



Maintaining Order in Religious Worship: Goffman's Perspective – A Review Article

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ABSTRACT

Sociological studies on religion have predominantly focused on macro-sociological approaches, emphasizing structural-functional aspects or conflicts. Consequently, these studies often center on religious movements or organizations and their roles in religious life, neglecting the dynamics of social interaction in everyday religious practices. Such dynamics illustrate how individuals and groups actively shape their religious experiences. However, a different perspective has been offered by Christopher M. Donnelly and Bradley R.E. Wright, who examine religion using a micro-sociological approach, specifically symbolic interactionism. Their study focuses on the dynamics of interruptions during Christian worship services and how congregants respond to such disturbances to uphold the proper conduct of worship. These responses aim to maintain a "self-image" and safeguard the church's reputation, as conceptualized by Erving Goffman. This review aims to inspire similar explorations in other religious contexts.

ABSTRAK

Selama ini, kajian tentang sosiologi agama selalu fokus pada pendekatan - pendekatan makro - sosiologi, menekankan pada aspek struktur fungsional atau konflik. Akibatnya, kajiannya fokus pada gerakan keagamaan atau organisasi keagamaan dan peranannya bagi kehidupan agama. Alasannya karena pendekatan tersebut cenderung mengabaikan dinamika interaksi sosial yang terjadi dalam praktik keagamaan sehari-hari, serta bagaimana individu dan kelompok berperan aktif dalam membentuk pengalaman religius mereka. Namun, kajian berbeda telah ditawarkan oleh Christopher M. Donnelly dan Bradley R.E. Wright yang mengkaji topik agama dari pendekatan yang lebih kecil (mikro - sosiologi) yakni pendekatan interaksionisme-simbolik. Keduanya memfokuskan kajian

pelaksanaan ibadah agama Kristen yakni kebaktian yang di dalamnya terdapat dinamika gangguan dalam pelaksanaan ibadah kebaktian dari para jemaat dan bagaimana jemaat itu meresponsnya sebagai bentuk penegakkan aturan pelaksanaan ibadah yang sah. Respons jemaat dan gereja selalu bertujuan pada menjaga “citra diri” agar tidak melanggar aturan dan menghasilkan nama baik seperti yang dicetuskan Erving Goffman dalam teorinya. Kajian ini penting untuk mengilhami fenomena serupa pada agama lainnya.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reviews the study entitled *Goffman Goes to Church: Face-Saving and the Maintenance of Collective Order in Religious Services*, published in *Sociological Research Online*, Volume 18, Issue 1, 2013, by Christopher M. Donnelly and Bradley R.E. Wright of the University of Connecticut, USA (Donnelly & Wright, 2013).

This research is grounded in the social reality that societal life is inseparable from prevailing norms, such as norms of decorum, including those within religious contexts (Rietveld & Hoogendoorn, 2022). In Christian worship services, social interactions serve not only as a medium for spirituality but also reflect broader social, economic, political, and environmental dynamics (Abbas et al., 2021). These norms are essential for fostering a sense of transcendence and a state of “flow” that enhances religious experiences (Astrachan et al., 2020). However, breaches of these norms often disrupt the harmony of interactions during worship services (Haynes, 2020). Therefore, understanding how such breaches affect collective behavior and religious experiences among congregants becomes critical (Donnelly & Wright, 2013).

Previous studies have highlighted various aspects of interactions in religious worship, including the concepts of social control and behavioral norms (Durkheim, 1995; Hochschild, 1979; Weber, 1992). However, Donnelly and Wright observe that studies on ritual interactions in Christian worship contexts remain limited, particularly in analyzing norm violations and recovery mechanisms. While prior research extensively examines processes of alignment and collective awareness, little attention has been given to the interactionist and dramaturgical aspects shaping collective experiences in religious rituals (Donnelly & Wright, 2013, p. 2). This gap underscores the need for further research on how norm violations occur and how the restoration of these norms unfolds during worship services.

This review article aims to provide a detailed explanation of Donnelly and Wright's work, focusing on the mechanisms involved in norm violations during Christian worship in the United States and the strategies employed by congregants and pastors to restore normative behavior. By adopting an interactionist perspective, this paper offers an in-depth understanding of participants' roles in maintaining collective order during worship services.

