



**RELIGION AND POPULAR PROTEST  
IN LATIN AMERICA**

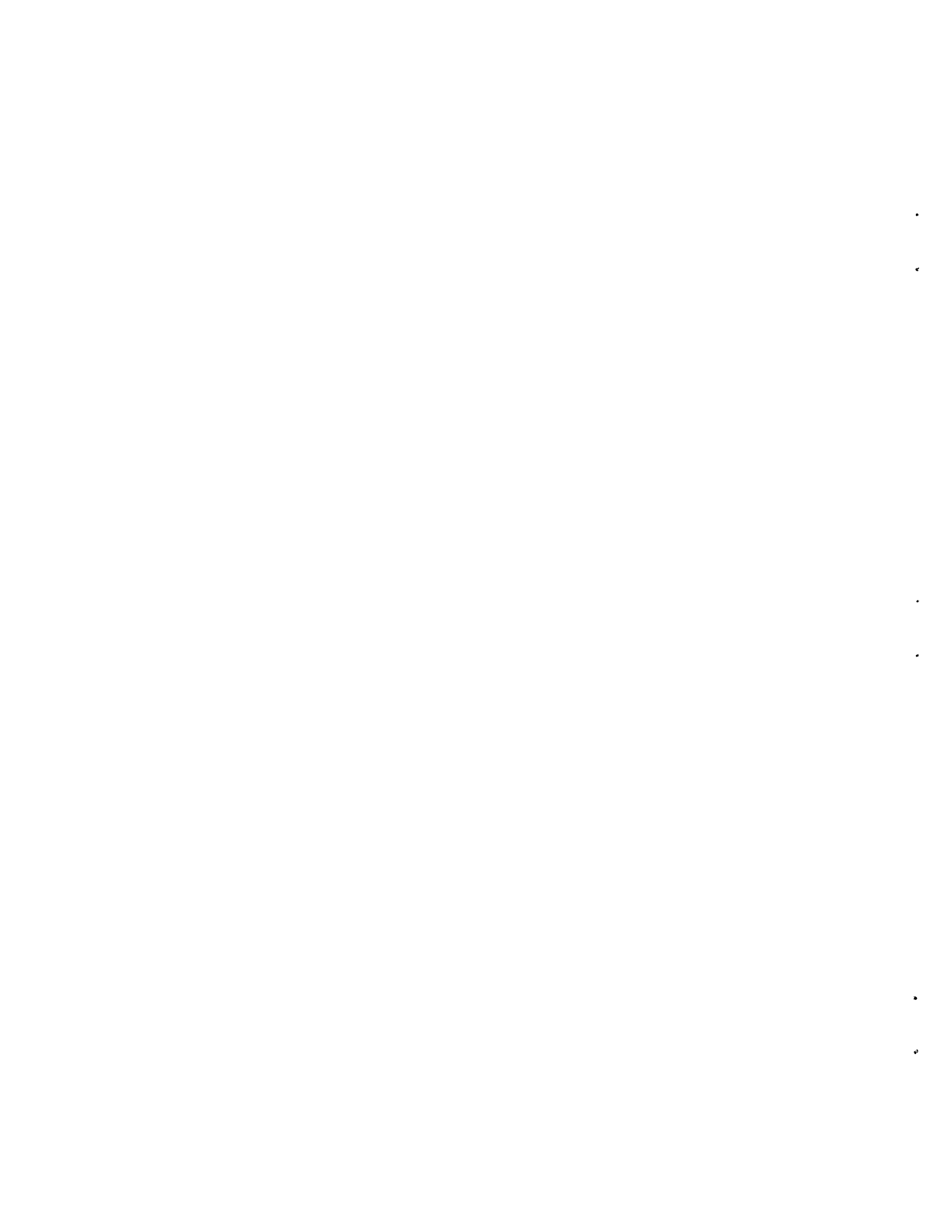
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## ABSTRACT

For centuries, religion stood as a bulwark for conservatism in Latin America. In recent decades, this has changed, as the Catholic Church in a number of countries has actively supported and legitimated popular protest. However, the nature of ecclesiastical change and the relationship between the Church and popular protest differ sharply from one country to the next. This paper examines the relationship between the Church (especially its ecclesial base communities, or CEBs) and popular protest, focusing on two sharply contrasting cases. In Brazil, Church progressives have played a dominant role, and in Colombia, conservative Church leaders have systematically prevented grassroots Church groups from participating actively in popular protest. The paper begins with some theoretical reflections on the relationship between the institutional and popular components of the Church, and on the relationship between informal protest and institutional politics. The authors then provide an overview of the nature, origins, and religious character of CEBs. Through individual life histories, they then analyze the role of CEBs in empowering popular protest in Brazil, and the tight ecclesiastical control over popular Church groups in Colombia.

