

**Religious Change, Empowerment, and Power:  
Reflections on Latin American Experience**

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This essay addresses the relation between religious change, empowerment, and power in contemporary Latin America<sup>1</sup>. I consider various components of this relation, with special concern for issues raised by the visible, growing, gap that separates the empowering energies arising out of religious change from the ability of those involved to achieve enduring and tangible improvements for themselves, their families, and communities. As used here, religious change refers above all to the great transformations in the region's Catholicism over the past three decades. Empowerment directs our attention to the cultural and organizational changes that have turned religion in Latin America from a reliable ally of the status quo into a critical force promoting a self-confident, organized, population. Religion in Latin America has lately appeared more often as a charter for liberation than as a time honored justification for fatalism and passivity. Concern with power requires us to ask how (if at all) these new orientations crystallize in effective organizations capable of changing the balance of domination in meaningful and durable ways.

Why focus on these particular issues? After all, a host of interesting and important questions about religion, society and politics in Latin America present themselves for our consideration. A brief and incomplete list includes the transition from religious monopoly to competitive marketplace (as Protestantism continues to expand), changing patterns of transnational religious activism, or the new significance of gender issues. It would be easier to deal with issues like these; the answers would be simpler, more neat and clean. But a concern with religion, empowerment, and power forces itself powerfully on our attention. Part of this concern arises out of what we might call the natural progression of scholarship. Early enthusiasm for liberation theology and on its transformative and mobilizational powers produced a large and optimistic. But not always very careful or critical literature. Not surprisingly, as time and circumstances change, a new generation of scholars has asked questions and uncovered nuances and limitations overlooked in the first blush of enthusiasm. Liberation theology itself has also changed, as theologians and activists cope with new social and political challenges and face aggressive new competition for mass support. But more is at issue here than the progression of scholarly interests. The issues are also brought forcefully to our attention by struggles and debates in Latin America itself. New challenges, along with a series of reverses, divisions, and failures has sparked searching discussions aimed at rethinking the past while at the same time charting a path for continuing and hopefully more effective action in the future<sup>2</sup>.

The choice of this particular topic is also driven by a question that has nagged at me for years, creating an uneasiness that has become increasingly insistent as time passes. Reading the literature on religious change in Latin America that has been produced over the last twenty-five years and talking with Latin Americans of all classes and conditions one soon runs up against a conundrum. Many (scholars and activists, men and women, laity and clergy, young and old, peasants and city dwellers) speak readily about how much religious change has empowered ordinary people, people like themselves. They tell you how it has given them a sense of identity and community, legitimized their needs by showing how they fit into a larger moral scheme of justice and equity, and given the tools of organization among people long accustomed to being dismissed as having nothing to say, or relegated to the status of mere objects of hierarchical authority. The transformation of religious messages, practices, and organized social life has thus called forth and helped to shape a new stratum of articulate, capable and self-confident citizens, contributing in this way to the creation of a truly independent civil society.

The problem is this. Granted the reality of religious change, which as we shall see has been both massive and far reaching, if there really has been so much empowerment with efforts concentrated in popular groups, why do they still have so little power?<sup>3</sup> After more than a quarter of century of efforts that many expected would generate a wholly new cultural and political landscape, why are popular groups all over Latin America arguably worse off than before? Why has it been so difficult to build new enduring and effective political organizations on the foundation of this empowerment? Finally, what do the visible complexities of these relationships and the disappointment and defeat of so many hopes suggest about better ways to ask the question, and about how best to grasp the possibilities and limitations of empowerment and power arising from religious change?

All too often, discussions of religion and politics in Latin America remain at an abstract level, with more attention going to «the people» in general terms than to anybody in particular. This is a real weakness, often fatal, because it leads even the most careful researchers and the most sympathetic observers to project their own values and expectations on to popular groups, instead of listening carefully and with an open mind to how ordinary men and women understand and evaluate their own experience. If we are to people history with recognizable human beings, not mere stick figures of social science theory, we must begin by putting flesh and bone on the story of religious change, empowerment, and power. The story I want to tell here comes mostly from the point of view of

popular groups, collections of poor people (the populus) in villages and urban neighborhoods all over the region. I also draw on the experiences of those who «go to the people», identify with them, share their lives, live and work along side them. These women and men are active and creative subjects with something of value to say. They deserve a hearing, and we owe it to them, and to ourselves, to listen to what they have to say. Limitations of time and space make it impossible to offer more than a brief selection from this wealth of experience. I have presented these voices at length in other work, and in any case a rich and varied literature exists for the interested reader<sup>4</sup>. For present purposes, the central point is to realize that despite differences in circumstance and individual condition, taken together, the experiences of these men and women -members of grass roots communities, lay extension agents, priests, sisters form patterns that illustrate some of the central themes that I want to advance here.

There is a pattern of religious change manifested in growing self-confidence and responsibility, and in explicit insistence on linking faith to actions that commonly lead to political involvement of some kind, often unintended at first. Groups arising from these changes combine the expression of faith and religious practice with small-scale projects in new ways that together constitute what we ordinarily think of as empowerment. These are often the first groups that anyone in the community has ever known of, let alone participated in, apart from family gatherings. Projects tend to be small-scale: building a bridge, laying a water line, organizing a cooperative, getting a teacher for the local school or a police station for the neighborhood, organizing a community celebration. But despite their small scale and apparently innocuous character, efforts of this kind lay foundations for a general disposition to join together and to act collectively on problems of the community. Such activism draws important legitimacy from the transformed moral vocabulary so notable in Latin American Catholicism over the past three decades, according to which poverty is not God's will, but rather a sinful result of human actions. In this light, authentic faith calls believers to build the Kingdom in this world, not await the next with passive resignation. This is something new in the culture.

