this, traditional churches also produce a wealth of discourse that pertains more directly to strictly "religious" issues such as church teachings, ethics, ecclesiology etc. Because the official discourse of these types of churches is typically addressed to both internal (e.g. church employees) and external audiences (e.g. other social organizations, regular church members, or the general public), they are nowadays often made publicly available online. Access to parts of such discourse may, however, remain more or less strongly restricted to particular internal audiences.

Strategies make up a particularly significant category of the official discourse of organizations. This is because strategies provide a primary vehicle for "organizational storytelling" and the construction of organizational imaginaries (Fairclough 2005: 932). As such, strategies also provide a principal means by which new discourses are (re-)produced and disseminated for "consumption" among organizational subjects. Strategy discourse also tends to display a particular set of distinctive features. For example, given their predominant focus on the future, strategies have a marked tendency to be "engulfed by their own 'truth' effects that make the socially constructed realities seem inevitable and taken for granted" (Greckhamer 2010: 844; cf. Iedema 2003: 73). Strategies thus play an instrumental role in the establishment of discursive hegemonies within organizations since any attempt to institute a new dominant IDF within an organization will be dependent on its successful integration as part of new strategies.

While the official discourse of large religious organizations generally tends to be both extensive and relatively easily accessible, this is far from always the case with smaller religious organizations. While all organizations produce an official discourse, they do not necessarily do

so in the form of strategies or other types of "formal" document genres. In such cases, the official discourse of an organization has to be gleaned from other sources, such as various types of publications and content disseminated by the organization online. While some religious organizations have a broader "public" to whom they address (at least parts of) their official discourse (Fairclough 2010: 41) others are primarily, and sometimes exclusively, focused on their own members and/or potential members. The distribution of official discourse and access to it will therefore always depend on the degree of openness of a given religious organization towards non-members as well as its authority and hierarchy structures. Gaining a fuller understanding of (and usually broader access to) the extent and nature of the official discourse of a particular religious organization usually requires at least some form of ethnographic research within the organization in question.

The above discussion has aimed to highlight how the general understanding that a religious organization has of itself and its place in society at a certain point in time typically becomes encapsulated in its official discourse. When a particular IDF gains hegemonic status within a given religious organization, the realities and imaginaries it constructs gradually take on the heuristic weight and rhetorical force of "common sense." And so, in line with the Thomas theorem (Thomas and Thomas 1928), what the dominant discourse of a religious organization defines as "real" will, although to varying extents, eventually become real in its consequences. For example, as noted above, the general orders of discourse of traditional Christian churches have become increasingly marked by the dominance of New Public Management-inspired reform and organizational renewal-emphasizing IDFs. Exploring changes in the IDFs and orders of discourse of religious organizations therefore principally involves highlighting the broader flows of inter-organizational discursive influence that they can be shown to be most strongly

subjected to at certain points in time. In the following final section of the article, we move to illustrate such changes in discursive practices in light of concrete examples from the official organizational discourse of five traditional Protestant churches.

6. Factor 4: The *re-contextualization* of discourse in religious organizational settings

Changes in the discursive practices and IDFs of religious organizations can be explored in relation to a more specific set of research questions. Drawing on previous work on organizational discourse, one central question concerns the ways in which discourses that originate from "outside" the organization may become *re-contextualized* (Fairclough 2010: 140) and integrated as part of the organization's dominant IDFs and order of discourse. This process typically involves a deliberate abstraction of meaning away from the situated original contexts of these discourses (Grant and Hardy 2003: 8; Iedema and Wodak 1999: 11). As will be illustrated below, clear examples of this can be found in the ways in which traditional Christian churches are increasingly adopting discourses from the managerial and private business sector and re-contextualizing them as part of their own official strategic discourse. As we shall see, the practice of re-contextualization also tends to go hand in hand with calls for the further *operationalization* or "putting into practice" of new re-contextualized discourses (Fairclough 2005: 932–934). Because the practice of re-contextualization thus strives to alter the order of discourse of a given religious organization with the ultimate goal of bringing about actual, tangible changes in its practices and modus-operandi, it provides a particularly useful focus for analyses of processes of religious organizational change.