## RESUMEN

Por siglos, la religión ha permanecido como un baluarte de conservadurismo en Latinoamérica. En décadas recientes esto ha cambiado, ya que la Iglesia Católica en varios países ha apoyado y legitimado activamente la protesta popular. Sin embargo, la naturaleza del cambio eclesial y la relación entre la Iglesia y la protesta popular difieren mucho de un país a otro. Este ensayo examina la relación entre la Iglesia (especialmente sus comunidades eclesiales de base, "CEBs") y la protesta popular, enfocando dos casos contrastantes. En Brasil, religiosos progresistas han jugado un papel predominante, mientras que en Colombia, líderes eclesiásticos conservadores han impedido sistemáticamente la participación activa en la protesta popular de las CEBs. El ensayo comienza con algunas reflexiones teóricas sobre la relación entre los componentes institucionales de la Iglesia y lo popular, y sobre la relación entre la protesta informal y la política institucional. Los autores entonces pasan a dar una vista sintética de la naturaleza, los orígenes, y el carácter religioso de las CEBs. A través de historias individuales, ellos analizan el rol de las CEBs en el fortalecimiento de la protesta popular en Brasil y el control eclesiástico ejercido sobre los grupos religiosos populares en Colombia.



For centuries, religion stood as a bulwark for conservatism in Latin America. The Catholic Church was a largely unquestioned ally of elites opposed to change in the established order of things. Church leaders particularly set themselves firmly against popular activism and protest of any kind. But over the last few decades, significant elements in the Catholic Church have moved to the active promotion of change, empowering and legitimating popular protest across the region. Once seen as a cultural reservoir for apathy and fatalistic resignation, the Catholicism of the popular classes now commonly appears as synonymous with solidarity and resistance to injustice and repression in cases otherwise as different as Brazil, Chile, or El Salvador.

Although change has affected the Church throughout Latin America, change is not everywhere the same, nor is it irreversible. Moreover, there is considerable resistance to change, with pervasive, occasionally bitter struggles to control the transformations in popular religion throughout Latin American Catholicism. This paper is one of many current attempts to pay closer attention to popular patterns in the process of political and religious change.<sup>1</sup> We examine the relation between change in religion and the evolving nature of popular protest. The issue has lately become salient in Latin America (as in much of the world), where struggles within religion have intersected with deep social and political transformations to create new legitimations and structures of protest. Much of the process hinges on what are essentially political issues. But note that more is at stake now than just the opposition of religion to political power. Latin American history provides ample precedent for such confrontations, as it does for a wide range of partisan entanglements by ecclesiastical elites.

The current scene differs because for the first time the locus of decision, conflict, and initiative has shifted to groups which poor people play a key role in establishing and maintaining. The centrality of such groups, known widely in Latin America as base communities, or CEBs (from their initials in Spanish or Portuguese), gives new depth to

the link between religion and politics. As they press for greater equality and autonomy, CEBs and similar groups challenge established norms of power and authority within the churches. To the familiar story of churches affirming or opposing states and regimes, we must now also analyze the way basic cultural categories like hierarchy, equality, activism, passivity, or the qualities making for legitimate authority are called into question and reworked in the routines of everyday life.

A few questions arise at once. Why do the Churches, and religion in general, empower and legitimate protest in some cases and not in others? (Under what circumstances do popular groups come to religious institutions with potentially political agendas.) Why do activist popular groups find a welcome and support in some churches and not others? In what follows, we explore these and related issues through a close look at the origins of religious change and its complex impact on protest. We begin with general considerations on religion and politics, and with a broad-brush account of the rise of CEBs throughout Latin America, their links to social and political change, and the ensuing struggles to control them.

Much writing on CEBs in Latin America remains highly general and abstract, and has failed to convey the sharp heterogeneity of CEBs in different settings and the complex nature of the linkages between CEBs and politics. To make analysis more concrete and realistic, our general discussion is followed by detailed comparison of popular and institutional transformations in Brazil and Colombia.<sup>2</sup> These nations hold down the progressive and conservative ends, respectively, of the spectrum of Latin American Catholicism. They promote very different ideological and organizational agendas at home, and also compete in regional and worldwide Catholic forums, to advance the positions with which each has become identified. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Brazil emerged as a model progressive Church in the region. But Colombians now dominate the leadership positions in the Latin American Bishops' Council (CELAM),

and use them with increasing vigor to advance the new Vatican line, devoted above all to reining in autonomous grassroots activism.

Such national and international differences have shaped the possibilities of popular action, and give a characteristic quality to popular religious attitudes, practices, and organizations in the two nations. To avoid the overgeneralization which plagues so much recent work on CEBs, we anchor the analysis of Brazil and Colombia in a pair of life histories. On the basis of extensive field research in these countries, we have selected individuals who reflect trends and differences in the two churches and societies. Because they are broadly representative of lay leaders in the two churches, these contrasted lives provide rich contextual detail without the danger of either idiosyncrasy or excessive generality. To set the stage for analysis, we begin with some theoretical comments on issues in the study of religion and politics, relevant to the study of CEBs.