Donnelly and Wright argue that restoring behavioral norms during Christian worship is not a passive process but involves active participation by congregants and pastors as norm enforcers. In this context, every worship service results from a collective social collaboration, where norm violations are addressed through interactive strategies aimed at repairing and re-establishing

disrupted social order. Thus, understanding these dynamics is crucial for appreciating how religious rituals can proceed harmoniously despite challenges to social norms.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This review article is based on research conducted in Protestant and Roman Catholic churches in two Northeastern states of the United States, specifically New England and Connecticut. These areas were selected because of their demographic composition, with 43 percent of the population identifying as Catholic and 13 percent as mainline Protestant. The study focused on these traditions due to their structured rituals, which allowed researchers to identify and observe errors during worship services easily. The location of these churches in rural areas, suburbs, and certain urban districts provided diverse social contexts for analysis.

The researchers employed a qualitative research approach using participant observation to collect both primary and secondary data (Haq et al., 2023, 2024; Djunatan et al., 2024). They gathered primary data through real-time observations of congregants' and pastors' behavior during worship services. Secondary data included relevant literature on religious rituals and theories underpinning social interaction (Lune & Berg, 2017).

The study participants comprised congregants and pastors from the observed churches. The researchers observed their behavior during worship without actively participating in the rituals, thus maintaining the natural flow of interactions. While they did not conduct formal interviews, they used back-row seating to capture the nuances of social interactions and the participants' responses to norm violations. In some cases, the researchers engaged in brief conversations that provided additional insights into the social and cultural context of the congregations they studied.

The research process began with selecting locations and conducting initial observations to understand the structure of worship services. Donnelly and Wright attended the services by arriving early and leaving after the service ended to observe behavior beyond the formal context, illustrating Goffman's concept of the "backstage." Data collection involved participant observation, during which the researchers documented behaviors and interactions during worship services. They dressed casually and maintained a neutral demeanor to blend in as ordinary attendees, ensuring they did not disrupt the rituals.

After collecting the data, the researchers reduced it by identifying key themes that emerged from their observations (Maxwell, 2008). They analyzed the data by categorizing behaviors related to social norms in worship services. The researchers then evaluated how norm violations were addressed through social interactions, referencing Goffman's concepts of face and face-work. Through this process, they gained deeper insights into the dynamics of ritual interactions and the strategies participants used to preserve social integrity during worship.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. "Maintaining Face": Goffman's Dramaturgical Concept

In the context of social interaction, Erving Goffman's work (2021), particularly the concept of "face", provides an essential theoretical foundation for understanding the dynamics of religious rituals. Face, defined as the positive social value claimed by an individual during social interaction, reflects the self-image that individuals expect others to approve of. Failures in maintaining face can significantly affect both the actor and the audience, making it crucial for individuals to understand and manage the social situations they encounter (Donnelly & Wright, 2013, p. 4).

Goffman, in his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, discusses the theatrical metaphor in daily life. In the theater, there is a front stage or region (front stage) and a backstage (back region). An individual performing on the front stage presents a polished and appealing

performance visible to others. In contrast, backstage events can often be messy or even painful (Goffman, 2021).

Goffman explains that during interactions, particularly when mistakes occur, individuals must engage in face-saving efforts through defensive measures or sanctions from other participants. This process involves two main strategies: avoidance, which pertains to efforts to prevent acknowledgment of errors, and corrective measures, which involve actions to repair violations after they occur. Goffman also highlights the importance of interaction structures that allow individuals to respond to mistakes appropriately to preserve social order and existing norms (Goffman, 1974).

Rituals in this context are not random acts but structured methods understood by participants. Goffman's concept of face-work sheds light on how individuals strive to adhere to social norms and maintain harmony in interactions, even when violations occur. This study emphasizes the significance of understanding social norms and the strategies participants use to address breaches during worship services and their impact on collective experiences in religious rituals. The researchers convincingly employ Goffman's face concept to capture the dynamics of disruptions during worship services in American churches.

b. Disruptions in Worship: Crying, Coughing, and Lapses

Donnelly and Wright's first finding pertains to events that disrupt worship services. In religious rituals, there exists what Goffman terms "expressive order" (Smith, 2013), which governs the flow of events in rituals so that the actions of actors during worship appear consistent and respectful of established norms. However, this order often faces disruptions from various types of violations, whether by religious officials or congregants. These disruptions can include physical actions, vocal errors, or procedural violations that interfere with the smooth conduct of worship.