The sequence of change just outlined has sparked both hopes and fears about religion's capacity to generate basic cultural and political transformations. Activists and grass roots groups hoped that their efforts would be just the beginning of a really different world. Elites of all kinds (political, military, economic, and ecclesiastical) feared changes that would upset long standing arrangements of power and control. Both groups exaggerated the possibilities of the situation. Neither hopes nor fears came to pass because each side misread

the situation in basic ways. Theologian and activists often misread the desires of ordinary people, projecting their own goals for overall social change onto popular groups. Moreover, as we shall see, the dispositions to collective action coming out of religious change produced tools of organization and specific groups that were only rarely knit together on a large scale. The ability of these new groups and their leaders to join together in durable and effective ways has been undermined by ongoing ties to church institutions, and by unreliable and manipulative political allies who often abandon these groups just when they need allies the most. These constraints and vulnerabilities are so crippling that in my own fieldwork I found that the groups most likely to survive, prosper and grow were those with marginal and limited ties to the churches. Some link is of course essential; with no ties at all, critical resources are lost and a sense of legitimacy is absent. But where the church invests major personnel and material resources in local groups, the result is often a collection of organizations that is so dependent on external guidance and control that when the good father or the good sister leaves (as they almost always do) no local reserves of resources or leaders remained that was willing or able to carry on. The groups along with their projects collapse. As many projects fail as succeed; only where deliberate provision is made for internal democratization and for the gradual fade out of external advisers and controls do groups develop the strength required to survive on their own. Only then do they actively seek their own connections with a larger society, rather than relying on clerical intermediaries to do it for them.

### **Religious Change, Empowerment, and Power**

Latin America has produced and experienced an enormous amount of religious change in very little time. Thirty or forty years ago the region was confidently dismissed as overwhelmingly Catholic, with weak religious institutions, closely allied to the state and economic powers, mired in derivative theologies, imported organizational models and practices of dubious orthodoxy. This same region has lately spawned remarkable and much copied innovations, including ideas like liberation theology, innovative forms of grass roots religious life, and bold innovations in the whole area of religion and politics. Traditional alliances of religious with political power have been undermined where not exploded, while religious groups have forged close ties with activist, often revolutionary forces. Most recently, new Protestant churches (mostly evangelical and Pentecostal) have emerged to prominence, breaking a 500 year Catholic monopoly on «official» religious representation in the region<sup>5</sup>.

To make sense of these changes, and to grasp their possible impact on empowerment and power, it helps to keep a few points in mind. Conventional wisdom has long attributed religious change in Latin America to the impact of the Second Vatican Council, translated and applied to Latin America by a series of regional Bishops' conferences -Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979) and most recently, Santo Domingo (1992). But scratching the surface of almost any country in Latin America soon reveals a long and rich history of debate, pressure for change and experimentation dating back to the early 50's. All these initiatives grew out of a desire to change the Catholic Church's ties to society, above all to poor and oppressed groups. The process gained energy and moral force from the Vatican Council, but for our purposes the point is that a vocal constituency already existed «on the ground» in Latin America, pressing for change and finding legitimacy in these larger events.

Much of the dynamic force of these changes has hinged on efforts to create a new place for the poor, known in Latin American as popular groups. In contemporary Latin America discourse, the word «popular» has meanings that may be unfamiliar to a North American audience. «Popular» does not refer here to something favored by many, but rather to elements that characterize the main body of the population (as in the Latin *populus*). In practical terms, «popular» refers above all to the poor, Commitment to the poor and to popular groups has grown beyond serving as their advocate to include efforts that encourage and empower their active and informed participation as equals in religion as in politics, and to side with them in disputes with established structures of power and privilege. This is the preferential option for the poor: identifying with the poor, living with and like them, siding with them in conflicts that may arise, sharing their experiences, and often their fate<sup>6</sup>.

These religious changes took on special character from the tenor of the times in which they emerged<sup>7</sup>. The years running from the early 1960s to the mid 1980s brought massive social and economic changes and an escalation of political conflict to the region. Agrarian concentration, urban growth, internal migrations, easier transport, expanded literacy and media access combined to make ordinary people available for organization and new ideas on a hitherto unknown scale. At the same time, a wave of military authoritarianism in major countries and the rise to revolutionary struggle in Central America drastically constricted spaces for open organization and expression of any kind. The result was that just as elements in the churches moved to engage the poor with new ideas and organizations, the poor themselves came to the churches in search of support. The poor needed help; the churches now looked like possible allies. This

encounter of a changing church with populations seeking shelter, support, and allies lies at the heart of subsequent debate and struggle over religion and politics.

Many of these hopes have been disappointed and these fears proven short-lived when not wholly groundless. With rare exceptions, religious change in Latin America has not produced revolutions, not even enduring political movements or alliances. No political party flies the banners of liberation theology: there is no network of red clergy or sisters working with revolutionary allies to turn the world upside down. Despite the fears and the many studies commissioned by the State Department and the CIA, there is no parallel in Latin America to the Iranian Revolution. With the passage of time it has become clear that no single vehicle, no single package of policies or orientations exhausts the possibilities of religious action: certainly not Christian Democracy, not liberation theology, and not newly activist Protestant churches, either with their North American allies, or increasingly lately, on their own.

Why has religious change not crystallized in effective and enduring political vehicles? The answer goes to the heart of the points I want to advance here. At issue is a series of failures in conceptualization and research and misreadings of experience that together cloud our vision and makes it hard for us to understand what is going on. Excessive attention has gone to extreme cases, such as El Salvador or Nicaragua, where direct links between religious ideas and their organizational expression, to empowerment and direct, often revolutionary action, seemed apparent. The problem is that although cases can show us possibilities and options at the edge, they are rarely a useful guide to overall developments<sup>8</sup>. As earlier situations of revolution, open civil war, and military rule have gradually yielded to more open conditions, less radical alternatives have moved to the center all across the region. Moreover, on closer examination even cases like El Salvador or Nicaragua reveal much less unity by religious groups around a revolutionary project than was once supposed. The widespread view that the Nicaraguan revolution was undergirded by a tight alliance with a popular church representing vast majorities and providing a core of revolutionary ideology is simply false. The truth is one of division and struggle in the churches, and a great deal of ordinary old politics in the Sandinista Revolution<sup>9</sup>.