### **Religion and Politics: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues**

The study of religion requires attention to more than documents, formal positions, or the sermons heard in Church on Sundays. Analysis must also consider the normal practice of religious life, the everyday activities and modes of discourse through which notions of power, authority, and commitment are worked out in practice. While separated here for purposes of exposition, institutional and popular levels of action are closely linked in reality, and shape and influence one another in many ways. Thus, an exclusive focus on either institutions or popular groups will not do. The case of CEBs points up the importance of this enduring tie. Although CEBs are often depicted as if they came directly "from the people", in fact they almost always begin as the result of some sponsorship by the institutional Churches. Moreover, as we shall see, the CEBs'

ties to the Church persist and are valued by ecclesiastical elites and grassroots members alike.

These reflections suggest the need to rethink common ideas about both institutions and popular religion. Institutions are more than machines for grinding out documents and allocating roles and statuses. They are vital, changing structures which project ideas and resources, and thus shape the contexts in which everyday experience is lived. They provide members with elements of identity, material services, and links to a larger universe of moral significance which undergird perception, commitment, and action. At the same time, institutions are not wholly autonomous. They are influenced by their constituencies, and adapt creatively to changing circumstances. Even the Catholic Church, that most hierarchical of religious organizations, is affected by change at the base. In the next section, we will show in detail how transformations at the popular level have been powerful motors for change in Catholicism over the last few decades. While the poor people who participate in CEBs value ties to the Churches, they bring their own changing agenda of urgent needs to the encounter with religious institutions. The working out of these needs can change the religious institutions that organized the groups in new and unexpected ways.

Popular religion, in turn, is no natural, "spontaneous" product. It is formed historically through the encounter of popular groups with institutions of power and meaning in their societies. As noted earlier, institutions reach out to shape popular beliefs and practices, and are deeply affected themselves by the process. Since the mid-1960s, a profound reevaluation of popular religion, and of the role and status of popular groups generally, has been under way in the Latin American churches. Once taken without much question as the superstitions of the unenlightened and (hopefully) humble masses, waiting to be led and instructed by clergy, popular religion is now increasingly



seen as a legitimate source of valid religious values and orientations (Levine, 1985a, 1986a, 1986d; Kselman, 1986).

The importance of analyzing the interaction between the institutional and popular dimensions is especially clear for the Catholic Church, since both elites and rank and file Catholics value the institutional link and strive to remain within its bounds. This common commitment to the "the Church" (however defined) sets limits to the likely scope of change, and as we shall see, poses problems for the long term viability of radical projects of democratization within such a hierarchical organization.

One final introductory note on this interaction of the popular and the institutional in the Catholic Church is in order here. Even though we emphasize the capacity of the grass roots to transform the Church, it remains a very hierarchical institution whose authority structure and universality are critical dimensions. Authority ultimately rests with the pope, who in recent years has used this authority to bolster the position of conservatives concerned with what they perceive as excessively autonomous and radical grassroots practices. This authority structure underscores the importance of the international character of the Church. Catholic practices in the remotest regions of the world are influenced by the Vatican.

Our perspective on politics and protest also cuts across conventional definitions that are limited to explicit vehicles of the "political" such as the state, parties, interest groups, rallies, elections, strikes, barricades or demonstrations. We look further, to the normal practice of religion in the CEBs, which encourages or inhibits new ways of thinking about and acting on the world. We highlight the ways in which religious change can reshape prevailing images of the self and patterns of intra-group relations, thus laying a foundation for new ideas about legitimacy and different cultural representations of authority. Such a perspective makes us dwell on matters which at first blush may seem wholly "non-political". But in our view, this apparent "non-political" character stems more

from the blinders of customary expectation, than from a real appreciation of what is at issue to those involved.

How do institutional politics fit into this analysis? Clearly, institutional politics involves control over the ideological projections, resources, and action programs of big structures. Institutional politics set the context and possibilities of informal politics and popular action. They thus have an immediate impact on the organization and distribution of power in ways informal politics can rarely match.<sup>3</sup> At this point, a reader may well ask what difference all these cultural transformations and informal politics make if institutions themselves do not change, if there is no shift in the structure of power. First, participation in CEBs clearly matters to those involved. Even if collective action with explicitly "political" goals never develops, the search for meaning goes on in the spaces ordinary life makes available. The powerless work with the tools at hand. Regardless of their short-term political impact, CEBs fill critical religious and affective needs, and can stimulate deep changes in personal as well as group life.

Further, religious change can nurture dissent and delegitimize established structures or leaders. Even if "power" is not "taken", the experience of discussion, organization, struggle and action can nurture an independent popular consciousness, and in this way make possible continued resistance to authority and sustained struggle for change. This is what lays down a cultural foundation for change, and undergirds long-term transformations in the meaning and possibilities "politics" holds for popular groups. (Cf. Iletto, 1979.) Scholars have focused too much on the apparent political results of religious action, with little sense of why motives emerge, or how they may stimulate and sustain action in the first place (Levine, 1986d). Explicitly political vehicles and outcomes are of course important, but if analysis ends here much of great value is missed. Most of the interest of recent Latin American struggles over religion and politics lies less in conventional political manipulations of religion (eg. the use of shrines and symbols or

processions, or the formation of religious political parties) than in the way changes within religion are associated with new kinds of social organization and with activities whose political meaning arises less from direct confrontations with authority (although these may occur) than from the legitimation of new ideas about activism, power and governance in ordinary life.