Religious officials, with their high visibility and authority, bear significant responsibility for adhering to norms. When they make mistakes, such as forgetting the sequence of rituals or performing inappropriate gestures, it can create discomfort within the community (Donnelly & Wright, 2013, p. 4). On the other hand, congregants often contribute to disruptions, such as children running around or adults arriving late. Vocal errors, including crying babies or adults speaking at inappropriate times, are common distractions during services. Additionally, appearance-related issues, such as inappropriate attire, can draw negative attention from other congregants. These disruptions not only impact the individuals responsible for them but also harm the denomination's overall image (Donnelly & Wright, 2013, p. 5).

It is crucial to recognize that maintaining worship order is not solely the responsibility of religious officials but also the entire congregation. Understanding these various disruptions can help create a more harmonious and orderly worship environment where individuals can experience a deeper and more integrated spiritual connection.

The severity and timing of these disruptions vary significantly. Minor disruptions, such as late arrivals, quickly silenced cell phone rings, or loud coughing, are usually trivial and often ignored by the congregation. These actions typically attract brief attention without eliciting significant reactions. However, more serious disruptions, such as crying babies or repeatedly ringing phones, can cause discomfort and unease among congregants (Donnelly & Wright, 2013).

Responses to these disruptions reflect the seriousness of the situation and those involved, influencing how the congregation reacts—either by avoiding or attempting to rectify the situation. Most disruptions occur during worship, especially during sermons, where the pastor's voice is the focal point. However, some moments outside the service, before and after worship, show relaxed behavioral norms as people adjust to the upcoming or concluded ritual

context. During these times, behaviors and facial expressions are more casual, illustrating the “backstage” dynamics in the social interplay preceding religious rituals (Donnelly & Wright, 2013).

In conclusion, Donnelly and Wright successfully demonstrate that disruptions during worship services, whether caused by religious officials or congregants, can impact the smoothness and sanctity of religious rituals. Actions such as procedural errors, distracting sounds, or dress code violations have varying effects depending on their severity and timing. Religious officials, with their significant responsibilities, are expected to minimize disruptions by adhering to worship norms and order. Meanwhile, congregants also play a vital role in maintaining harmony and focus during services. By understanding various forms of disruptions and their resulting responses, both minor and serious, this study provides profound insights into the collective responsibility of creating a worship environment that is orderly, harmonious, and conducive to deep spiritual experiences.

c. Avoidance Processes in Addressing Disruptions

The next finding explores the avoidance processes in response to the disruptions discussed in the previous subsection. In the context of managing disruptions during worship, Goffman explains that individuals use various strategies to maintain their “face” and manage situations where disruptions cannot be avoided (dramaturgy). One of the most common strategies involves ignoring the disruptor and focusing on worship, creating what Goffman calls “tactical blindness.” For instance, when a young man with mental disabilities makes loud noises during a pastor's prayer, the pastor continues praying and tries to maintain focus despite apparent difficulty. This effort demonstrates an attempt to preserve concentration and avoid acknowledging the disruption (Donnelly & Wright, 2013, p. 5).

Additionally, individuals often use humor to address disruptions, acknowledging the situation without threatening the face of the disruptor. An example occurred when a pastor baptized a crying baby and calmly stated, “Don't worry, he's still baptized,” which elicited laughter from the congregation and eased the tension. This shows how potentially disruptive moments can transform into lighthearted, amusing experiences (Donnelly & Wright, 2013, p. 6).

When disruptions occur, particularly verbal or auditory ones, clergy members often respond by not only ignoring the noise but also increasing their vocal intensity to proceed with the service. For example, Pastor Tom raised his voice and used hand gestures to redirect attention away from a crying child, maintaining the flow of the worship service without reprimanding the disruptor.

Sometimes, individuals who make mistakes during worship impose self-sanctions. For instance, a congregant who responded to a communal prayer at the wrong time quickly realized their error and bowed their head in embarrassment. This action demonstrated respect for the ritual norms they had inadvertently violated.

Lastly, a type of avoidance called “forgiven acceptance” occurs when congregants and clergy perceive certain disruptions as normal. During one service, a young man with mental disabilities made loud noises, yet neither the congregation nor the clergy reacted negatively, signaling an acceptance of the disruption due to the individual's background.

The above findings highlight that Donnelly and Wright discovered avoidance processes during worship reflect collective efforts to maintain harmony and ritual order through various adaptive strategies. Both congregants and clergy employed approaches such as “tactical blindness,” humor, vocal amplification, and accepting disruptions as understandable to manage situations without escalating problems or creating tension. These strategies demonstrate flexibility and tolerance within religious communities while emphasizing mutual respect and adaptation to unexpected circumstances during worship. By recognizing that disruptions can be

addressed inclusively and empathetically, this study underscores how religious communities preserve the sanctity of worship amidst practical challenges.

d. Corrective Processes

Donnelly and Wright also examined the corrective processes in the context of social interaction during religious worship, involving complex interactions among various actors to rectify behaviors deemed as violations of ritual norms. When disruptions occur, such as inappropriate statements by worship leaders or disrespectful behavior from congregants, responses range from verbal reactions to direct corrections.

