
CULTURE, AMERICAN FEUDALISM, AND THE CONUNDRUM OF LEADERSHIP

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Abstract: “American cultural feudalism” is introduced as a way to explain long-standing and broad patterns of social and political behavior in the United States. Its validity as a theory is suggested by current trends in leadership studies and international research on topics such as economic development, corruption, and perceptions of power. The article argues that cultural feudalism threatens the actual practice of leadership, tending to replace it with forms of force or concentrated power. Implications of this argument are explored for leadership in religious communities.

Of Politics, Promise, and Peril

On the 4th of November, 2008, Illinois United States Senator Barack Obama was elected the forty-fourth President of the United States of America. His election concluded a campaign that would have made history one way or another: either with the oldest person (John McCain), the first woman (Hillary Clinton), the first woman vice president (Sarah Palin), or the first African American ever to have reached the presidency. Many middle-aged and older Americans never imagined that an African American would be elected president in their lifetimes: when Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson, and Al Sharpton were candidates, few political observers viewed their campaigns as realistic. The same was said of Obama’s candidacy when it was announced in Springfield, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln’s adopted hometown. Teaching at the largest African American graduate theological school, I heard students express during the primaries their fear that Obama would be

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assassinated even if he received the Democratic Party's nomination. Such is the persistence of the effects of racial attitudes, vestiges of oppressive ways of life that many of my older students still can remember.

As though prompted from the story line of a political thriller, Obama's remarkable and historic election became distracted by the announcement a few weeks later that F.B.I. agents had arrested Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich. The son of immigrants, Blagojevich allegedly was caught on authorized wiretaps seeking to sell Obama's vacating U.S. Senate seat to the highest bidder. On 29 January, 2009, after a four-day impeachment trial, the Illinois state Senate voted unanimously to unseat Blagojevich as governor. As of this writing, Blagojevich's federal case was pending.

If this were an isolated set of circumstances, one could conclude rather easily that Blagojevich's alleged actions represent merely a serious lapse of ethical judgment on the part of one person. However, Blagojevich's predecessor as Illinois governor, George Ryan, currently is serving a six-and-one-half-year prison term for white collar crimes. Ryan is the third Illinois governor since 1968 to have been so convicted and imprisoned.¹ As one who lived in and near Chicago for fifteen years, I am not surprised—although it distresses me to see public officials violating their public trust. It was during the tenure of my residency around the Windy City that some of the ideas in this article began to take shape in my thinking. Prior to that time, I had lived all of my life in Western states. Something was different in the urban upper Midwest—something more subtle than first appearances but pervasive and strong nonetheless.

Ideals about Office

Juxtaposing the historic election and engaging style of Barack Obama with the political allegations against Rod Blagojevich prompts reflection upon a number of issues

¹ For more information, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Ryan, accessed 19 January 2009.

about American society and politics. For those interested in the nature of power and leadership, an Obama/Blagojevich saga presents telling images and contrasts. If someone holds an office, is he or she leading? What is the measure of effective leadership? Such questions have taken on increased prominence in my mind, ever since I was drawn as a young teenager into the world of student government. For six years, I learned the elements of representative democracy—rule of law, use of a constitution, election to office by peers, voice, debate, compromise, revisions, vote, and so on. These early experiences with student council have influenced my deeply-held beliefs about society, government, the public arena, and leadership.

No doubt this background had something to do with my puzzled sense of being a fish out of water when I moved across the country and near Chicago. There was something about the social and political attitudes there that was subtle but decidedly different. Nothing in my life out West or my seminary training helped me understand it. Over the years, however, I began formulating some ideas: concepts that, for one thing, seem to illuminate the contrasts between Obama and Blagojevich—both of whom, ironically, have ties to Chicago.

Naming the Species

There is, I believe, a way to name what I have been grappling these many years to understand. This article offers such a name, in order to articulate the nature of what I sense is a pattern of complex, persistent human phenomena in the United States. In so doing, I will reflect on its existence and character in relation to considerations of leadership in general and American religious leadership in particular. Occurrences of leadership are not limited to presidencies or governorships—indeed, as my later comments will suggest, I despair at times that high office expresses authentic leadership far too infrequently. What religious practitioners need is a deep appreciation for the ways in

which opportunities for religious leadership emerge in a complicated set of dynamics connecting religious groups with other communities and institutions.

Some of these dynamics can be explained by the notion of “American cultural feudalism.” I am offering this new phrase for what I think is a new theory.² It is “feudalistic” in the sense that it expresses patterns of—and unquestioned premises about—human interactions that have their primary origins in medieval European feudalistic life. It is “cultural” in the sense that the patterns themselves have adapted to rudiments of later economic (capitalism) and political (representative democracy) systems that formally have replaced feudalism. It is cultural also in the sense that it is behavior shared in community—that is, the behavior of individuals being deeply influenced by the culture in their specific environments.

Exploring Leadership Culturally

However, my purpose here is not solely to offer social analysis. At the heart of my interest here is leadership. What is the basic nature of leading? How is an understanding of religious leadership influenced by its socio-cultural context? How are economic, political, and cultural elements of society related—and in what ways do religious institutions interact with these elements? Finally, to what extent can paradigms of a broad scope illuminate the complex nature of leadership in American society? These four questions will guide the discussion that follows.

In this article, then, I propose several insights about the nature of American cultural feudalism and its influences upon American society and religion. In particular, I will begin to raise the question of whether cultural feudalism threatens—even when subtly—the

² Following Thomas Kuhn, who argued that new paradigms in the history of scientific discovery begin to emerge as new data cannot be adequately explained by any extant paradigm. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed., enlarged, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

development of genuine leadership. I will discuss how this threat affects religious leadership in the United States. To address these matters, I suggest, first of all, that the notion of leadership needs to be more narrowly defined than its more common usage implies. Rather than treating leadership as something relatively synonymous with concepts of office, authority, power, and the like, genuine leadership has more to do with a group's or community's vision. Authentic leadership involves helping that community articulate, embrace, and follow some vision of a common good, with integrity. Yet such a process never occurs in a vacuum: leadership (even religious leadership) is heavily influenced by factors of the situation's milieu or context. This is my second proposal. Third, the context for American leadership—its "soup base"—is framed by the interactions of specific economic and political systems, namely free-market capitalism and representative democracy. Fourth and finally, recognizing the presence of cultural feudalism in American society opens a way to identify broad, strong yet subtle features that touch on virtually every aspect of American life.

On the basis of these proposals, my central thesis tenders a value judgment about the effects of cultural feudalism on the practice of leadership. I hope to be sufficiently credible in contending that cultural feudalism complicates, and not infrequently undermines, the emergence of authentic leadership. This occurs because feudalism usually limits wide access to the kind of civic preparation and expansive opportunity that fosters leadership potential. At its heart, cultural feudalism tends to be coercive, whereas leadership tends to be persuasive; that is, in a final analysis, feudalism is inclined to impose its will, while leadership is inclined to inspire assent and participation. When viewed from the perspective of religion, these contrasting tendencies lead to very different experiences of faith and practice, some of which contradict key American values.