In the following we shall briefly illustrate the process of re-contextualization in light of a few examples from the actual official discourse of five long-established Protestant churches in different parts of the world: the United States, Britain, and Finland. While these churches are embedded in three notably different societal and cultural contexts, they nevertheless display many similarities with respect to their historical developments, general theological outlooks, organizational structures, and main types of civil engagements. They also all share some very similar experiences of long-term decline. Ever since the mid-1960s, the established seven so-called "mainline" Protestant churches in the United States have found themselves in a state of perpetual decline that continues to this day. They have long since lost their previous status as majority denominations and become eclipsed by the rapid proliferation of neo-evangelical non- and cross-denominational "seeker-sensitive" churches (e.g. Wuthnow and Evans 2002: 5-7; Lantzer 2012; Pew Research Center 2014). Below, we shall discuss examples from the official discourse of three of these churches. In Britain, the Church of England has experienced even sharper decline in membership and social and cultural stature during the same time period (e.g. Davie 2015: 31). The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) has likewise experienced significant decreases in membership figures and loss of social and cultural stature during the past couple of decades, although it retains its position as national majority church (ELCF 2019). As a result of their experiences of long-term decline, the orders of discourse of all of these churches have undergone notable changes in past decades and become ever more marked by New Public Management-inspired reform and renewal-emphasizing IDFs (Author). Considering examples from three different churches therefore serves to highlight the central role that discourse and more particular forms of discursive change plays in processes of religious organizational change across three different national, social, cultural, and partly linguistic, contexts.

At this point we also arrive at the level of textual analysis. In an oft-cited passage, van Dijk (cited in Wodak 2008: 3) defines the analysis of discourse as "the systematic and explicit analysis of the various structures and strategies of different levels of text and talk." The analysis of discourse therefore essentially focuses on identifying patterns and recurring key elements in a given body of textual data which appear to be central to how events, phenomena, states of affairs, persons, etc. are construed in particular ways and how, as a consequence, particular meanings are produced (e.g. Taylor 2001: 6). Main analytical categories include (but are far from limited to) *vocabulary* (i.e. choice of words, the ascription of evaluative meanings, use of metaphors); *modality* (i.e. the employment of modal verbs and adverbials to indicate different levels of certainty and commitment to what is being said); and *genre* (i.e. various types of socially and culturally prescribed modes of interaction or communication such as strategic documents, promotional leaflets, religious sermons, etc.). Analyses of genre can also include an additional focus on *style* or "tenor", i.e. on whether a particular text retains a "formal" or "informal" style, or whether it should be characterized as "argumentative," "descriptive," "prescriptive," "proclamatory," etc. (e.g. Fairclough 1992: 75; 125–127; 158–160).

Our first example comes from the American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA). It is taken from an official church document titled "United Baptist Church: Governance Tasks" (2012, compiled by Dr. C. Jeff Woods). At the very beginning of the document, it is stated that the "3 types of governance tasks" that it outlines is adapted from the management book *Governance as Leadership: Reframing the Work of Nonprofit Boards* (Chait et al. 2005). The purpose of the document is to argue for the adoption and implementation of these three "governance tasks" within the ABCUSA. With regard to the second task the document states the following:

Type II Governance – Strategic

- Views the organization as an open system susceptible to both internal and external forces
- An emphasis upon performance
- Develops the pathway from Point A to Point B
- Type II Governance should involve strategic thinking rather than merely strategic planning

(ABCUSA, Woods 2012, 1)

This excerpt provides an example of a quite explicit attempt at re-contextualizing a particular managerial discourse into the official discourse of the ABCUSA. In terms of vocabulary, the excerpt is strongly marked by managerial language (e.g. "performance," "pathways," "strategic thinking"). The emphasis put on the importance of nurturing a culture of "strategic thinking" rather than just "strategic planning" is particularly notable since it highlights the need for the ABCUSA to adopt an entirely new approach to its organizational culture. In terms of modality, the text articulates a high degree of certainty about what is being said (e.g. "should involve"). In terms of genre and style, the text is highly formal in tone.

Our second example comes from the Episcopal Church in the United States (TEC). It is taken from a 2013 document titled *Marketing your Parish: Advertising Best Practices for Effective Evangelism*. The text opens with an "Executive Summary" that starts out by stating:

> Despite a legacy of 2,000 years as the greatest marketing organization the world has ever seen, the church has been sitting on the sidelines during the ad revolutions of the past 50

> years. Mention “advertising” around Christians and you’re sure to provoke a reaction. Suggest churches should market to targeted segments of the population, and you’re starting to tread on forbidden turf. However – be it a congregation, diocese, denomination, or the universal Body – the church cannot afford to consider “advertising” a dirty word.
>
> Fundamentally, commercial and church marketing are more similar than you might think. Both require a coordinated strategy of sending messages to a targeted group of people, and both chart their efficacy with one measure: conversions. Effective commercial advertising sells products, whereas effective church advertising gets confirmed communicants in the pews. (TEC 2013: 1)