The experience of Peru is also relevant. Peru is a founding center of liberation theology, and for several decades Peruvian Christians built a remarkable network of activist, grass roots groups. With the return of civilian rule and political democracy, alliances were forged with parties of the Left that

achieved significant presence and power by the mid-1980s. That alliance (Izquierda Unida, or United Left) disintegrated in the late 1980s, leaving many popular groups divided and adrift. A further blow came in the elections of 1990, when grass roots groups voted for Alberto Fujimori, abandoning the parties of the left, which were diligently promoted by church activists.

Much of the difficulty scholars have faced in making sense of these developments rests on a tendency to confuse theological texts and what activists say and write about the people with what the people themselves think and say<sup>10</sup>. The effort required to find and listen to ordinary people can be difficult and frustrating. Personally, I have swallowed clouds of dust and waded lakes of mud just getting to community meetings in the countryside and city neighborhoods. I have spent what seemed like endless hours on rural buses, only to wait more as people slowly gather together, or return home from long and tiring work. But when one makes the effort, the reward is that one learns things that simply cannot be learned any other way. Eloquence has very little to do with education; ordinary people have ideas of their own, ideas that rarely make it into official texts, ideas that are often ignored or glossed over by pastoral agents who have their own agenda. One learns right away that the people who «go to the people» are very often much more radical than the people themselves: the naive radical priest is a figure of fun in popular folklore.

One regularly hears discussions in Latin America about the Church's role as a «voice for the voiceless», representing and fighting for the oppressed and the excluded. This is an honorable and often risky role, one that has given Latin America numbers of new martyrs. But on reflection it is evident that being a «voice for the voiceless» retains a presumption of distance and authority and fits more easily into traditional directive roles than standing aside to let the voiceless speak for themselves, hearing what they say, and trusting them to act<sup>11</sup>.

There is growing sensitivity to this problem among those committed to the liberation theology agenda. Not long ago I attended a meeting in Lima, Peru, called by the Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas, a founding center of liberation theology. This gathering was intended to evaluate the experience of the last few decades and chart a course for the future. After several days of discussion and debate, a central conclusion was that «for twenty years we've talked about popular groups and made the popular subject central to all our theories, but we've never really let popular groups speak for themselves»<sup>12</sup>. Having reduced much of popular identity and concerns to issues of social class, the theories with which liberation theology relied (Marxist versions of the social sciences, especially



dependency theory) unwittingly created an effective gap between popular culture and those who opted for the people. Poor people have identities and concerns that reach beyond class: failure to acknowledge this distorts their interests and puts their support at risk.

A curious pattern is now emerging in commentary about popular groups. As Teresa Tovar, a Peruvian sociologist, has pointed out, twenty years ago elements on the Left saw such groups as bearers of a wholly new politics and culture. Now, these very intellectuals commonly paint the same groups as disorganized, irrational, divided, and anomic. Tovar states that «We either face a modern, institutionalized world, one that runs on clear rules, that is democratic and so forth, or what we face is a chaotic and disorderly world, which in the last analysis is irrational»<sup>13</sup>. The same population provides the raw material for both paradigms: they cannot both be true<sup>14</sup>. Of course the dilemma is false. Communities and their circumstances have changed, as economic crisis produced a desperate search for personal and family survival in contexts that favored small scattered small scale initiatives while punishing large scale collective action<sup>15</sup>. At the same time, in politics the return to civilian rule across the continent has divided groups once held together by common opposition to the military.

The point is that in assessing the potential of grass roots groups for shared and focused action over the long term, it is vital that such groups not be reified - identified once and forever with a single organizational form or program. We need to see them in all their complexity and contradiction, made up of individuals trying to chart a course in difficult and changing seas. In Tovar's words, «we need to get away from searching for a historical subject (in the classical Marxist sense) something privileged and sacralized by virtue of its position in the social structure and form whose vantage point once can make sense of society and history as a whole. Instead, we need to see a plurality of subjects, whose identities are created through their own interactions and forms of understanding, and whose positions are therefore changeable»<sup>16</sup>.

The preceding considerations force us to moderate our expectations of popular groups, and to do so in ways that pay attention to what the groups themselves, say, think, see, and do -not to what social science or philosophy expects. They do not always want what social scientists think they should want. Moreover, they often discuss needs, wants, and forms of action in ways that are not captured by social science tools or paradigms. But this does not mean that they are not aware of the problems. They are aware, they are concerned, and

they talk about and work on the problems all the time. The task of listening and hearing what they say is ours<sup>17</sup>.

A further difficulty in translating the empowerment arising out of religious change into power stems from connections between popular groups and to big structures like the churches. In our understandable concern with social and political results, it is easy to forget that the groups we are dealing with are, after all, religious. Their core motivation and central source of solidarity is first religious and only then perhaps tied to a political program. Religious identity is critical to the very constitution of the group, providing a common moral vocabulary and a sense of rightness, along with practical bases for mutual support that sustain membership in the teeth of adversities. To understand the possibilities and likely limitations of empowerment and the kind of power arising from such a base we need to see how changing ways of being religious lead men and women to engage the world on new terms. This means taking religion seriously itself as a source of a change, not simply a step on the path to political action.

One thing we know with confidence about popular groups is that their fate is never in their hands alone. Poor people by definition have limited resources; they need allies and contacts, and particularly prize continuing ties to the church. Religious activism clearly draws strength from the sense of legitimacy, continuity, and belonging to something larger than oneself that comes with being part of the churches. But the ties that nourish also ties bind and constrain. Any activist, priest, sister, or lay activist, who goes to a grass roots Catholic group and begins by attacking the Bishop or perhaps the Pope as hopeless conservatives, blind and self-centered men standing in the way of needed action, is likely to get a cold shoulder from the group. Religious authorities are venerated, and ties to the church are valued. Group members are of course interested in «politics» and anxious to act in ways that will help themselves, their families, and communities, but their politics is much less crude, much more nuanced than a simple class-and-politics-first vision would lead us to believe<sup>18</sup>.