In order to demonstrate the plausibility of these suggestions and theses, I first will highlight some

parameters that reflect a degree of consensus on the nature of leadership. Next, I will present a sketch of the theory that I name here, American cultural feudalism. To do so, certain generalized references to history, economics, religion, and politics will be necessary. Following that presentation, I then will explore what I view as a conundrum over the nature and function of leadership. Here, differences between feudalism and democracy—in both stated ideals and actual practices—form the substance of the discussion. Lastly, I will relate emphases and conclusions from the earlier discussions to a general consideration of American religious leadership.

Toward Consensus on Leading

People who study, think, and write about leadership employ no one single perspective or framework. Related, but not identical, concepts such as power, authority/legitimacy, competence, status, culture, management, charisma, and others inevitably turn up in careful studies of what leadership is.³ Models of leadership abound: one long-respected resource indicates at least eleven of them;⁴ another source, at least ten.⁵ Attention to the concept of leadership stretches far back into antiquity.

Theoretical Traditions

Yet, until fairly recently in history, the only kind of theory about leadership was one that today is known as the “great man.”⁶ This long-standing view primarily considers major historical movements and the persons who were part of them. It assumes that the tides of human events have hinged upon the decisions, actions,

³ A quick look through the table of contents of the 1,100-plus page volume, *Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership*, makes this point easily. See Bernard M. Bass, *Bass & Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications*, 3rd ed., (New York: The Free Press, 1990).

⁴ Bass, chapter 3.

⁵ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 4th ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007).

⁶ See Bass, 37-38.

and effects of heroic-style characters such as Constantine, Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Napoleon, and so on. Lists of such “superior qualities”⁷ of personality and character typify the great man tradition.

By the middle of the twentieth century, however, the tide of leadership studies began to turn, in favor of an opposite approach—namely, that leadership appears as a consequence of a particular combination of factors external to any one person. This situational approach to leadership theory focuses for explanation on “time, place, and circumstance.”⁸ Situational theorists argue that the social and political accomplishments of a Mahatma Gandhi can be explained by his devotion to a cause that was considered important at the time—not because of his personal traits.⁹

A third set of leadership theories challenges both of the others—by integrating them. It is based on the premise that leadership derives instead from the interaction between personal characteristics and situational dynamics. These newer theories synthesize elements of both person and situation; the key to understanding leadership is their interplay. One stream in this synthesizing set of theories, the transformational model, has become especially popular. Considered a paradigm shift of its own, the transformational model asserts that what is central to leading is the capacity for motivating and equipping others to function effectively. In this process and its results, everyone involved becomes transformed: goals are met and, perhaps even more importantly, higher ideals are realized; people feel respected and appreciated; and constructive change takes place.¹⁰

Transformational leadership, similar to great-man theories, still recognizes the role of charisma. That is, persons with unusual gifts can and do lead, inspiring

⁷ Bass, 38.

⁸ Bass, 38.

⁹ Bass, 39.

¹⁰ Northouse, chapter 9, esp. pp. 175-177; see also Bass, 53-54.

others to reach beyond their present circumstances for a greater good. What distinguishes charisma in transformational theory from charisma in great-man theory, however, is recognizing the key to charisma's effectiveness in its relationship to others. The transformational leader depends upon the interaction with those that she or he seeks to lead.¹¹ Because followers must validate the person's charisma, transformational models view leadership as operating much more by persuasion than force. Transformational qualities fit very closely with what people say they want in a leader and role model;¹² this is the case even on a multinational scale.¹³

Synthesizing theories provide an approach to leadership that appreciates its complexity. Acknowledging interaction as central implies that leadership always functions contextually, connectedly. This insight cannot be overemphasized. It means that leadership cannot exist in a vacuum, as though leadership itself exists without reference to any concrete circumstances. These points become significant as we consider culture.

Definitions: Scholarly Concurrence

Not surprisingly, then, synthesizing leadership theories undergird much contemporary research and writing. Many of the most highly-regarded authorities in the field today at least implicitly speak of the person-situation interplay as the seat of leadership activity. These include John Gardner,¹⁴ Ronald A. Heifetz,¹⁵ Warren

¹¹ Northouse, 177-178.

¹² Bass, 54.

¹³ See Northouse's summary of the GLOBE cross-cultural study on implicit leadership theory, in Northouse, 313-325.

¹⁴ "Leadership is the process of persuasion or example by which an individual (or leadership team) induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers." John W. Gardner, *On Leadership* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 1.

¹⁵ "...the usefulness of viewing leadership in terms of adaptive work...[which]consists of the learning required to address conflicts in the values people hold, or to diminish the gap between the values people stand

Bennis,¹⁶ Robert K. Greenleaf,¹⁷ Margaret Wheatley,¹⁸ Peter G. Northouse,¹⁹ Stephen R. Covey,²⁰ Bolman and Deal,²¹ Kouzes and Posner,²² and Bernard Bass.²³ These several scholars and writers reflect strong elements of the transformational leadership paradigm, in which the motivation from charisma depends upon its reception by those of the group or community. This point needs

for and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires a change in values, beliefs, or behavior.” Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 22.

¹⁶ “...leadership revolves around vision, ideas, direction, and has more to do with inspiring people as to direction and goals than with day-to-day implementation...” John Sculley, as quoted in Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1989), 136.

¹⁷ “Leadership—going out ahead to show the way...” Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 96.

¹⁸ “...effective leadership...simple governing principles: guiding visions, strong values, organizational beliefs... The leader’s task is to communicate them, to keep them everpresent and clear...” Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1994), 133.

¹⁹ “Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.” Northouse, 3.

²⁰ “...leadership...can be broken into two parts: one having to do with vision and direction, values and purposes, and the other with inspiring and motivating people to work together with a common vision and purpose.” Stephen R. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 246.

²¹ “The effective leader creates an ‘agenda for change’ with two major elements: a *vision* balancing the long-term interests of key parties and a *strategy for achieving the vision*, recognizing competing internal and external forces.” Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley imprint, 2003), 205, citing John Kotter.

²² “When they were at their personal best, our leaders: 1. Challenged the process. 2. Inspired a shared vision. 3. Enabled others to act. 4. Modeled the way. 5. Encouraged the heart.” James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How To Get Extraordinary Things in Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), 7-8.