This excerpt provides an apt example of the re-contextualization of the language of marketing and advertising into the official discourse of the TEC. Significant parts of the text are devoted to justifying the employment of marketing in church settings. In terms of vocabulary, the text employs a more colloquial rather than technical kind of language. In terms of modality, although the text communicates a high degree of certainly about what is being said, it is also to a large extent geared towards persuading potentially skeptical readers (e.g. “cannot afford to consider”). In terms of genre and style, it retains a largely informal tone. As noted, re-contextualization typically involves an abstraction of meaning away from the contexts in which the recontextualized discourse was originally produced. This can be seen in the ways in which the above text re-frames and partly re-defines the practices of marketing and advertising as part of an effort to reconcile these practices with already established Christian discourse.

Out third examples comes from the United Methodist Church in the United States (UMC). Beginning already with the extensive so-called *Igniting Ministry*-campaign in 2001 the UMC has invested heavily in various types of church advertising and marketing. In 2009, the *Igniting Ministry*-campaign was replaced by the equally extensive *Rethink Church*-campaign, which brought a new emphasis on new media coupled with continuing investments in marketing. These initiatives have also necessitated the creation of a range of new educational programs for UMC employees. For example, the church now offers its employees a course in "Internal Communications." On the UMCs official webpages the course is described as follows:

> Throughout this course, church leaders will learn the tools and techniques needed to create a holistic communication plan tailored for their congregation, which includes consistent messaging, email and newsletter communications, as well as working with volunteers.
>
> The resources in this course will also help churches to utilize a communications plan worksheet, apply S.W.O. T. analysis, and identify effective online strategies to maximize interactions with church members. (UMC.org 2019).

This excerpt constitutes an example of the re-contextualization of communication-specialist discourses on effective organizational communication. In terms of vocabulary, the text is characterized by the extensive use of technical vocabulary (e.g. "holistic communication," "effective online strategies," "maximize interactions"). In terms of modality, the text communicates a high degree of confidence and commitment (e.g. "will learn," "will help"). In terms of genre and style, it largely conforms to strategy discourse conventions and retains a

formal, prescriptive tone. Importantly, the discourse in the excerpt also envisions the operationalization (i.e. "putting into practice") of the discourse it contains in the form of the actual implementation of a wide range of new working-routines at the congregational level.

Continuing on the topic of communication, out fourth example comes from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF). Following long-term progressive decline, the order of discourse of the ELCF has become ever more firmly dominated by reform-oriented IDFs. Following a few notable instances of negative media attention in recent years, the church has created extensive and detailed guidelines for managing different types of "crises," defined as an "event or process that threatens the people in the organization, its real estate, assets, or reputation" (sakasti.evl.fi 2019). As one can read about "proactive versus reactive crisis communication" on the church's web-portal for employees and partners:

> It is advisable to be prepared for crisis communication in advance. All parishes should have a crisis communication plan that is up to date, and which can form part of a broader crisis plan /…/ A crisis communication plan defines, among other things, different types of crises that can be anticipated, the principles of crisis communication, tools and channels, stakeholders, i.e. collaborative partners, and responsibilities. The plan should also include a crisis communication process description as well as detailed guidelines for procedure in crisis situations. The significant role played by social media in today's crises should not be forgotten[1] (sakasti.evl.fi 2019).

[1] Author's translation from the Finnish original.

This excerpt provides an example of the re-contextualization of discourses derived from public relations and media image management discourse within the church. In terms of vocabulary, it employs some degree of technical language (e.g. "stakeholders," "collaborative partners," "process description," "guidelines for procedure"). In terms of modality, the text is quite unequivocal in its insistence on the need for every parish to develop its own crisis communication plan (e.g. the repeated use of "should"). In terms of genre and style, the text is clearly prescriptive and largely formal in tone. Here too, the discourse in the excerpt does not only outline what a crisis communication plan "is;" it also directly encourages the measures it outlines to become operationalized and put into actual practice through the creation of such plans and routines in every parish.