## **REASON, SOCIABILITY, AND MEDIATIONS**

The discussion thus far has pointed to a number of dilemmas and obstacles on the road from empowerment to power. Underlying all these difficulties is a collection of multiple and overlapping ties that bind popular groups to elites and to the institutions they control. It is time now to consider the other side of the coin, and look at factors that can help turn these complex relationships

from instruments of control into effective tools of empowerment. The process is best understood when examined in the context of real communities, where three elements combine to make a potentially decisive difference: first, the convergence of reason, sociability, and community in religious change; second, the role played by mediators (those who «go to the people») and the specific character of those mediators; and third, the relation of all this to democracy and democratization.

The convergence of a claim to reason, to the free and independent exercise of personal and group judgment, with the development of sociability, new forms of associational life, and the deliberate creation of community lies at the heart of religious change in Latin America today. The growth of personal and collective claims to understand and act on the world in rational ways and to hold knowledge independent of authority is fundamental. Richard Bernstein states that «once worked into everyday life, the claim to reason acquires a stubbornly transcending power, because it is renewed with each act of unconstrained understanding, with each moment of living together in solidarity»<sup>19</sup>. In the religious change that Latin America is experiencing this claim to reason is expressed above all in independent access to religious knowledge through the Bible. Independent access to religious texts and the structure of intense small groups in which Bible study takes place (commonly known as base communities or CEBs, from the Spanish, comunidades eclesiales de base) nurtures confidence and provides opportunities for self expression and shared self governance.

Free access to religious texts and to knowledge in general inverts traditional Catholic trickle-down theories of knowledge, according to which the Pope knows more than the Bishops, the Bishops know more than the priests, the priests know more than the nuns, and so forth, down to ordinary people at the bottom. The very idea that access to religious knowledge and hence to sacred power involve access to power in general, and the related notion that power therefore has multiple sources, explains the concern with which traditional elites view such developments, which they perceive as subversion of the proper order of things<sup>20</sup>.

Access to the Bible is utterly new in the popular religious culture of Latin America. Mass literacy is of course recent, and in any event, earlier generations were taught that reading the Bible was simply unnecessary: it was forbidden. Access to the Bible is highly prized, and group members contrast availability of the scriptures (and the general impact of having liturgies in languages they can

understand) with the experience of their youth where religious instruction meant rote learning, and distances combined with the scarcity of clergy made religious practice at best sporadic. Having access to the Bible makes possible religious experience of a kind hitherto unavailable. A member of one group I studied in Cali, Colombia told me that, «Well, yes. Yes, let's say no priest is available for a mass, well, then we can come anyway? No? Participate, join in the church, reading scripture and talking about it is what's important anyway» (Interview, 28 May 1983 ?). When I asked a neighbor to tell me what meetings were like, she stated that, «Well, its like this, we develop it this way. We all work to understand better, everyone, even me, because you know, there are so many things a person doesn't know right? The Bible. We read the Gospels and we study every little bit. And here we have people who have never known anything. They read it there, (in church) the priest reads the Gospel and that's that. Because he says a world of things people pay no attention to. But, here we try to explain things ourselves. We don't have them explained to us, but ourselves we draw it out. We discover what we think. It's not just the priest in the pulpit telling me not to sin, not to do this or that, to repent, because you know a person hears all that stuff and then goes home and forgets it all» (Interview, 13 May 1983).

In the popular religious groups that I am familiar with, nobody reads liberation theology, and hardly anyone knows church documents. At most they may read one of the short pamphlets that circulate informally among groups. What they read is the Bible. Every group meeting starts with a Bible reading, which is then discussed in relation to current issues and concerns in the community. Let us be clear about the precise nature of this Bible study. These are not fundamentalists searching for inerrant guide to action in sacred scriptures. What they seek and find are exemplary events and persons; forms of action and role models that make sense in terms of their own lives. The Bible is of course filled with very concrete imagery, and with parables that apply in relatively uncomplicated ways to the routines of daily existence. Bible reading and discussions in popular communities typically stress issues like authenticity of faith and the linking of faith to action, solidarity, sharing, the social nature of true love<sup>21</sup>. The Hebrew Prophets resonate strongly with popular ideals, because of how the Prophets denounce injustice and reject religious hypocrisy. Along with prophets like Amos, Jeremiah, or Isaiah, the story of Exodus also gets a lot of attention, as a concrete instance of God's concern for freedom and justice<sup>22</sup>. Themes of this kind flow easily into a general commitment to solidarity and love of neighbor. The biblical passage most often cited to me was 1 John 4:20-21: «If anyone says 'I love God' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And

this commandment that we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also». This passage undergirds a working view of social relations in which sharing, mutual help, and solidarity are central to the very meaning of «being church». A phrase I heard a lot in rural Venezuela sums this stance up very well: rezando y la mano dando (praying and lending a hand).

These new dimensions of religious experience tied to Bible reading are knit together by a redefined Christology, which has produced a new and meaningful image of Jesus. Jesus no longer appears as a distant Lord on high, but rather as a real person, God in human form, living in the community. Jesus is now someone like themselves, a man who suffered and therefore understood what suffering means. «We are like Jesus», one Venezuelan peasant told me, «Jesus was the first, he joined with people to see how they could get out from under. You can't separate the two things. Jesus came and celebrated, he got involved with people's problems. It's the same with us; a day's work always ends with a celebration. The two things. So you see, Jesus is here with us, doing the same work».

The general demand for authenticity and solidarity is manifested in consistent stress on the need for individual and group responsibility to take action in a world that can be changed. One example may drive the point home. In one neighborhood in Cali, Colombia, I asked what group meetings were like. One man stated that: «What happens is that when people come to the meetings each one brings what they know about community problems» (Interview, 28 May 1983). A neighbor commented that: «Well, you know, that's how it is, it's here in the marginal barrios you get the worst abuses. I don't know if you think it's the same everywhere in Latin America, but the way I see things, religion has been reformed, and I say reformed because they used to teach us that praying would solve everything, that praying was all you needed to satisfy God. But now the Bible makes us see things differently. Because even though it is true that praying is communicating with God, you've also got to be committed to act along with your brothers and sisters». (Interview, 29 May 1983). Another group member put it this way. «I tell everyone, they must be real Christians walking towards our faith, walking to truth, not the kind that sit all day with rosaries in their hands, who wait everyday for manna to fall from heaven. The manna is all used up, that's what I say». (Interview, 28 May 1983).