²³ “Leadership is an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or restructuring of the situation and the perceptions and expectations of the members. ...Leadership occurs when one group member modifies the motivation or competencies of others in the group. ...” Bass, 19-20.

elaboration. Scholarly consensus suggests that genuine leadership exhibits two key qualities. One, it occurs only in the context of a particular community or group: leadership is interactive. Two, it has more to do with persuasion than force. If power is understood primarily in terms of coercion, then it is not being employed to lead. As Bass puts it, “The concept of power leaves unexplained much of what is involved in the leadership role.”²⁴ In other words, if we are to understand the nature of leading, the exercise of power must be viewed in terms that are not coercive.

Hence, leadership as a concept-defining practice is not equitable with, or merely identical to, notions that commonly define other forms of human exchange. Leadership is not simply the same as office, authority, power, status, initiative, role, influence, coercion, privilege, public accomplishment, or any other widely-recognizable social phenomena. In this regard, leadership needs circumscription, demarcation, a limiting of its sphere of description, for the sake of clarity and usefulness. If everything is leadership, so to speak, then the concept loses its capacity to explain anything significant or valuable. Instead, the notion of leadership deserves a distinctive place in our understanding of human endeavor. This is true, I believe, in all arenas of human life that authentic leadership touches.

We will see later how such a perspective on leadership provides a critical framework for assessing the value of public-oriented behaviors. Any such behaviors are influenced by the intricacies of culture—which means that leadership also has cultural dimensions. What we mean by culture provides a prelude to our central topic.

A Landscape of Cultural Influence

In other words, the validity of an argument for cultural feudalism is stronger when it can be located as part of a broader conversation about culture, its influence and nature. Here, the conversation takes two forms. The

²⁴ Bass, 251.

first appeals to cross-cultural and international research that emphasizes the empirical basis of large-scale cultural trends. The second one orients our particular treatment of culture by defining it in terms of invisible but indispensable sources of any culture's driving energy. These two brief discussions set the stage for an introduction to American cultural feudalism.

The Strength of Culture

In thinking about leadership, why pay attention to culture? The term *culture* has crept its way of late into public discourse. Yet culture is a much more complicated phenomenon than is given credit in popular discussions, even those in the church. Americans do not understand culture; we are the products of the early Protestant legacy toward individualism, fanned by American capitalistic practices. The notion of culture reminds us that human experience is laced with elements that are very contextual and communal. Culture is one way of affirming that connectedness is in the nature of things.

Culture is real. The influences that affect a minister's relationship with a congregation and its community exist in part outside of the personal experiences of the church members and the neighborhood residents. Culture is also subtle; it is not as easily measurable as demographic statistics, even though statistics can point to persistent and idiosyncratic features that reside in culture. Culture's very subtlety accounts in part for its strength in human life and its resilience from one context to another, and even from one generation to another.

Cultural research is not a popular form of disciplinary inquiry, in part because its conclusions are not always flattering. Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson, however, argues that seeking cultural reasons for why things happen is not the same as saying that it always has to be that way. In Patterson's pithy language, "to explain is not to be deterministic." Patterson points out that sometimes scholarship seeks to figure out things that we

realize are not beneficial.²⁵ Explanation does not require approval, but when evidence supports explanation, the question of what can or should be done relies on the strength of the explanation's validity. This is an insight that can get lost when realities do not match ideals.

Culture, Religion, and Politics: Precedents in Theory and Research

In other words, controversial proposals that include cultural analysis are not new. Max Weber's classic essay²⁶ on the relationship between certain traditional Protestant ideals and the development of modern capitalism still sparks debate. In "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," Weber develops an argument for a particular historical phenomenon that I would label as "cultural." He was struck in Germany by the distinctive, dominant economic position of Protestants—especially Calvinists—compared with that of Catholics. This superiority in "economic rationalism" led Weber to argue that "the principal explanation of this difference must be sought in the permanent intrinsic character of their religious beliefs," rather than simply in the circumstances of history and politics.²⁷ What Weber develops is an explanation of the Calvinistic view of election that led, he argues, to a "worldly Protestant asceticism" in which the acquisition of material goods—while not viewed as a goal in itself—was understood as a sign of divine favor.²⁸ The ethic of hard work and self-denial that became associated with these Protestant values, Weber claims, created "the spirit of capitalism" that drove the development of modern, Western capitalist economics.

²⁵ Orlando Patterson, "Taking Culture Seriously," in *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 202-208; quotation from p. 208.

²⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, introduction by Anthony Giddens (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958; introduction 1976, George Allen & Unwin Ltd.).

²⁷ Weber, 40.

²⁸ Weber, 170-171.

The Weberian Legacy

Although Weber's thesis has been scrutinized, criticized, and modified over the decades, his ideas continue to remain engaging. Later scholars have taken Weber's cue and developed similar arguments about ethnicity, ethics, and economics. For instance, Francis Fukuyama's thesis about economic success across the world is in large part an argument about culture. Fukuyama's central notion is that of trust. Social capital and what he calls "spontaneous sociability"²⁹ combine to create in certain countries forms of quite prosperous associations beyond kinship relations. "High-trust" societies like the United States, Germany, and Japan each have, already in place, "a set of ethical habits and reciprocal moral obligations internalized by each of the community's members."³⁰ By contrast, "low-trust" societies like Italy, China, and France do not possess the social capital to create the kinds of organizations that can function efficiently in an increasingly technological world. Social capital and trust, Fukuyama argues, are features of culture, and they do not appear the same way in every society.

A similar point about the varying effects of culture is made from Geert Hofstede's study in forty countries on perceptions of power.³¹ From his data, Hofstede argues for a continuum of "power distance," where one end is "high" and the other "low." On the high end, members of organizations in particular countries (such as France, Hong Kong, and Turkey) believe that their lack of access to power is given and unchangeable. In such countries, persons who have little power accept their condition and the hierarchical forms of organization or society that uphold it. For them, the distance to power is high. By contrast, in countries on the low end of the continuum,

²⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 27.

³⁰ Fukuyama, 9.

³¹ See Eric Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993), 18-25.

persons with little power in their organizations believe that the inequality is not permanent or given. Instead, they believe that all persons should be treated equally and that they have the right to further their chances to increase their own power. Hofstede argues that countries with low power distance are Western or heavily Westernized and have a large middle class population.

Both Fukuyama's and Hofstede's studies imply that the ties between religion and culture are also evident within differing political systems. A number of independent, international studies³² demonstrate clearly that this is the case. Political scientist Ronald Inglehart analyzed data³³ from a values survey administered in sixty-five countries, in order to understand contrasts between culture, economics, and democracy. It is clear from his research that patterns do exist. The world's wealthiest countries tend to be those that are historically Protestant; they also tend to be those countries where general trust of people is the highest.³⁴ Countries like Norway, Denmark, Sweden, New Zealand, and Canada are in this "high-trust, high income" category, along with the United States—whose trust level, by the way, is the lowest among the wealthy nations. Those with low wealth and low public trust tend to be countries with Islamic and Catholic histories. Inglehart concludes that, while "economic development," as it is commonly known, does encourage a country's movement away from its traditions; its current culture nevertheless remains heavily influenced by the traditional culture that has been shaped by the dominant religion in its history.³⁵ In other words, the "survival values" of some nations continue to persist, even with a degree of increase in wealth, while the "self-expressive values" encouraged by historic Protestantism are much more evident in those wealthier countries with

³² See Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, eds., *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

³³ Ronald Inglehart, "Culture and Democracy," in *Culture Matters*, 80-97.