In the initial stage, challenges may manifest as paralinguistic responses, such as sighs or subtle vocal protests. For example, when a pastor announced a matchmaking event for Valentine's Day, a congregant expressed displeasure with a disgruntled noise. This subtle response allowed congregants to express dissatisfaction without disrupting the service (Donnelly & Wright, 2013, p. 7).

Further, challenges may escalate by drawing attention to the disruptor. For instance, when a child dropped a hymnbook, some congregants glanced at the child with neutral expressions. This common, indirect corrective response indicated awareness of the disruption without formal intervention. For more severe violations, congregants might use sharp looks or frowns to signal disapproval (Donnelly & Wright, 2013, p. 7).

Verbal comments from congregants, even if not directed explicitly at the disruptor, also serve as effective sanctions. For example, when a pastor made an inappropriate remark, congregants murmured disapproval, creating social pressure on the leader without disrupting the service (Donnelly & Wright, 2013, p. 7).

On the other hand, more direct corrections involve actions by the pastor or clergy members reprimanding congregants publicly. One instance involved a pastor reminding a song leader to announce a hymn, emphasizing the importance of maintaining worship order. However, such corrections are typically reserved for clear and conspicuous situations (Donnelly & Wright, 2013, p. 8).

Notably, challenges from congregants toward clergy are rare. In one example, when a pastor struggled to speak, two congregants attempted to assist but were rebuffed. This highlights a hierarchical dynamic where congregants are discouraged from challenging clergy authority.

The corrective strategies used in these contexts not only maintain order but also preserve the face and reputation of the involved actors. Congregants' challenges act as mechanisms to reinforce social norms and enhance self-awareness among violators, encouraging future behavioral improvements.

Regarding apologies, Donnelly and Wright identified another type of response to errors in religious rituals: efforts to repair damage caused by mistakes. These efforts typically involve the violator apologizing to acknowledge their mistake and attempt to make amends. Apologies were more common among congregants than clergy. Examples included a woman who apologized after stumbling into the chapel late or an usher who apologized after rushing a donation basket.

In this context, apologies served to demonstrate that violators sought to regain trust and acceptance within the social setting. In contrast, clergy apologies were rare and often avoided direct acknowledgment of fault. For instance, a pastor once apologized for poor vision humorously, reflecting the "asymmetric rules" governing clergy-congregant interactions. This dynamic shows how clergy often occupy positions of power that make it challenging to engage with congregants as equals.

Overall, Donnelly and Wright's findings on corrective processes illustrate how such strategies not only uphold order but also reinforce social norms and mutual respect. By analyzing these interactions, the study highlights the collective responsibility in maintaining worship sanctity and the delicate balance of authority and accountability within religious communities.

e. Monitoring Worship Services

Donnelly and Wright also explained the role of monitoring during worship services. Their observations revealed that rule enforcers play a crucial role in maintaining the expectations and norms of worship without holding formal positions. These individuals act as religious "police," monitoring violations and ensuring the smooth flow of rituals. These enforcers, typically over sixty years old and dressed neatly, actively supervise the congregation, paying close attention to disruptions, especially during sermons and prayers. For instance, a woman dressed in red was seen carefully scanning the congregation and responding promptly to emerging disturbances (Donnelly & Wright, 2013, p. 9).

Donnelly and Wright noted that these enforcers identified disruptions through visual observation and acted as first responders to violations, even without a close relationship with the offenders. Moreover, the enforcers displayed rigid and polite body language, reflecting the church's norms. At times, they even followed unnecessary norms, such as making the sign of the cross at inappropriate moments. This enforcement behavior was more apparent during the service and tended to dissipate afterward, indicating that the role was situational. These enforcers appeared committed to preserving the collective image of their denomination, often sacrificing their personal worship experience to maintain ritual stability, effectively becoming religious martyrs in a social context.

f. Critical Reflections on the Research

In the context of research discussing the dynamics of social interaction during worship, several critiques can be raised to deepen the understanding of this phenomenon. This study provides fascinating insights into how individuals manage disruptions in religious rituals, referencing Erving Goffman's concepts of face management and strategies for addressing disruptions. However, one overlooked aspect is how individuals' social and cultural backgrounds influence these processes. For example, the rule enforcers identified in the study operated in ways reflecting specific cultural norms prevalent in their community, but this behavior cannot always be generalized to broader or cross-cultural worship contexts.