Apart from its role in spurring self-confidence and a claim to reason, Bible reading also serves as a hook draw people in. Many are familiar with Bible stories and these stories provide a legitimating framework for thinking about community

issues and possible solutions. One of the most successful grass roots groups that I encountered was a network of peasant coffee cooperatives that grew slowly in mountain communities in Western Venezuela, from modest beginnings in the Legion of Mary. Called in by the local priest to help craft solutions to problems of debt and scarcity, Jesuit organizers responded with a long term plan for building cooperatives<sup>23</sup>. One of the Jesuits told me that «at first we had some problems. There were a few groups who thought that all this went beyond the proper bounds of religion. Some even said that it was bad, that it meant using the Legion for things for which it was not intended. I told them no, and used Gospel passages, like the multiplication of loaves and fishes. I said, «do you know why five thousand were able to eat? Because one person put his food in common. If that person had kept his bread and fish in his own pocket, Christ would not have made the miracle. Yes, and Christ is willing to work miracles here too. But someone has to contribute his loaf, his fish, someone has to lend his hoe, lend his jeep, put something in common, so that Christ can perform the miracle. And so we got started». (Interview, 31 Janvier 1983).

Sociability refers to a general disposition to form groups and to engage in collective action. In many countries, groups that appear vigorous and viable on the national scene have no local presence whatsoever. Once beyond the limits of the capital city, it is all too easy to find people who have never encountered a trade union, never met a political party organizer. New grass roots religious groups are often the first and only experience of getting together that reaches beyond family, village, or neighborhood, and the first and only experience of active participation and self-government of any kind that is available to ordinary people. Such experience can have a cumulative and self-reinforcing quality.

Alexis De Tocqueville's analysis of early nineteenth century America is relevant here. Tocqueville was impressed by the spread of associations in America, and wrote that «in democratic countries the science of association is the mother of science, the progress of all depends on the progress it has made... When citizens can only meet in public for certain purposes, they regard such meetings as a strange proceeding of rare occurrence, and they rarely think at all about it. When they are allowed to meet freely for all purposes, they ultimately look on public association as the universal, or in a manner, the sole means which men can employ to accomplish the different purposes they may have in view. Every new want constantly revives the notion»<sup>24</sup>. In his view, it was equality of condition that drove Americans to create and join associations, seeking in group life an antidote to the isolation and loneliness a mobile and egalitarian society was producing. In Latin America the relation is slightly different, for here what we

encounter is the creation of associations (with social trust sustained by religious values) that promote equality by diffusing tools of association to everyone and in this way demystifying authority and those who hold it<sup>25</sup>.

Religious change bears on this convergence of reason, sociability and community in several important ways. There has been a notable decline in the social and cultural distance dividing clergy from ordinary people: the clothes they wear, the jobs they hold, the food they eat, the places they live, and the words they use in ordinary speech. The ensuing ease of contact turns priests and nuns from strange and mystical figures into understandable and approachable human beings. Most group members like the change, and so do clergy and sisters. Nuns in particular prize the chance for more frequent and less formalized contacts in the community: they talk about how getting out of wearing habits helped them communicate honestly with people: now they were seen as real human beings, not «holy» or sacred figures to whom people felt they had to tell a pretty story.

The role of mediators and mediation deserves a word of its own. There is a school of thought in Latin America according to which the people have «erupted» into the churches. In this view, their active presence makes a decisive difference: bringing new issues and ideas into the churches, and in this way creating new social relations and forcing a shift in public and private agendas. Elsewhere, I have argued at some length that this is at best a partial and inadequate view of the matter<sup>26</sup>. The whole process of religious change as expressed in popular groups is never spontaneous: groups simply do not spring up directly «from the people». Popular culture cannot be understood in isolation from the themes and institutions of dominant culture: these are negotiated relationships.

This means that it is not enough simply to «re-read history from below», to cite a phrase often heard in Latin American circles. It is not enough to re-read history from below because it is precisely in the fusion of history as seen and experienced from below with power and norms as projected by institutions and their agents that the possibilities of empowerment are found. This fusion is negotiated and fought over at all levels, and is worked out empirically through a complex material infrastructure of groups and meetings, pamphlets and audio cassettes, courses, pastoral agents going from group to group, and so forth. Popular groups have choices: competing «packages» struggle to gain and hold popular clienteles<sup>27</sup>. Tracing these linkages, and following ideas or programs up and down the chain is a fascinating exercise that reveals that far from being spontaneous expressions of popular desires, the vast majority of grass roots religious groups begin in response to some institutional initiative. Often local

residents will return, enthusiastic, from a regional course sponsored by the church. More commonly, somebody (usually a nun) comes to the area, knocks on doors, and invites residents to a meeting. Here are representative accounts from interviews with two Colombian peasants:

«I really don't know, some missionaries came to the school about four years ago. Before that, we didn't know anything about it. They stayed a night, and later a sister came. Sister Sara came and told us a base community was going to be set up, people were needed, and who would volunteer. So she showed us how to organize the meetings, and (now) we do it». (Interview, 4 January 1983).

«How? Because they told us to (Porque mandaron). When Sister Sara and Father Mario came and told us, at first I said no. They never asked me to a meeting because I would not go. I don't harm anyone. I don't steal, I am not bad. But I went anyway and I liked it». (Interview, 5 January 1983).

The importance of mediations in theory and practice is evident in the difference that the nature of mediators makes to the quality of group life. Accumulating research affirms that the character of these ties (organized by men or women, religious orders or main line church structures, linked with development agencies or not) has more impact on group activities and outlooks than class or local situation considered by themselves<sup>28</sup>. Marginality makes a difference, here. Innovation and real tolerance for democratization and empowerment within local groups is more likely to arise in sources marginal to, but not isolated from, central church structures. Mediators are critical to the whole process because the quality of mediation says a lot about what people expect from the groups. The more authoritarian and controlling the mediator, the more passive and docile the group. In all cases, mediators willing to phase themselves out of group life are more likely to promote and sustain viable democracy within groups and a self-generated effort to seek connections with others like themselves rather than running everything through the hands of clerical advisers. Marginality frees pastoral agents from tight control: women and religious orders generally are freer than male clergy and parish-diocesan structures. Marginality can be liberating, but there are limits. Marginality may open doors to innovation, but total isolation cripples groups by cutting them off from needed contacts and resources.