People learn about politics and religion not only through explicit messages, but also through the implicit models of good societies and proper behavior which they encounter in the contexts of daily routine. As these contexts change, legitimations of power and authority are reworked. Again, explicitly political change comes at the end of a long chain of events, not at its beginning. Stated otherwise, we look first to understand the religious content of religion. Without analyzing the powerful motivating capacity of religious ideals, it is impossible to understand the political significance of religious transformations. Generally speaking, to find the most important political consequences of religious change, we look not in the realm of institutional politics, but rather to ideas about power, authority, and justice--ideas that are shaped by religion.<sup>4</sup>

The renewed salience of religion in politics in the late twentieth century would surely have surprised many earlier thinkers. Since the nineteenth century, many students of religion saw it as an atavism that was likely to disappear with the advent of modernization. Despite otherwise radical differences of opinions, writers like Freud, Nietzsche, Marx, and Feuerbach agreed that religion was epiphenomenal, secondary to expressions of interests, desires, or processes that are somehow more "real." Until recently, much sociological analysis of religion has continued to make this assumption.

The importance of religion in the politics of Latin America, Africa, Asia, and increasingly in the US underscores the need for theoretical reassessment. Far from declining, religion shows great import throughout the world. Moreover, analysis that makes religion epiphenomenal is hard pressed to grasp the central value of religious

belief to those involved. Religion is clearly a powerful motivating force on its own. Religious ideas inspire and legitimate action at the same time that religious structures produce enduring social bonds which make collective endeavors possible. External pressures create alternatives and opportunities, but prior transformations within religion have autonomous validity and an independent import on politics and protest. Analysis which forgets the powerful motivating force of religious belief and looks only to concepts such as "elite manipulation" or "popular struggle" misses much of the reason why people join religious groups in the first place. It thus fails to see how religious motives and values undergird other aspects of group life. Religion provides enormous political energies that change expectations, challenge accepted notions of the legitimate, and refocus action on new areas and issues of conflict. Moreover, the current visibility of religion is not well understood as a fundamentalist or atavistic reaction--the last gasp of a dying world view. Fundamentalists are not much in evidence in the Latin American cases we discuss.

The importance of understanding the religious motivations of actors holds in particular for the exaggerated radical expectations common in much writing on CEBs in Latin America. Most CEBs are not necessarily or even usually interested in revolution. CEB members generally have more urgent needs and modest goals. To see them primarily as tools for political change (as the Left often does with praise, and the Right with condemnation) is to overstate their political involvement and to misread their religious nature. Where revolutionary commitment of CEBs occurs as in El Salvador, it is the product of external pressures that drive groups, in Berryman's apt phrase, "from evangelization to insurrection" (Berryman, 1986). The next section looks closely at the origins and character of CEBs in Latin America, with special reference to the link between religious and political dimensions of the CEBs.

### The Nature of Base Communities

Much has been written lately about CEBs, with particular stress on their supposed potential to stimulate and nurture a new sort of involvement by poor Catholics in society, culture, politics, and religion. Limitations of space make a detailed review impossible here.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, a few critical points may be noted. First, despite the broad interest in CEBs, there is little agreement as to just what these groups are like. Widely varying kinds of organizations are lumped together and presented as CEBs. Even a cursory review of the evidence turns up major differences in CEBs between nations, and also among regions, dioceses, and localities in the same country. Thus, what passes for a base community in El Salvador or Brazil often bears little relation to groups of the same name encountered in Colombia or Argentina. Conversely, a group that meets all of the normal definitions of a CEB may not call itself a base community.

A common working definition of CEBs takes off from the three elements of the name "ecclesial base community:" a striving for community (small, homogeneous); a stress on the ecclesial (links to the church); and a sense in which the group constitutes a base (either the faithful at the base of the Church's hierarchy or the poor at the base of the social pyramid). Most CEBs are small groups, involving ten to thirty people, usually relatively homogeneous in social composition. They gather regularly (usually once every week or two) to read and comment on the Bible. They are most often composed of poor people in a single neighborhood, village, or hamlet.

Second, as noted earlier, CEBs are rarely spontaneous creatures, springing "from the people." They are born linked to the churches, specifically to initiatives by bishops, priests, nuns or lay agents commissioned by the Church. Links to the Church are maintained through a regular routine of courses, visits by clergy and especially sisters, and the distribution of mimeographed circulars, instructional material, and cassettes. All

this means that while the CEBs are popular in social composition, they are not autonomous or isolated from the Church. They are constantly influenced by the institutional Church, and often subject to its monitoring and control. This situation easily leads to conflict between the institution and the CEBs where the former is relentless in its demand for control or where the popular groups attempt to develop in a direction opposed by the clergy.