Another critique concerns the emphasis on "tactical blindness" as a way to ignore disruptions, which prioritizes maintaining harmony in the ritual over openly addressing the issue. This approach can obscure discussions about the importance of integrating violations into religious practices, as highlighted by Peter Berger (2011), who argued that social interaction often reflects a tension between norms and reality. In many religious contexts, violations, while considered normal, must be addressed to uphold the sanctity of rituals. Ignoring disruptions may have long-term negative effects, creating a tendency within the community to overlook behaviors that require intervention.

Furthermore, the corrective processes identified in the study, such as indirect verbal critiques or stern glances, suggest a hierarchy that could suppress congregants' active participation in shaping norms. This aligns with Michel Foucault's (2019) argument that power in society is not always visible but flows through existing social norms. In other words, while corrective processes aim to maintain order, they also reinforce hierarchical structures within religious communities, potentially marginalizing congregants' voices.

On the other hand, the avoidance processes described in the study demonstrate individual resilience in handling disruptions. However, it is worth reflecting on whether this resilience always has positive effects. By ignoring disruptions, individuals may overlook opportunities for constructive dialogue on how worship practices can become more inclusive and responsive to the diversity of spiritual experiences within the community. The concept of “forgiven acceptance” warrants further exploration, as it highlights the complexity of social interactions in worship, where individuals may feel marginalized or overlooked when certain norms are prioritized.

In conclusion, while this study offers valuable insights into managing disruptions during worship, it also invites critiques that can deepen the analysis. A broader understanding of the social dynamics at play—considering cultural factors, hierarchy, and the potential for dialogue—can provide a more comprehensive view of how religious practices evolve in the face of contemporary challenges (Kudrya-Marais, 2022; Manrique, 2019). Future research should consider the voices of various community members and how norms can be transformed to create a more inclusive and responsive worship environment.

4. CONCLUSION

This review concludes by emphasizing that religious services create a dynamic interplay between two ever-changing groups: those who violate rules and those who enforce them. The study identified various threats to ritual order, methods for addressing these threats, and the informal social role of rule enforcers who help maintain order. The findings reinforce Erving Goffman’s ideas, illustrating the complexity of norms in religious practices in the Northeastern United States. Specifically, actions that disrupt ritual order are sanctioned by rule enforcers, enabling worship leaders to maintain a consistent religious experience without directly engaging with unsacred matters.

Furthermore, the study reflects on the distinction between the sacred and the profane, where congregants’ mistakes are not merely seen as disruptions but also highlight the hierarchical structure within worship. By incorporating Goffman’s thinking into the study of religion, the research presents disruptions in the context of religious rituals not only as behaviors to avoid but as indicators of religious power differences among worship leaders, enforcers, and congregants. These findings could extend to other contexts, such as sports events or university classes, where social control is similarly necessary to create a harmonious collective experience.

The study reveals that congregants are not passive recipients of teachings but actively maintain the appropriate atmosphere for worship. This self-monitoring process is critical, creating informal social roles that ensure ritual order. Thus, for emotional and educational experiences in worship to occur, it is essential for groups to maintain discipline and separate the crowd from the more focused and engaged congregation.

However, while this study provides significant insights into managing disruptions during worship, several critiques deserve attention to enhance the analysis. First, the study fails to account for how individuals’ social and cultural backgrounds influence the dynamics of interactions during worship. Rule enforcers operate within specific cultural norms, so generalizing the findings to broader worship contexts should be approached cautiously. Second, ignoring disruptions through “tactical blindness” may obscure the importance of open discussions about violations, which should be integral to religious practices. This could create long-term adverse effects, where behaviors requiring intervention go unnoticed.

Additionally, the corrective processes observed during worship reveal hierarchical structures that may suppress congregants’ active participation in shaping norms. This calls for greater attention to how congregants’ voices can be marginalized, necessitating a more inclusive and responsive approach to diverse spiritual experiences. The concept of “forgiven acceptance”

deserves further exploration, as it highlights how individuals in the community may feel sidelined when certain norms are prioritized.

By addressing these critiques, future research should delve deeper into how worship practices can adapt to contemporary challenges and foster dialogue among various community members. In this way, religious practices can not only maintain order but also serve as spaces for inclusivity and continuous spiritual growth

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