How does all this relate to democracy and democratization? The groups and the general processes that concern us there are clearly insufficient by themselves to serve as the source of new political movements, much less of a



wholly new political order. Nonetheless, they can and do contribute to democracy to extent that they promote the growth of an autonomous civil society grounded in the dispositions to collective action and associational life discussed above. The creation and diffusion of new norms about equality, leadership, participation, and accountability play a key role here, spurring effort to democratize culture and politics over the long haul. The whole process gains strength from the growing ability of popular groups and individuals to break the culture of silence that remains characteristic of the poor in many societies and cultures<sup>29</sup>. Silence is safe: keeping one's mouth shut is a time-honored way to avoid trouble. One of the comments one most often hears from group members and those who work with them is how difficult it is to get people to say anything at the beginning, let alone to exchange opinions and disagree. Disagreement is viewed as conflict and conflict is risky; silence is safer.

Breaking the culture of silence comes as people learn words and acquire confidence to speak. It requires a supportive setting, spaces (often literally rooms or houses) where communities can get started and meet without harassment. For change to take hold and endure, ordinary people must come to see themselves as persons capable of change and of changing their communities. Continuing religious ties give the whole effort legitimacy and a compelling moral vocabulary. Transforming the content and process of religious practice gives it a solid foundation in everyday routine. Linking it firmly to concrete needs makes it possible for abstract notions of equality, solidarity, or activism to find a place in the ordinary experience of family or community.

Religious change thus requires more than ideas alone. In any event, ideas never come in the abstract: they appear to particular people in specific historical and social circumstances. Ideas need audiences and mediators, women and men who find the messages meaningful, work to diffuse them through time and space, and find the associated forms of practice logical in their circumstances of their own lives. Ideas and group structures evolve together; neither takes the lead. In his work on Ideology and Utopia, Karl Mannheim put the issue of how change can begin and endure in particularly useful terms. By themselves individuals cannot turn utopian dreams into reality. «Only when the utopian conception of the individual seizes upon currents already present in society and gives expression to them, when in this form it flows back into the outlook of the whole group and is translated into action by it, only then can the existing order be challenged by the striving for another order of existence»<sup>30</sup>.

Whether or not change gets under way and what path is followed are questions that cannot be answered with reference to groups alone. The quality, durability, and long term direction of change at this level very much depends, as I have argued here, on how links to larger institutions are organized and legitimated. Institutions that project a hierarchical and controlling image of the good group and the ideal member will strive to control group discourse and to keep their agents astride processes of leadership selection. In this way they severely constrain any possibilities of empowerment, when they do not strangle them at birth. Actions remain personal and confined to the local arena. But with even a slight degree of institutional openness, groups tend to flower, producing voices hitherto silent and talents hitherto unrecognized. Given active backing for personal and group empowerment, the scale of action broadens, and the connections between religious change and social involvement are drawn more explicitly and links to others like themselves are more readily recognized and achieved.

## **Conclusions**

A few general and necessarily tentative conclusions follow. Scholars in the social sciences are all too given to beginning with political outcomes and from that point working back to find antecedents and origins. But true understanding requires the opposite: we must work with the religious and social origins of the group if we are to grasp how politics and political outcomes make sense to them. Beginning with politics is as self defeating in practice as it is in theory. A Venezuelan Jesuit with extensive experience comments that «a political project is something immense. It means nothing less than a pretension to be able to take power and project a model for organizing Venezuelan society. Very logical for those who work at the level of concepts. But for those working at the level of practical action, it is like asking a peasant who is building a sling shot for killing birds if he has thought about constructing an atomic bomb. It is much too remote. The people grow and learn according to the logic of facts and events, not concepts»<sup>31</sup>. There is in any event little evidence that popular groups dream of turning the world upside down, raising the oppressed, and bringing the mighty low. People have more concrete and practical goals: educating their children, getting a house or maybe a community center, acquiring new tools or perhaps even a vehicle. In the same vein, the desire to build community is not an escape to tradition nor is it best understood as an effort to re-build some lost golden age. At issue is simply a attempt to engage the world on better terms, to enter and share in its benefits on a more equal and just footing<sup>32</sup>.

Reflection on Latin America's experience of religious change, empowerment, and power affirms that nothing is pre-ordained in values or culture. Experiences change beliefs and beliefs change behavior at all levels. Neither values nor culture are static, nor can they be dismissed as superstructure. This point is not limited to Latin America: it has general applicability. Scholars of religion occasionally seem afflicted with an inferiority complex; they believe that their field is doomed to disappear. Theories of secularization have pounded that lesson into the heads of aspiring students of the matter for generations. The argument has been that modernization and growing social differentiation produce a situation in which religion was destined to privatization and marginality as an organized social activity; at best to epiphenomenal status, at worst to disappearance. Sharp lines between private and public, religious and secular, were depicted as the normal and desirable by product of modernization.

But the sharp lines posited by secularization theory are misleading in practice and lack compelling force in theory. These are analytical divisions, lines that ordinary men and women bridge every day as they go about their business all over the world. Over the last few decades events all around the globe have affirmed the dynamic force of religion as an independent source of change. Theories of secularization failed to address, let alone identify, on going changes within religion and the continuing role religious around the world play in spurring the transformation of culture, society, and politics. The problem is not confined to a misreading of the present or to false predictions of the future. The intellectual legacy of secularization theory also skews our understanding of the past, above all by exaggerating the extent to which religious consensus held societies together in earlier times. Stress on lost consensus reinforces a disposition to see diversity as disorganization, change as decay. But this image of a golden past age of cultural unity built around religious consensus ignores long-standing variation and conflict within religious traditions, and obscures the strength of diversity and innovation in the present<sup>33</sup>.