³⁴ Inglehart, 90.

³⁵ Inglehart, 80-81.

a Protestant history.³⁶ The latter all have democratic political systems of one sort or another.

Culture and "Progress"

Observations like those of Fukuyama, Hofstede, Inglehart, and others have led international studies scholar Lawrence Harrison to conclude that the general direction and overall welfare of nations are shaped by two basic cultural patterns. These patterns can be characterized by differences in the way that they deal with several categories, such as orientation toward time and to work, thrift, education, merit, ethical standards, and others. Harrison sees so-called "progressive" cultures sounding a lot like the "worldly ascetic Protestant" of Weber's essay, while the "static" cultures are those of traditional practices, low trust outside of family relations, with more authoritative social structures.³⁷

Harrison's arguments about the influences and varying consequences of cultural difference are similar to those of Samuel P. Huntington and Thomas Sowell. Sowell recognized that the results of his extensive research on race and culture fly in the face of many widely-held intellectual views dominant in the 1990s³⁸ and probably even today. He concludes that objective and environmental circumstances do not hold the key to the capacity of emigrants or national minorities to adapt and succeed. Rather, Sowell asserts, "In both cases, the culture of the people themselves is a major factor in the outcome...."³⁹ Culture, Sowell argues, consists of "patterns of skills and behavior... [that] have often persisted for generations or even centuries,"⁴⁰ including outlooks and mind-sets—that is, cultural attitudes—that Sowell claims have more to do with an ethnic

³⁶ See Figure 7.4 in Inglehart, 93.

³⁷ Lawrence Harrison, "Promoting Progressive Cultural Change," in *Culture Matters*, 299-301.

³⁸ Thomas Sowell, *Race and Culture: A World View* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), iv.

³⁹ Sowell, 9.

⁴⁰ Sowell, 1.

community's economic conditions than the given environment.⁴¹ Huntington's argument sees cultural difference at the root of variations in economies and governments across the world.⁴² Culture consists of "philosophical assumptions, underlying values, social relations, customs and overall outlooks on life..." all of which are being strengthened in many regions of the world through the influence of religion.⁴³ As he argues for shifting worldwide trends in the power of civilizations, Huntington places "culture and cultural identities" at the heart of global politics.⁴⁴

I submit that these several scholarly conclusions provide a broad and compelling framework for recognizing culture in its world-wide patterns. While culture's range of diversity is fascinating and baffling, its fundamental patterns are discernible. Its pervasiveness is evident in social, political, economic, and even religious life. The review above implies definitions of culture that are similar. In a word, culture is "shared meaning and behavior."⁴⁵ This means that communities and groups of people have something in common, that these common things are related to values, and that the activities of the group—whether formal or informal—reflect meaning, that is, deeply-held beliefs.

Culture's Taxonomy of Levels

Yet this concise definition needs unpacking. While some of culture's features are easily observable—Sowell's "patterns of skills and behavior," Huntington's "social relations [and] customs"—others are not so readily evident. Sowell refers to "cultural attitudes" and Huntington to "philosophical assumptions, underlying

⁴¹ Sowell, 22.

⁴² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), 29.

⁴³ Huntington, 28-29.

⁴⁴ Huntington, 20.

⁴⁵ This is the definition that I first posited in *How To Get Along with Your Church: Creating Cultural Capital for Doing Ministry* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 6.

values ...and overall outlooks on life.” To illuminate the presence, and key role, that these elements play in any culture, I have relied on the work of Edgar Schein. His model of the cultural levels of organizations,⁴⁶ I believe, also can be applied to communities of all sizes.

Schein’s model of organizational culture proposes *three distinct levels* to the culture of any organization.⁴⁷ The first level Schein calls the “artifacts,” which consist of everything that can be observed about what the organization does or has. Communities build streets, businesses, schools, homes, and the like. Congregations hold regular worship services; they meet in particular spaces that they decorate a certain way. These and many other things all function at culture’s artifact level. The second level of culture for Schein is the “espoused values,” those written and spoken sayings, consciously and deliberately promoted as what that organization believes to be important, as supporting rationale for its various artifacts. Mission statements, campaign rhetoric (“We hold these truths...”), and slogans each typify espoused values, and religious communities have their share as well: “We are warm and friendly”; “a church in the heart of the city with the city in its heart.” It is relatively easy to find evidence in society and organizations of espoused values, the second level of culture.

However, Schein argues that these two levels do not tell enough of the organization’s cultural story. The Declaration of Independence espouses that everyone is created equal with inalienable rights, yet the U.S. Constitution initially counted African slaves as only three-fifths a person (for census purposes). Illustrations like these call our attention to some contradiction between what the community *says* is important to it and how it actually *behaves*. Incongruities like these are often most evident primarily to newcomers, and they are clues

⁴⁶ See Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

⁴⁷ Schein, chapter 2.

to the presence of a third cultural level. This third level explains not only contradictions but any other area of a community's behavior that is not rendered sensible by appeal to its espoused values.⁴⁸ In other words, what is not accounted for, when comparing the observable artifacts with the espoused values, points us toward a deeper place in culture.

This is the level of culture that is most important. Schein calls this deep, third level that of "shared tacit assumptions." These assumptions are taken for granted and rarely spoken aloud; they represent for the organization what it believes deep down is right and true about the world and members' place in it. Because they are mostly unconscious, tacit assumptions are difficult—but not impossible—to uncover; not only this, they also are very difficult to change.⁴⁹ Yet Schein argues it is those tacit assumptions that drive the organization; they are what make its culture what it is; they are its true energy, regardless of what the organization's or community's mission statement or slogans sound like.

Schein's theory of culture enriches our short definition of "shared meaning and behavior." We begin to realize that culture is so complex, not simply because there are so many different cultures, but also because culture's very strength rests below the level of ready awareness. Culture's character and energy rest within a dimension that is not easily accessible, especially to outsiders.

These assertions, based in Schein's insights, help to make the theory of American cultural feudalism credible. They explain tensions that a newcomer to a community or group tends to experience, a degree of incongruity that is difficult to explain, especially at first. However, since Schein's definition of culture rests in the level of assumptions, it thus illuminates why members of a community or group come to accept apparent contradictions as normal. This definition has to do with

⁴⁸ See Schein, 30.