Why did CEBs develop as they did? Across the region, religious and political trends converged to give a specific character to emergent groups. Change in the Catholic Church, encouraged by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and peaking at the 1968 meeting of the Latin American Bishops Conference at Medellín, Colombia, set in motion a broad range of innovations, including stress on lay participation, more attention to the promotion of justice (and the denunciation of injustice), and more effective evangelization among popular classes. These changes enhanced the status of popular action and expression within religion, and formed part of a broad upsurge of grassroots experiences all across Latin America (Levine, 1986a).

Within the churches, these changes responded to growing secularization, urbanization, and (in many countries) the erosion of the Catholic religious monopoly and the growth of the Left. Further, rapid social and cultural change in the post-1945 period created new needs on the part of the popular sectors that established groups did not fulfill, including the need for more participatory experiences that would provide friendship, meaning, and structure as they faced the changing world around them. Thus, as the Catholic Church opened its doors in new ways to the poor, the poor sought new answers and experiences in religion -- whether through the Catholic Church, the Pentecostal churches, or (as often was the case in Brazil) Afro-Brazilian sects. It is no accident that religious growth since the 1950s has affected a wide amalgam of faiths in Latin America. Growth has been particularly pronounced among religions and varieties of religious

experience that offer a strong sense of community, friendship, and meaning, regardless of political content.

These religious and social changes intersected historically with the emergence of "national security" regimes and a regional turn to "new," more repressive authoritarianism. The conjuncture was critical (Levine, 1986e). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the Catholic Church opened up more to popular groups, repression intensified in many countries, and popular religious groups became targets of official violence because any autonomous organization was suspect in the eyes of fearful elites. Because "normal" political channels (parties, unions, neighborhood associations) were closed, church-sponsored groups and activities inadvertently became the only available "political" outlets in some countries. The import of political closure was mostly indirect. As noted, the initial impetus for most CEBs was religious, not political. They emerged as part of a broad Church strategy designed to reach and hold a clientele more effectively. The initial impact of the CEBs stemmed above all from how the religious, social, and cultural experiences they brought found a ready clientele. But in all the cases where CEBs later became prominent, political closure was decisive in magnifying their impact. Repression drove new clients into these structures which often were the only available vehicles for organization and common action. At the same time, repression radicalized many bishops and pastoral agents who then intensified efforts to create and extend CEBs. Further, the national security states leading the repression were so manifestly anti-popular that they unwittingly encouraged the politicization of most CEBs, by repressing just about any collective popular action, no matter how innocuous its initial goals.<sup>6</sup>

If we look closely at the actual process of grassroots organization, a clear pattern emerges across the region.<sup>7</sup> In most cases, the first step came as pastoral agents set about reworking the ties between churches and popular classes. In large numbers they went to live in popular communities and work alongside residents on a day-to-day basis.

CEBs were typically formed after some such contact, and only with a few years of experience did a more elaborate and articulated vision begin to appear of what CEBs were supposed to be like. National and regional programs soon followed, dedicated to leadership training and group promotion, and to the general dissemination of these initiatives.

One of the characteristics of this intersection of grassroots innovations and institutional changes was an emphasis on "the people". This new direction was visible in heightened respect for the poor as sources of religiously valid insights. The very term, "popular religion", once synonymous with ignorance and superstition, became practically a code word for authenticity and for values like generosity, selflessness, and solidarity. Religious populism stressed the need to go to the people, share their conditions, and identify with their situation. Much like the narodniki of nineteenth century Russia, sisters, priests, and middle class activists throughout Latin America moved to seek the "wisdom of the people" (DeKodt, 1970; Kselman, 1986; Paiva).

Much of this populism, and the accompanying adulation of "the popular" by progressive groups, is wrapped around an intense fight for power. An old fashioned, bitter political struggle rages all over Latin America to control popular groups, and especially to control programs which train pastoral agents and produce materials for group use. At issue is who will staff the institutes, run the mimeograph machines, record and distribute the cassettes, make the visits to the groups and coordinate their activities. In short, who will set the agenda of CEBs, and what will it contain? Will they stress spiritual matters to the exclusion of social and political issues, or will it be the reverse, or some combination of the two? The general trend in the Catholic Church, reinforced strongly by Pope John Paul II and pushed with notable vigor after the 1979 meeting of Latin American bishops at Puebla, has clearly been to stress the former. As yet, the outcome is not uniform, but politically active CEBs are obviously under pressure.



We have argued that CEBs emerge primarily as the result of initiatives of pastoral agents to reach out to the popular sectors. But the CEBs involve a relationship between the Church and the popular sectors, so it is also essential to explore the bases of popular receptivity. This receptivity was not unlimited; there are countless cases where clerics attempted but failed to create CEBs. Interestingly, failure was more likely where the pastoral agents attempted to encourage highly politicized CEBs from the beginning. Conversely, success was more likely where religion and community were the main objectives. Popular receptivity was also greater where some traditional religious values (respect for images, processions, veneration of saints) were upheld, even as other aspects of popular religiosity changed.