An essential step in moving beyond the limitations of secularization theories comes with rescuing the autonomy of the religious content of religious institutions. These are not simply epiphenomena causal value. This is not to make religion into an all purpose, all powerful causal agent. That would do no more than replace one distortion with another. Instead, the key to reliable analysis lies in finding ways to identify and balance the changes arising from within religion (ideas, practices, groups) with those whose power stems from the play of other forces and institutions.

The preceding considerations indicate the complexity of the problem, and suggest how many obstacles mark the path from religious change through empowerment and power. Consider the following points:

- Change at the grass roots is often constrained by the very religious agents who set the reform in motion. Despite talk about church democracy, anxiety to ensure the loyalty of grass roots groups to the church leads them to inhibit the groups from making alliances with others like themselves. Control over all kinds of decisions is reserved to the hierarchy and its agents. What results are at best dense but segregated networks of groups; at worst a situation in which signs of potential independence are strangled at birth.

- Such constraints have been reinforced in Latin American Catholicism in recent years by a combination of overt Vatican hostility with disappearance of the external funding and personnel on which grass roots groups have long depended<sup>34</sup>.

- Prevailing images of what politics is about do much to hem in grass roots groups. Liberation theology's own emphasis on the «wisdom of the people» undercuts organizational strength by depreciating connections to other social groups and levels. Liberation theologians long argued that «politics» was a simple matter in which «the people» (the majority) would achieve power and implant socialism. That leaves no room for manoeuvre when socialism has lost its appeal, and it leaves activists helpless when politics requires constant efforts at negotiation and compromise<sup>35</sup>.

- Change at the grass roots is in any case constrained by the reluctance of ordinary people to accept a broad political agenda. Goals are limited to begin with; building movements and alliances has to proceed through a series of manageable steps and tangible achievements. Groups members are wary of utopian dreams.

- Poor people's movements everywhere lack resources and need allies, but finding them means putting their independence at risk. Many of the groups inspired by liberation theology invested heavily in alliances with left wing political parties. The case of Peru suggests how vulnerable such groups became to manipulation or division at higher levels.

- Even under the best of circumstances, change takes a long time. Hindsight suggests that what church social activists and much of the Latin American left saw as a one generation or less process of consciousness raising, political mobilization and conquest of power can only (if ever) be a much longer term process. At a minimum it requires the constitution of stable social groups, the reworking of family, gender, and community relationships over generations, and a sustained effort to institutionalize principles of equity in the day-to-day operations of social movements and political institutions.

The dilemmas just outlined lead to the paradoxical conclusion that bridging the gap between empowerment and power may be most likely when power itself is not an initial goal. Only if religious groups remain viable as religious groups, binding members together in a shared moral community and building that community in ways that enhance freely given participation among equals, are they likely to sufficient strength and durability to reach out to other areas of life. As Stephen Werner has suggested, «the empowerment functions of religion are latent. At an individual level those who seek well-being in religion tend not to find it; those who gain well-being in religion are not those who seek it»<sup>36</sup>.

In moving from empowerment to power nothing is so effective as democracy. Consistent efforts to democratize the internal life of groups and to make equality a reality is absolutely essential if groups long accustomed to silence are to find voice and feel free to express it. To be sure, the most democratic group will fail if left isolated and vulnerable, without allies or connections. But without the foundation that democratization provides, any hope for self-sustaining change and meaningful empowerment is likely to prove illusory. Considered in this light, the appropriate parallel for Latin American experience is less the Iranian Revolution than the Puritan revolution of sixteenth century England. In the Puritan Revolution, religious change fueled social forces and sparked a revolution that despite being defeated in the short term nonetheless left a permanent legacy of a theory of rights and a reality of independent associational life that has marked our culture ever since<sup>37</sup>. A parallel closer to home is the experience of the African American churches and the civil rights movement in the United States. Scholars like Albert Raboteau, Aldon Morris, or Taylor Branch have demonstrated how the black churches changed religion from a justification of subordination to a charter for liberation. The new ideas nurtured in the churches, crystallized by a new generation of leaders, and encountering a population and changing circumstances, laid the basis for an experience of empowerment and the formation of an important political movement. Obvious

setbacks and continued limitations should not obscure the major achievements of this movement in transforming American culture and society.

These parallels suggest that the most likely outcome of Latin America's experience with religious change, empowerment, and power is not a coherent large-scale political movement, but rather a multiplicity of more modest initiatives whose cumulative effect will slowly shift the ground of expectation and action in societies as a whole. Latin Americans have experienced a lot of change in a very little time. They are only at the beginning of making sense of what it all means for the future.

## NOTES

Earlier versions of this essay were presented as a plenary address to the meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion , Washington DC, November 1992 and later as a key-note address at the Vilanova University Sesquicentennial Conference on "Church, State, and Society: Sociopolitical and Economic restructuring Since 1960".

1. In keeping with the essay format and with the goal of providing reflections on the issues, I have tried to keep the standard scholarly apparatus of footnotes and commentary on the literature to a minimum. A list of references is provided for those wishing to pursue the issues further.

2. As Habermas (The Theory, 2:400) remarks, sometimes "it takes an earthquake to make us aware that we had regarded the ground on which we stand every day as unshakeable"

3. Note that this play on words, between empowerment and power, cannot be made in Spanish. Spanish has not satisfactory one-word equivalent for "empowerment".

4. The analysis and particularly the interview material cited here draws heavily on my *Popular Voices in Latin America Catholicism*, and to the literature cited there and referred to in the references section of this essay.

5. the recent growth in Protestantism is beyond the scope or purpose of this essay. I will simply note that the expansion of Protestantism in Latin America makes sense less as a foreign invasion or a rupture with the past, than as an extension of the trends already at work in the theory and practice of Catholicism, including the focus on active participation in small groups and Bible study. See my "Protestants and Catholics" for more detailed commentary. Relevant sources on Protestantism in Latin America include David STOLL: *Is Latin America?*, MARTIN, D., STOLL, D. and BURNETT, G.