⁴⁹ Schein, 31.

learning from group experience, with perceived validity, and with transmission:

The culture of a group... [is] defined as *a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems..., that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.*⁵⁰

Thus, the transmission of cultural assumptions, both within one community and from one generation to another, occurs without clear conscious awareness. This point, among others, will be instructive as the notion of cultural feudalism is spelled out.

Feudalism: An American Cultural Phenomenon

If culture can be defined by a pattern of shared basic assumptions, then what does this definition say about cultural feudalism? I am strongly persuaded that American society carries in its complex of cultural streams a set of deeply-inherited attitudes, being closely tied to a few key artifacts that are traceable to feudal societies. These artifacts, modified over time by a new context, still suggest inherited patterns based in transmitted shared assumptions.

America's Unnamed Cultural Legacy

It is not necessary to review the history of European feudalism in order to begin to identify these inherited, common patterns.⁵¹ Their primary features appear something like this:

1. **Power** (i.e., the ability to make things happen) that is *concentrated* among those who fill a limited number of hierarchical positions (“feudal lords”);

⁵⁰ Schein, 17.

⁵¹ For a brief introduction to the elements of late medieval European feudal societies and their manorial form, see Thomas Greer, *A Brief History of the Western World*, 5th ed., (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 185-192.

2. **Law** that is established by, and thus secondary to, the hierarchical authority (and thus the will) of these feudal lords;
3. **Citizenship** and **social status** that is based on the vassal's relationship of loyalty to the lord;
4. **Privilege** that is afforded to vassals who have gained the lord's favor, which is attained through *service* to that lord;
5. A two-class **social and economic pyramid**, in which a very small percentage of people enjoy substantial status and resources, while the vast majority of the population basically subsist;
6. **Territoriality**, in which social, economic, and political life revolves around the lord's specific geographical holdings, with its corresponding resources, status, and power, including protection from any perceived threat by service of that lord's vassals.

I am proposing that these six points describe key elements of European feudalism, and that they maintain a persistent legacy in American social, economic, and political structures and processes. Obviously, American government and public life do not formally recognize lords, vassals, fiefs, and manor houses. At the same time, however, I perceive this persistence of rudimentary feudal practices—behaviors around privilege and patronage, loyalty through service, concentrated power, status, and territorial protection—that have been transmitted over the generations. These practices, I would submit, operate because a number of deeply-held beliefs that originated in the feudal era still exist.

Signs and Forms of American Feudalism

To look for indications that these features have persisted in American life, I think of stigmatized versions of them in nineteenth-century urban gangs and in the continued present activity of organized crime. I call these “stigmatized” versions, because—for the most part—public discourse does not consider them socially acceptable. Yet their presence suggests that the cultural

assumptions undergirding European feudalism did not disappear with the emergence of democratic and capitalistic processes.

Gangs and organized crime illustrate one of the two versions of cultural feudalism that exist in the United States. General political and social characteristics in Chicago, for instance, continue to illustrate the form of cultural feudalism that I call *rough-and-tumble*. It seems to exist most strongly in urban areas of the American Northeast and Midwest. Immigration from poor, peasant regions of Italy, Ireland, and eastern European states swelled Chicago's population and powered its economic engine for decades. As early as the 1890s—if not earlier—Chicago politics came under the influence of strong forms of feudalistic behavior.⁵² The first mayor Daly was notorious as a “boss” of the political machine. Former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich's wiretapped telephone calls about President Obama's vacated U.S. Senate seat suggest this same cultural orientation.

The rules of the game of feudalistic politics seem to be that whoever can get to the top, and stay there by whatever means, runs the show (the *feudal lord*). This lord then attempts to protect the power over his (I use this male pronoun intentionally) holdings from all threats. Loyalty in the form of service and homage from those who serve the lord (the *vassals*) is expected, even to the point of “warfare,” which in this transmuted context means drastic (but sometimes as clandestine as possible) actions to preserve the power of the lord (*territoriality*). In public office, this means that loyalty is more important than debate in the public arena on matters that come under the office's purview. Hence, disloyalty to the

⁵² For a treatment of this phenomenon in nineteenth-century Chicago, in the context of a biography of a world-renowned social reformer, see Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Jane Addams and the American Dream of Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), chapter 7. This story illustrates much of the tension between feudalism and democracy—and thus of leadership—that the present article seeks to articulate. An interesting detail: Elshtain uses the phrase “rough-and-tumble” to speak of Chicago politics (p. 181), a term that I also have used for years.

lord—however that might be perceived—will be punished. It means that the public arena, a sense of the common good, is limited by the behavior of the feudal lord (*privilege*), rather than by democratic practices.

In the Southern states, feudalism takes a form that reflects its origins in the *plantation*. Economic, social, and political life were intertwined in the hierarchy that this medieval, manorial form adapted to the agricultural world of the South. At the top was the master of the plantation and his family. Black house servants had more status and opportunity than the black field workers, who were subject to the white overseer's approval. In this form of feudalism, reality was seen as static, following the cyclical rhythms of the growing season. As a symbol of this almost cosmological worldview, the feudal hierarchy was never expected to change. Race clearly was one factor but so also was class, as the continuing legacy of rural poor Southern whites suggests.

Thus, in Southern states, cultural feudalism continues to operate following the plantation model of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By contrast, rough-and-tumble feudalism took root in northern cities as white ethnic groups, usually working-class, poured into places like New York City, Philadelphia, northern New Jersey, and Chicago. I submit that these streams of culture came to dominate their locations or regions; they became the strongest form of culture among the several streams in any given context. For this reason, it appears further that virtually all of the religious groups that existed in these feudalistic areas became deeply influenced by feudalism's practices and deeply-held assumptions. This point will be explored later.

The Context of Idealized Democracy

What makes the presence of cultural feudalism in the United States so problematic is, as I have intimated, that it clashes with a newer, more distributive, form of society and public life. In order to appreciate the nature of this deep tension, let us consider—as we did for feudalism—

elementary features of a democratic society. In its ideal form, democracy seems to include six key features:

1. Espousal of a public “**common good**” rather than maintenance of advantages for a few: One of democracy’s premises is that the body politic recognizes a public arena, in which decisions about daily life take into account everyone.
2. Establishment of the “**rule of law**,” (e.g., property, crime, traffic, taxation, etc.) in which the same standards are intended to apply to all persons and groups: If there is something like “common good,” then it stands to reason that it is protected by rules that make sense.
3. Maintenance of the rule of law with three major functions and structures of government: **legislative, judicial, and executive**. Democratic societies establish offices like mayor and governor to oversee the operation of society; courts and judges to rule on cases in which the law is violated or contested; and chambers with elected officials who create or modify the laws themselves.
4. Establishment of public office by an **electoral process**: Citizens vote for other citizens who are eligible to stand for election to the various offices established in the respective jurisdiction.
5. **Minimum standards for public office**: Typically, citizenship—and, in a few cases, an age minimum—is the only requirement for being eligible to run for most public offices.
6. Resistance of lifetime service in most offices, by the use of **term limits**: The political playing field is more level when one person is limited in the number of terms that she or he can serve in one elected position. There are notable exceptions to this democratic feature, many of them at the federal level, and the rationale for these exceptions is not necessarily consistent or persuasive.