Concern with the political impact of CEBs should not obscure their central religious character. If we ask what CEBs actually do every day, and how their ordinary routines converge with the pressures and opportunities of institutional politics, we must begin with ties to the Church. In daily practice, CEBs are much more conventionally religious than is commonly realized. Members pray a lot, both individually and as a group; they also value and practice very traditional prayers and rites such as rosaries, nocturnal vigils, adorations, now disdained by some radical Church activists. They place great stress on liturgies and traditional religious celebrations, including processions and pilgrimages. These are explicitly downplayed by those radicals who favor preaching and sociological discourse over liturgy. Indeed, the clash of popular desires for liturgy with activist stress on "useful" collective action is a permanent feature of much CEB life. As noted, CEB members value links to the Church and generally have great respect for Church leaders like priests, and especially bishops and the pope.<sup>8</sup> Radical clergy, sisters, and activist laity all over Latin American have learned that attacking the hierarchy drives the people away.

These explicitly and conventionally religious activities cut through all aspects of group life. No matter what the social or political agenda may be, from child care to sewing,

from cooperatives or strikes to land invasions, in all instances there is great stress on prayer, Bible study, and liturgy. Moreover, most of the groups' social and political agenda is also quite conventional.<sup>9</sup> Typical activities include sewing, visiting the sick, or "social action", which usually means collecting money, clothing, or food for those in extreme need. There is often an attempt to found cooperatives, which generally remain limited to very small scale savings and loan operations, or at most to collective marketing or common purchase arrangements.

Within this seemingly innocuous set of activities, CEB life represents a sharp break from hitherto normal religious practice. Members meet regularly to read and discuss the Bible, pray together, and celebrate liturgies as a group. None of this was true on any significant scale before the mid 1960s. Until recently, most popular religious life in Catholicism was sporadic, centered around celebrations of mass (especially on major holidays) or visits to Church coinciding with key sacraments. Scarcity of clergy meant that many people's only contact with the official Church (particularly in the countryside) came on isolated occasions. The promotion of CEB formation, Bible study, and the change to local languages (Spanish and Portuguese) for ritual and liturgy has significantly altered religious life. Group meetings make religious life more regular and familiar. Moreover, access to the Bible lessens the dependence of the poor on traditional authority figures like priests. After getting under way, many groups continue on their own, visited only occasionally by clergy or sisters .

The religious innovations of CEBs help explain why they have become so controversial, at the center of the current debate about the Church. Conservatives believe CEBs have become too autonomous and have formed what Pope John Paul II terms "a popular Church." This fear has triggered a series of efforts to control grassroots religious activities more closely, as will be seen from the Colombian case. But the point is more general: even self-consciously "progressive" groups may have less revolutionary

impact than is often suggested. But because the normal practice of CEBs encourages critical discourse, egalitarianism, and experiments in self-governance within the groups, even the most "apolitical" CEBs can have long-term political consequences. They do so by stimulating and legitimating new kinds of leadership and commitment in the larger society. The next two sections describe how and explain why CEBs foment popular protest or fail to challenge entrenched authority patterns. The contrasting experiences of CEBs in Brazil and Colombia show how CEBs vary in their impact depending on the institutional and political context in which they are embedded.

### **Base Communities Empower Popular Protest: Brazil**

Base communities emerged earlier in Brazil than elsewhere in Latin America; the first ones sprang up in the period immediately before the 1964 military coup. From this time on, the Brazilian Church has served as a model for Catholic progressives throughout Latin America. By the mid-1970s the Brazilian Church was probably the most progressive in the world. The hierarchy assumed strong positions in defense of human rights, trenchantly criticizing the military government on many occasions. Equally important was the fact that the Brazilian Church has been the continental leader in grassroots innovations, among which the CEBs are the most outstanding. Although it is difficult to rely on these numbers (which are probably somewhat exaggerated), spokespeople for the Brazilian Church say that there are now approximately 100,000 CEBs, with over two million participants. One can question these numbers, but the CEBs have clearly been a major pastoral priority of the Brazilian Church.

CEBs have been heavily concentrated in dioceses where bishops have encouraged their promotion. The support of dozens of progressive bishops was a necessary condition for CEBs to assume such a central role in the Church. Within the

parameters of a Church which has limited material resources and clergy, the Brazilian Church has provided vast intellectual and human resources for grassroots groups. Without exception, Brazil's most prominent progressive theologians have worked extensively with CEBs. CEBs are targeted as a leading priority by many dioceses and archdioceses. The National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) has sponsored several book length studies of CEBs and many studies on related subjects (CNBB, 1977, 1979, 1982). In addition, many leading CNBB statements have addressed the issues that are vital in the life of CEBs. These include religious issues proper, such as popular religiosity and mass for popular groups; they also include socio-economic questions of central importance to the popular classes. Although the CNBB did not officially endorse the five National Encounters of CEBs, it did support them unofficially.