Our final example brings us to the Church of England in Britain. It is taken from a highly detailed 2014 official strategic document titled "Talent Management for Future Leaders and Leadership Development for Bishops and Deans: A New Approach". Under the heading "The Cohort Programme for Diocesan Bishops in Detail," the description of "Module 1 – Building healthy organizations" begins as follows:

> In preparation for this module, learners will be asked to work through a suite of on-line tools that will measure the effectiveness of the team they lead. They will also be asked to participate in a 360 degree feedback exercise. The module will start by exploring the current context of the Church and the challenges and opportunities that face the organisation now and in the future. The spiritual focus of the programme will be underlined. Ecclesiology and perspectives from different traditions in the Church will be included. The 'healthy organisation' will be defined as the foundation for the success of the

> Church in the future. Learners will work on their team and individual 360 feedback reports and construct action plans around their development needs. (Archbishops' Council of the Church of England 2014: 12).

The discourse in this excerpt provides an example of the re-contextualization of several managerial discourses for the purposes of highlighting the need for church leaders to develop their leadership skills and learn to contribute to foster what is defined as the "healthy organization." In terms of vocabulary, the text alludes to managerial discourses on "effectiveness," measurable "success," and "development needs." Considering that the text in the excerpt describes a form of education program that diocesan bishops will be partaking in in the future, it is strongly categorical and stipulating in terms of modality (e.g. the recurring use of "will be"). In terms of genre and style, the text conforms to the conventions of strategy discourse and maintains a clearly formal tone. Overall, the discourse in the excerpt illustrates an increasingly wide adoption of New Public Management-associated organizational values and imperatives. This is particularly evident in the ways in which the text advocates for the implementation of various types of instruments for measuring "effectiveness" and monitoring "success." To a larger degree than the previously discussed examples, this example is strongly geared towards the putting into practice of such discourse in the form of an extensive new educational program.

The above discussion has provided a general illustration of the increasing adoption and re-contextualization of certain types of external discourses into official church discourse. The fact that traditional churches have become particularly prone to re-contextualize, internalize, and encourage the operationalization of discourses that derive from fields such as marketing,

advertising, and PR and communications clearly points to the ways in which they have become ever more susceptible to inter- organizational discursive influence and the ideology of New Public Management. This has evidently also led to the establishment of new types of dominant IDFs within the churches which may, in time, come to exercise an ever stronger influence on ever more aspects of their general orders of discourse. This development in and of itself constitutes a notable example of contemporary religious organizational change.

7. Concluding remarks

This article has strived to highlight the usefulness of discourse theory and discourse analysis for the study of processes of change in religious organizations. For this purpose it has presented and outlined an analytic framework that draws attention to four main factors that tend to play a particularly central role in determining how discourse and discursive practice works to effect religious organizational change. As outlined above, the framework provides researchers with a particular set of tools by which to approach, identify, and analyze the ways in which religious organizations may become strongly susceptible to particular types of broader flows of inter-organizational ideational and discursive influence at certain points in time. This was illustrated through a general analysis of concrete examples of the changing organizational discursive practices of five traditional Christian churches.

It needs to be openly acknowledged, however, that the framework presented in this article only allows for analyses of how discourse works to affect religious organizational change up to a certain point. As noted, it is best suited for analyses of *how* and *why* particular types of

discourses make their way into and serve to bring about certain types of changes in the orders of discourse of religious organizations at certain points in time. Ultimately, the value of the framework for these types of analyses will have to be assessed on the basis of how well-suited it proves to be, or how easily it can be modified, for the study of different types of religious organizations. But as was specifically noted at several points in the analysis of concrete examples of religious organizational discourse above, the practice of re-contextualization also tends to go hand in hand with calls for the operationalization such re-contextualized discourse in actual practice. A deeper analysis of the impact of discursive change on the character and modus-operandi of contemporary religious organizations would need to move beyond a focus on discourse alone and also inquire into the *actual practical outcomes* of the operationalization of new re-contextualized discourses within particular religious organizational settings. Following a model outlined by Fairclough (2005: 932–934), this could be done by investigating the particular ways and extent to which the operationalization of new discourses may result in 1) the actual *enactment* of new ways communicating and interacting within particular religious organizational settings; 2) the *inculcation* of new organizational identities; and 3) the *materialization* of new discourses in the form of actual new working-routines or the re-organization of physical spaces, etc. Such deeper and extended analyses would also require the employment of additional research methods such as ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews. While such extended analyses would therefore need to move beyond the framework presented here, an adequate consideration of the interplay between the four main factors outlined above greatly aids in the firmer framing, grounding, and contextualization of such further analyses. While the analytic utility of the framework is limited to explorations of organizational discourse per se, it

also provides a solid foundation for further empirical analyses of the actual, tangible effects of changing discursive practices in particular religious organizational settings.

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