American history, however, demonstrates that these six democratic principles never have been expressed in their full ideal form. For generations, some of these

features were not intended to include women, certain ethnic groups, and minorities. Even the espousal of a “common good” is easily questionable in retrospect. This acknowledgement of long patterns of inconsistency between values and action allows us to seek its explanation in a discussion of cultural feudalism.

Feudalism and Democracy: The Deeper Dimensions

Cultural feudalism exists within the structures and processes of a nation that claims to be democratic. As I claimed earlier, the presence of feudalistic culture in the United States has created long-standing tensions and even contradictions. The most fruitful way to make sense out of these tensions and contradictions is by pointing out contrasts between the ideals (espoused values) of American democracy and some of the unspoken assumptions of cultural feudalism.

Such a process typically is challenging but not impossible. On the one hand, espoused values are fairly easy to determine, since they exist in public discourse. On the other hand, it is at the level of shared assumptions that our work calls for more care. Assumptions rarely, if ever, reveal their hand. Because they are taken for granted, these deeply-held premises about reality, truth, time, space, human existence, and human activity⁵³ do not appear readily in conscious awareness. Learning to identify cultural assumptions requires concentrated attention on phenomena that are not obvious. Reflection and practice make the process easier. Thus, the following lists represent my initial efforts to identify both democratic values and some primary, mostly-hidden, shared tacit assumptions that I think define cultural feudalism. As a sample, the two lists reveal notable differences:

⁵³ These are the categories of what Schein terms as the “deeper dimensions of culture”; see Schein, ix; 85-86, for the list.

Democracy espouses...	...while cultural feudalism assumes...
1. Every human being has the same rights to life opportunities.	1. Getting in with the right people will change your life—but it will cost you.
2. Every person has the right to express an opinion on matters of public interest.	2. The people who make the decisions will do what they want, regardless of what others think.
3. People of good will can work together to achieve important goals.	3. You can trust only people who are like you or one of yours.
4. The future allows chances to move ahead and makes things better.	4. We must preserve what we have or we might lose it forever.

Consequences: Feudalism in a Democratic Package

If we accept the validity of these kinds of contrasts, it should not be difficult to see how cultural feudalism can affect the actual practice of democracy. For one thing, feudalism tends to create a *passive citizenry*. The stronger feudalism’s influence, the less likely citizens will believe deeply that their participation in politics and governmental processes will make any difference. This point finds support in the power distance research by Hofstede. Passivity among citizens leads, secondly, to a relative *tolerance of corruption* in government, especially of elected officials. In locations where cultural feudalism is strong, citizens can be aware that a government official has used the privilege of office for personal advantage but not necessarily consider the act or practice ethically suspect. On this point, it is noteworthy that the United States ranked only eighteenth out of eighty-five nations evaluated in 1998 on a ‘Corruption Perception Index.’ Sweden, New Zealand, Canada, and even Singapore and

Ireland, all ranked higher than the United States on perceptions of dishonest activity in government.⁵⁴

Third, strong cultural feudalism creates conditions that tend to lead to a *low public opinion* of government work. Citizens often view these jobs as rewards for loyalty, positions that do not intend to be efficient or socially beneficial. Fourth, cultural feudalism tends to attract to public office persons who *enjoy being in charge* of something and receiving *high status* more often than those who want to serve the electorate. Public service can take a back seat to the power that is afforded the “feudal lord.” As a result, fifth, *elections* themselves become a *warrant for privilege*. Public discourse about issues, both before and after elections, is less important than activities behind the scenes, activities that seek to guarantee the will—and well-being—of the privileged official. The Blagojevich scandal suggests this characteristic. Sixth, cultural feudalism fosters a *limited purview* concerning the world at large. Social networks, economic activity, and political processes are seen almost exclusively through territorial interests, even when decisions and actions in question involve groups or communities outside of that territory. Fukuyama’s research on “low-trust” societies seems relevant here.

Such differences between feudalism and democracy create very different kinds of community ethos. Whereas democracy, when it is practiced, generates community hope, cultural feudalism tends to generate a pronounced degree of community fatalism. This contrast first occurred to me in the wake of a conversation with a professional friend, an experienced philosophy teacher who could not find a permanent position and drifted into grant-writing. A tall Irish Catholic who never ran out of humorous stories, Howard and I ended up talking one day about the working-class populations in Chicago who hailed from eastern European countries. That conversation must have taken me to an unexpected turn,

⁵⁴ Seymour Martin Lipset and Gabriel Salman Lenz, “Corruption, Culture, and Markets,” in *Culture Matters*, Table 9.1, 113.

for I remember at one point saying, “But they came here to escape repressive governments and to enjoy freedom and democracy.” Without blinking an eye, Howard replied, “Hell, George, they don’t care about freedom and democracy. They just want a better job.”

His comment left me speechless; it drove a small but perceptible wedge into my social idealism. In the years that followed, I found myself musing at times on why these immigrants could have such low expectations. Now it seems illuminating to suggest that they are living out forms of cultural feudalism that came with them to this country.

Adaptation Strength

Feudalism is a part of the American cultural soup, sort of like a vegetable soup that has different ingredients in it—and tastes a little different—depending on where you are eating it. Since American cultural feudalism is taken for granted in the places where it functions, its relationship to other existing streams of culture often is easy to miss. As a result, all six of the above-noted effects of cultural feudalism on democracy are relative: they will exhibit themselves in varying degrees, based on the strength of the feudalism vis-à-vis other cultural streams that are present. At its strongest, feudalism dominates its locale or region, in effect relegating democratic values and practices to objects of feudal manipulation. This is a way of saying that the actual presence of cultural feudalism in any one place will demonstrate its capacity for adapting to its own context. Feudalism blends in with other cultural streams, wherever it is. This blending thus creates *hybrid forms*, in which the particular artifacts and espoused values that represent social and political expressions of democracy can become nothing more than window dressing for feudalistic practices. Schein’s insight here is most instructive: the shared tacit assumptions, the underlying premises, are what drive any group or community. Thus, if cultural feudalism dominates in a given locale, democracy can be espoused, but feudalism is practiced.

Hybridization of feudalism into American democratic goals demonstrates one example of complex patterns and emerging phenomena in the United States that I call “cultural confluence.”⁵⁵ On the surface, these forms vary in balance depending on the locale being considered. Western states, for example, seem to exhibit a lower degree of influence from cultural feudalism. Southern states and the old industrial urban northern centers exhibit higher levels of feudalistic influence.