In Brazil, about 80 bishops (out of 350) have actively promoted CEBs, and most of these bishops have also encouraged CEB people to participate in institutional politics. Arguably the most distinctive feature of the Brazilian Church has been the harmony between progressive grassroots experiences and the hierarchy, a harmony made possible only because of the progressive character of many Brazilian bishops. Meanwhile, the openness of the Brazilian hierarchy to concerns originating among grassroots pastoral agents has given a dialectical quality to change in the Brazilian Church. Grassroots pastoral agents pushed for change and were directly responsible for most of the innovations. The hierarchy legitimated and further encouraged these changes, and theologians (who generally had considerable contact with the grass roots) elaborated theologies that underpinned the innovations.

This concern of the Brazilian Church's with promoting CEBs has been integrally connected to its desire to promote more effective and participatory Church structures, and also to its view that a necessary component of the Church's mission is promoting social justice. For example, the bishops have stated that the Church should assume "its

critical and prophetic mission of denouncing injustice and promoting the solidarity and legitimate hopes of people" (CNBB, 1975: 78-79).

The CEBs are one of the primary means of promoting social justice within the Brazilian Church. The bishops, theologians and social scientists who promote CEBs clearly believe that base communities should not form a Church ghetto. On the contrary, they encourage CEB people to participate in the social movements and political parties to help transform the society's elitist political patterns and inegalitarian social structures. Typical of the discourse one finds in materials produced by the Church for distribution in the CEBs was a highly publicized document issued by the archdiocese of São Paulo--the most populous archdiocese in the world, and the most influential (although far from the most radical) in the country.

Everyone should participate in politics, because everyone is a free and responsible citizen. The citizen has a right and an obligation to give an opinion, criticize what is wrong, suggest new paths, and indicate the real needs of the people. Politics cannot be limited to a group that knows everything and manipulates the people, for the first subject of political action is the people, organized to make their rights as citizens count (Comissão Pastoral, 1981: 82-83).

One must allow for a considerable gap between discourse and grassroots pastoral practices, which sometimes are more authoritarian, clerical, and conservative than the discourse would indicate. One must also allow for the fact that even where pastoral agents actively promote political involvement, the move from participation in CEBs to participation in progressive social movements and party politics is not an easy one for most CEB people. Brazilian politics has been so elitist that its structures discourage political participation. The slow, controlled nature of the liberalization process and the elitist character of the transition to democracy blocked the kind of radicalization of CEBs that occurred in Nicaragua (after 1976) and El Salvador (after 1979). Nevertheless, the impact of grassroots Catholic leaders on an amalgam of social movements that emerged in the 1970s is undeniable. Indeed, since the 1970s, one cannot understand popular movements in Brazil without reference to the political style and impact of grassroots

Catholic activists. All over the country, people who have participated in CEBs are among the leaders of neighborhood associations, labor unions, and peasant unions. Popular movements, in turn, were important actors in redefining the nature of the liberalization project initiated by the military government in 1974 (R. Cardoso, S. Mairwaring, forthcoming). The impact of poor Catholics migrating from CEBs to partisan politics is particularly clear with the Workers Party, the most progressive major party in this country where politics is thoroughly dominated by elite transactions. The popular presence in political life is still weak, but it has been strengthened considerably by the grassroots Church.

The life of one Brazilian woman who began to participate in a base community in 1974 helps show how and why CEBs have assumed political importance in Brazil. Azuleika Sampaio, now 52 years old, is a remarkable example of a person whose life changed dramatically because of her involvement in a base community.<sup>10</sup> In turn, this CEB experience enabled her to become an outstanding leader in her city's neighborhood movement and, to a lesser extent, in the women's movement. Although her life history is particularly poignant, the point is that throughout the country, thousands of individuals like her have had a major impact on the grassroots Church and in political life.

Azuleika was born in 1933 in Recreio, Minas Gerais, where she grew up as a practicing Catholic. Her religious practice as a child was typical of that of most poor rural Brazilians. She had a strong faith, instilled mostly by her father, but she rarely went to mass. The closest church was too far to make a regular practice of doing so. But her father prayed every night; Azuleika, despite having limited knowledge of the institutional Church, did likewise.

In 1946 she and her family moved to Rio de Janeiro. From then until 1974, she lived in one of Rio's largest favelas. At age 13 she began to work as a domestic servant, and at age 14 as a factory worker. She became the only member of her family to frequent

the local church. At age 16 Azuleika married. From then until 1974, her life revolved around the family and house, her paid jobs, and her religious practice. Shortly after marriage she joined the Apostolado da Congregação, a Church movement that focused on spiritual devotion, prayer, and charity. She notes that she "started in the Church by tradition and continued because of devotion." She helped with catechism classes, cooked for the priests, etc. She retrospectively describes her faith as "traditional" and "pre-Conciliar." Religion was "an end in itself," with no sense of political commitment. Politics was an issue only during campaign periods, when the priest told the people how to vote. She herself voted for conservatives like Carlos Lacerda and Jânio Quadros. Charitable actions (such as hospital visits) marked the limit of her social commitment. As she says, "I later changed radically, like water to wine."