6. See for example, the Bretts, *Murdered in Central America*, CARRIGAN, A.: *Salvador Witness*, or NOONE, J.: *The Same Fate as the Poor*.

7. For details see my *Popular Voices*, chapter 2, SMITH, C.: *The Emergence of Liberation Theology* and in a somewhat different light, BERRYMAN, Ph.: *Religious Roots of Rebellion* and STOLL, D.: *Is Latin America?*

8. Pearce offers extraordinary insight into El Salvador in her *The Promised Land*. See also BERRYMAN, Ph.: *Religious Roots*. I comment on the problem of recent work on Nicaragua in my "How Not to Understand Liberation Theology, Nicaragua, or both".

9. See my "How Not to Understand".

10. Cf. STOLL, David, who argues in the case of the Ixil peoples of Guatemala that apart from “wanting to show solidarity with the victims of human rights violations, many of us have found the sociological frame of references adopted by liberation theology than with our own. Certainly it is easier for secular intellectuals to identify with liberation theology than with fundamentalism. But the theology of liberation may fit the religious experience of Ixils less than a theology of survival”. *Between Two Armies in the Towns of Guatemala* 194.
11. As Jon Sobrino points out, this what characterized the murdered Archbishop Oscar Romero’s option for the poor in El Salvador. See his “A Theologian’s View of Oscar Romero”
12. LEVINE, D.H.: “Peru: El derecho a pensar en situación de fin del mundo”. For a full account of this meeting, see the special number of *PAGinas*, 18:118/November 1992, Lima, entitled “Desarrollo y libaración en américa Latina: nuevos Horizontes” and ROMERO, Catalina and MUÑOZ, Ismael (eds.): *Liberación y Dessarrollo en america Latina Perspectivas*.
13. TOVAR, T.: “El discreto desencanto frente a los actores”, 25.
14. TOVAR states “In the 70s, when popular groups that never before had a clear social presence made themselves’ more visible” and flourished in a social context made a place for them as (collective) actors, the idea of a popular movement came to stand for a totalizing subject —a uncomplicated, and seemingly automatic gateway to a new future. In contrast, in the 1990s, popular social practices are widely viewed as leading to irrational disorder. If popular subjects once marched inexorably towards a socialist future, now they march towards disorder and barbarism (*Ibid.*, 27).
15. For examples, favoring small businesses (microempresas) or streetvending over trade union organization.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 31. Tovar provides further details, with a specific focus on Peru in “La ciudad mestiza, vecinos y poblaciones en el 90” For a general discussion see LEVINE, D.H.: “Construyendo Cultura y Poder” and *Constructing Culture and Power in Latin America*.
17. For a detailed discussion of methodological issues involved in grasping these categories see my *Popular Voices*, especially chapter 1. See also SCOTT, J.: *Weapons of the Weak*.
18. BECKER, M.: “Black and White in Color”.
19. BERNSTEIN, R.: *Habernas and Modernity*, Introduction, 25.
20. The phenomenon is not limited to Latin America. Karen Field shows the intimate relation of civil to religious authority in the colonial system, noting that religious and civil agents of that authority identified independent black preachers (Jehovah’s Witnesses) as carriers of what police files referred to as



"ecclesiastical bolshevism". Because they claimed the right to read and interpret the Gospels independently, and to act in accord with that reading, they were (correctly) regarded as subversive of the entire of the entire established order. Field, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa*, 238. For a detailed review of relevant work on Africa, see Terence RANGER: "Religious Movements and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa".

21. For more details see LEVINE, D.H.: *Popular Voices*, especially chapters 2 and 5 and also BERRYMAN, Ph.: *Liberation Theology*.

22. For a discussion of the exodus metaphor in Western culture, see WALZER, M.: *Exodus and Revolution*.

23. I recently visited these communities after a long absence and found the cooperatives still active despite hard times brought on as part of the overall difficulties of the national economy and political system.

24. *Democracy in America*, 138, 140.

25. There is renewed appreciation of Tocqueville's relevance to the study of religion. See DALTON, L. et al.: "Bringing Tocqueville in".

26. For example, *Popular Voices*, chapters 1, 9, and 10 and *Constructing*.

27. BURDICK, John: *Looking for God in Brazil*, IRELAND, R.: *Kingdoms Come*, or the studies collected in CLEARY, E. and STEWART-GAMBINO, H.: *Conflict and Competition*.

28. One of the most detailed studies available is HEWITT, W. E.: *Base Christian Communities in Brazil*.

29. GAVENTA, J.: *Power and Powerlessness* or SCOTT, J.: *Domination and the Arts of Resistance and Weapons*.

30. *Ideology and Utopia*, 207.

31. MICHEO, Alberto: *Una Experiencia Campesina*.

32. LEVINE, Daniel H.: *Considering Liberation Theology as Utopia*.

33. WERNER, R. Stephen: *Work in Progress Toward a New paradigm in the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States*. See HATCH, N.: *The Democratization of American Christianity* for a relevant rereading of U.S. history.

34. Vatican pressure is evident in a host of new, young appointments to key church positions and in consistent effort to change the direction of Latin America-wide Catholic institutions. The opening of Central

and Eastern Europe has also drawn of resources that otherwise might have gone to Latin America. See DELLA CAVA, R.: *Financing the Faith Vatican Policy 1978-90*, and *Thinking About Current Vatican Policy*.

35. In this regard, I recently (Summer, 1993) participated in a workshop for grass roots activists and political leaders designed to rethink the possibilities and constraints of political action. This practical effort is part of the overall rethinking visible, for example, in the contributions to ROMERA, C. and MUÑOZ, J.: *Liberación y Desarrollo*.

36. werner, 1970. Reexamining the theory of secularization in light of American history, Werner stresses that over the years religion in the United State has been culturally pluralizing, structurally adaptable, empowering, generative of identity, and a powerful source of new voluntarism.

37. This point is argued convincingly in DODSON, Michael and O'SHAUGHNESSY, Laura: *Nicaragua's Other Revolution. Religious Faith and Political Struggle*

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