Conclusion: A Disconcerting Legacy

In considering these features and effects of American feudalism on the pursuit of a democratic society, one could be understandably perplexed and even troubled. Because of its subtle prominence in the American public arena, cultural feudalism eventually calls into question the matter of social integrity. It is possible for any community, out of its own experience, to learn that it is typical and normal in the public arena to say one thing and then do something else. Cultural feudalism is so resilient that it has learned to adapt its way of life to the structures, processes, and rhetoric of representative democracy. It has become commonplace in certain sectors of American society to accept without question the duplicitous coexistence of cultural feudalism within the trappings of democratic society. Though a harsh assessment, my purpose in using the term *duplicitous* is to draw attention to feudalism’s function and consequences. At bottom, cultural feudalism does not attempt to share. Instead, in its strongest expressions, cultural feudalism hides behind egalitarian practices and sayings that appeal to an American public. All the while, privilege, power, unquestioned loyalty, status, and territorial control counteract social opportunity and diminish pursuit of any common good.

⁵⁵ A description of the elements of cultural confluence can be found in Thompson, chapter 3.

Feudalism and Leadership: Implications

I suggested early in this article that I detect direct causal relationships between American cultural feudalism and how leadership is perceived and supposedly practiced. At the most fundamental level, what makes cultural feudalism threatening to the development and practice of authentic leadership is that the former's driving energy derives from deeply-ingrained cultural premises that work at odds with democratic principles. These premises (Schein's "shared tacit assumptions") in particular express perspectives on a number of fundamental themes, including human existence, human nature, human relationships, and even time. The Declaration of Independence provides a potent illustration. Its sentence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal... life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" expresses several ideals, espoused values, that form the foundation of American democratic social and political development.

At Odds

Within American history, however, these ideals have not been consistently pursued or realized. The early Puritan stimulus to create a more level playing field in social and political relationships represented a relatively new and fragile approach to framing human discourse and interchange. Its more egalitarian premises (merely implied as they often were) met head-on with the massive trajectory of European feudalistic life, as that long-dominant institution gained a foothold politically, economically, and socially in the American colonies (a related but distinctive form of feudalism was established by French colonization in North America and has retained its cultural trajectory primarily in Louisiana).

These two broad streams of culture (Puritan and feudal) created an uncomfortable confluence in American life, in differing combinations among the several colonies. At local levels, especially in New England, espoused democratic ideals appear to have become more fully translated into community practice. The town hall

meeting as a venue for citizen voice in political process is one simple example. Yet, at wider regional and national levels, cultural assumptions about privilege, loyalty, turf protection, and the like tended to hold sway. While the Declaration of Independence states that “All are created equal...” it has taken many decades and tough judicial actions to challenge structures and behaviors that belie the espousal of equality, justice, and opportunity.

Leadership in Culture

Informed by this interpretation, I thus draw a few general observations and insights about leadership. For one thing, I think that the very *nature of leadership* should be clarified. Under feudalistic influence, the notion of leadership is almost anachronistic. Instead, notions of *authority*—the right to exercise power because of holding an office—and *power*—the capacity to accomplish something—were wedded with that of *inherent privilege*. If leadership means simply to take initiative that gets results, then it does not matter whether we act feudalistically or not. However, if leading also involves processes that are undertaken with some integrity for the community, then feudal means do not readily justify Christian—or even democratic—ends. If, instead, leadership focuses upon helping a community live into a vision of some common good with integrity, then—in this day and place—leadership always will move in some fashion in concert with practices of democracy. As we saw earlier, such an outlook resonates with the tone of American (and even, to some extent, international) studies on leadership.

Second, efforts to reduce or eliminate any obvious negative effects of cultural feudalism will not be fruitful if they are aimed simply at individual persons or particular structures. By its very nature, culture is too embedded for that. Changing culture—not merely changing things, processes, or espoused values—calls for the same kind of attention that helped to create the culture in the first place. Various organizational scholars offer change processes, none of which we will consider here. It is

germane to point out, however, that it is possible, often desirable, and sometimes necessary for a culture to undergo change.⁵⁶ Authentic leadership will assume the long view in such endeavors, undertaking them with realism about the challenges and hope for progress that at times will appear uneven and incremental.

Third, such a prospect cannot be undertaken lightly, for it *requires more time* than Americans typically want to spend on anything *and a kind of energy* for which we are unaccustomed. Culture does not change quickly or easily; it will resist its own demise, even when the change is viewed by the community as a sort of desired resurrection. Because cultural feudalism provides benefits for the few who are able to take advantage of it, there will be resistance if feudalism appears to be threatened. Authentic leadership will not underestimate the power either of inertia or inspiration.

Fourth, awareness of cultural feudalism helps us understand why *turf protection and low cooperation* among various functions of public life are likely to occur and continue. If it is believed deep down that sharing diminishes one's power, status, and well-being, it is difficult to persuade groups and communities to look at a bigger picture rather than their own vested interests. Similarly, communities who never expect fresh and appealing opportunities have a hard time believing that attractive alternatives are possible or likely. Authentic leadership will express appropriate kinds of espoused values carefully and also will find ways to exhibit progress on the issue as a signal for the benefits of involvement.

A fifth observation about feudalism's implications for leadership could strike closest to the heart of the matter. If leadership becomes associated with force, then it loses a key quality that is valued widely in our era. We have seen already that leadership's conceptual orientation in recent generations has leaned toward the centrality of

⁵⁶ Schein, however, points out that a change process should not begin with the goal of changing culture, but rather by addressing some tangible situation that needs attention; see Schein, 334, Principle 3.

persuasion and influence, as opposed to the power of unwilling compliance. Cultural feudalism prefers its own forms of “persuasion.” What it does not accept is the notion that wide sharing of opportunity, responsibility, and power actually benefits the body politic. Authentic leadership does not shy away from power, but its relationship with power differs markedly. Rather than seeking power at all costs, the sign of an experience of leading involves the preservation of community voice, dignity, and integrity. The morning rituals and ceremonies surrounding an American presidential inauguration symbolize this distinct approach to power.

Feudalism, Religion, and Leadership

If the ideas and suggestions noted so far about feudalism and American society carry sufficient merit, then the conundrum of leadership in America also bears directly upon its religious communities. Religion in America also unavoidably must deal with national, regional, and local contradictions about unity, freedom of choice, and equality (democratic ideals) vis-à-vis social behaviors that support privilege, hierarchy, territoriality, and concentrated power. The latter, as I have tried to argue, demonstrate key underlying elements of the legacy of feudalism that has been transmitted over many generations by the weight of culture. These behaviors continue because they are supported by deeply-held cultural premises that are passed on; the assumptions are linked with the particular behavior patterns.⁵⁷

Pastoral and Congregational Challenges

This conundrum can be illustrated by the experience of the American Catholic Church. With its roots in Europe, the Catholic Church in its complex hierarchy and international presence nonetheless exhibits patterns of behavior that resemble the medieval feudalistic heritage. The cultural impress of this feudalism migrated to the

⁵⁷ See again Thomas Sowell’s opening generalizations on the persistence of cultural patterns, *Race and Culture*, 1.

United States with Catholic immigrants, especially as American parishes were established. However, in recent decades, increasing numbers of American Catholic parishes are populated by members who earn college degrees. As more Catholics work in professional positions and experience more of the opportunities of a democratic society, the politics of ministry in those parishes change. The priest cannot get away with running things on his own. I have heard similar stories from members and clergy out of German Pietistic traditions, as well as from African American clergy and ministry students.

These struggles to reconcile deeply-persistent cultural trajectories in the soil of democratic promise will take on many forms in American religion. For instance, how do congregations view mission? In a feudalistic context, the world is static and poor folks stay poor (it is convenient, ironically, to quote Jesus on this point, is it not? “For you always have the poor with you...”⁵⁸). Yet in a democratic context, the public arena allows for (and even encourages) discourse and action to improve things. To remain healthy, a society under democracy requires ongoing self-critique, an essential feature that cultural feudalism undermines with its subtle insistence that privilege and a static universe rest in the very nature of things. Pastors and congregations who are committed to justice and peace as integral to their ministries inevitably will run into symbols of resistance that originate in feudalism. Seeking to make the world a better place for everyone will upset the feudalistic applecart. To pursue justice implies the kind of change that feudalism assumes is not necessary.

⁵⁸ Matthew 26:11a; the same statement is made in the same pericope in the Fourth Gospel, John 12:8. Jesus might have been quoting from Deuteronomy 15:11, “For the poor will never cease out of the land...,” which appears at the end of a passage enjoining the newly-landed Israelites to share generously and willingly with those among them who are poor (vv. 7-10).

On the Local Level

As we have seen, the driving energy of cultures rests below their surfaces. This means that congregations—almost in spite of their declared religious affirmations—understandably do not understand themselves. They usually function as mirrors of their cultural context, as Inglehart and others have implied. When feudalism leaves a strong flavor in the cultural soup, congregations are more inclined to exhibit behavior tied to feudalistic beliefs about power, privilege, loyalty, and status. This kind of behavior, at some point in the congregation's life, is going to bump up against some claim to democratic principles. Why? Because we live in a society in which appeal to things like freedom, opportunity, voice, vote, and the like still have high currency.

I am suggesting, then, that feudalism in congregations is potentially harmful to all of their forms of ministry. In the wake of the civil rights movement, a growing environmental justice movement, and continuing immigration, the vision of democracy never completely disappears from a congregation's horizon. Even churches and denominations that use a more hierarchical polity still struggle at times to reconcile the authority granted to certain church offices with the albeit uneven promise of dignity and opportunity in the wider American society.

Reframing Hypocrisy

I am suggesting, therefore, that part of our problem in the Church is not simply our personal moral failure but our corporate complicity with cultural legacies that are not up to the challenge. How can such hypocrisies (if we will call them that) be understood as driven by deeply-held assumptions derived from a subtle yet powerful cultural feudalism? Such questions move discussions of piety and ministry out of private frameworks of individualism and into the unfamiliar terrain of group identity and responsibility.

Posing these questions of ourselves gives us a different outlook on Jesus' comment to the ten who were ticked off at James and John, because the two had asked

for the best seats with Jesus “in glory” (Mark 10:37). Jesus reminded them that other nations around the Jews had rulers who “lord it over them,” who act as “tyrants” (Mark 10:42). Here Jesus is speaking of the political conditions of that era, of the layered, complex form of governance that dominated the Roman Empire. We all know how Jesus replies to this observation: that greatness in the Jesus movement comes through the role of a servant (Mark 10:43), and that Jesus himself is the model (“For the son of Man came not to be served but to serve...” [Mark 10:45a]). We cannot claim that this model of ministry is democratic, but we certainly realize how counterculturally it would have played in Jesus’ day. Even today, it remains countercultural in a nation that purports freedom of association and wide opportunity to its citizens, new and old.

Against the Grain

In other words, a discussion of cultural feudalism brings a different angle of appreciation to the notion of the Church as *countercultural*. When the Apostle Paul admonishes the Roman church that it should “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom. 12:2a), we typically read these words as addressing personal piety. We shall not be conformed as individuals, to allow the “age,” to define us. But what if the countercultural, the nonconformed, nature of this text had to do with culture? By this reading, the world of status, privilege, and hierarchy would be abandoned, in pursuit of transforming relationships within communities and between communities. By this reading, being countercultural also means standing for open process in a public arena, as much as it does for a certain position on any particular issue.

Religious communities always exist within a broader social and cultural context and hence must negotiate (with whatever degree of awareness they might attain) their own understanding and practice of power, force, and leadership. Often the shared assumptions from wider society are never challenged within churches.

Quakers, Mennonites, and a few other traditions are exceptions—and, as a result, in certain respects have remained socially marginal.⁵⁹

The Stage—and the Test

In this approach to leadership, then, a religious context for leading must be understood out of a social background of democratic principles. Even accounting for various established religious offices and forms of polity, I am suggesting that American religious life continually runs up against the implicit question of its deepest beliefs about time and humanity. The legacies of American cultural feudalism act as an undertow, pulling back against democratic assumptions—for instance, about time as future-oriented and progressive, rather than past-oriented and even cyclical.⁶⁰ In cultural feudalism, “leading” tends to be viewed as maintaining privilege, power, and status by whatever means necessary. By contrast, democracy continues to look to the future, at possibilities for good, and at ways in which the community itself participates in defining and achieving that good.

Hence, the conundrum of American leadership will continue. At its heart are not the surface-level questions of decisions over policy and practice, and, in a religious context, of doctrine and practice. Rather, communities are driven by the cultural energy flowing from their mostly unspoken and unquestioned premises about the world and those who inhabit it. Without a growing awareness of the particular elements that constitute these energies, communities struggle to negotiate and navigate their life together. I am suggesting here that the long-standing presence and power of cultural feudalism in the United States makes it more difficult for religious communities to realize their missions in a democratically-

⁵⁹ For an example of this point, see Greenleaf on John Woolman and the abolition of Quaker slaveholding, in *Servant Leadership*, 29-30.

⁶⁰ These varying concepts of time are discussed in Schein, Chapter 8.

oriented society. Context is not everything—but it is certainly more than for which it is usually given credit.

American religious leadership is challenged to find ways to articulate and inspire community vision while still standing in the swamp of feudalism's legacy. To do so requires a capacity to be, as Jesus exhorted his twelve, both “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16b). It is the aim of this article to offer one way of understanding how to address this challenge, from its serpentine side.