Always a hard worker, in 1967 Azuleika went to work at a sewing factory, where she became the head of a section, overseeing some minors who worked there. In 1970, she won a prize as the best worker in Rio de Janeiro. She also returned to school in 1967, having previously completed only two years of schooling. In 1973, she finished ginásio, the equivalent of ninth grade.

In 1974, along with her two sons and husband, she made the short move to Nova Iguaçu, a poor working class city some twenty miles to the north of Rio. In this overgrown (1.5 million people by the mid-1980s) and rapidly expanding commuter city, she and her family were able to purchase a small lot, even though they remained very poor. It was at this point that she started participating in a base community that had been organized by the local priest. She also participated in a Church-organized mothers' club, but eventually left because she considered the priest too authoritarian and conservative. However, this more independent assessment came only after exposure to other Church activities had enhanced her personal confidence. She speaks of the sense of belonging that she found in her local CEB.

Azuleika's involvement in the CEB did not preclude an ongoing commitment to attending mass. She notes that the priest "was great. He encouraged the CEBs. He participated in everything, gave us lots of encouragement. Many people grew because of him." But when the priest left in 1976, the CEBs had some trouble carrying on on their own. In 1975, she was elected social coordinator of the local community. Later that same year, because of her growing responsibilities in the local community she started to attend some discussions about health. These discussions became the basis for forming a more dynamic neighborhood movement in Nova Iguaçu. From the outset, Azuleika was challenged and stimulated by the leaders of these health discussions, four doctors who were interested in organizing the local population to obtain better urban services. She relates that "When I entered the movement, I met people on the left engaged in popular health work. My relationship with them was terribly important to me; they taught me a lot. Our friendship is very deep and meaningful. They are very capable and intelligent. We have been friends now for ten years."

Her evident skills made her an outstanding leader. After 1976, she began to move in more sophisticated political circles, with other outstanding popular leaders of the region. In 1977, Azuleika started a neighborhood association in her community. That same year, a Maryknoll priest from the U.S. began to work with the CEBs in her region. This man also had a significant impact on her life. He supported her deepening involvement in political and religious issues in Nova Iguaçu. In 1979, she became part of the Justice and Peace Commission, and in 1980 she started to work for Cáritas, an international organization of the Catholic Church that works for the poor. Nova Iguaçu's Cáritas was directed by a progressive priest who also supported Azuleika in many ways.

In 1979, she was elected part of the first Coordinating Commission of the city-wide neighborhood movement, which by then had become one of the most important neighborhood movements in Brazil. Her leadership in local politics led Azuleika to



become the President of the Federation of Neighborhood Associations of Nova Iguaçu in 1983. In late 1985 she was re-elected to this position.

Several points of Azuleika's story are particularly important for present purposes. The initial impulse for political involvement came from religious participation. Religion encouraged significant transformation of political perspectives by emphasizing such themes as Jesus's predilection for the poor, the Biblical insistence on social justice, and solidarity. Religious motivations and organizations were critical in overcoming individualism and mutual isolation that have traditionally impeded collective action among the popular sectors. The CEBs stimulate the idea of collective organization as possible and legitimate, while promoting its practice in tangible and visible ways. CEB political activity is rudimentary in most cases, but for many people, CEBs provide the first taste of collective organization. In many poor communities, this is basically a new resource: the groups themselves are new and their links to the Church provide a sense of protection and an entree to broader horizons of a kind rarely known before.

Furthermore, religion was not simply a way station en route to developing a more advanced political consciousness. On the contrary, Azuleika remains profoundly marked by a religious vision of the world. Although she no longer participates in her local CEB on a regular basis, she continues to go to mass and remains friends with the individuals in the local CEB. Religion was not the only factor in her political transformation, but it was the motivating force behind the early stages of this transformation.

Given the living conditions that Azuleika and millions of Brazilians face, it takes very strong motivation to be as persistent as she is. She works a whole day; is absorbed by her family life, including taking care of one retarded son; and yet finds time to participate in countless activities, some of which are tied to the Church while others are strictly political. Religious motivation alone does not explain this extraordinary dedication, but it has been the core of it.

Religion's political impact first came in the sphere of "informal politics." Azuleika emphasizes that it was the combination of developing personal confidence and a greater concern for community affairs, both results of her participation in the base community, that led her to get involved in the neighborhood and women's movements. Personal confidence need not lead to political involvement, but for many women and men it has been a necessary stepping stone to political participation. CEB life can stimulate, or better uncover, new sources and types of leadership. The pervasive stress on self expression and participation clearly works to elicit hitherto hidden capacities for leadership. We have observed countless meetings where once tongue-tied men and women step forward to speak and share experiences. Their capabilities are nurtured in the group, supported and drawn out by friends and neighbors, and then spill over to affect other issues--from agricultural practice to savings, from personal relations to marriage patterns, schools to politics. People who were once afraid to speak out now do so with confidence and vigor. People who did not even have a rudimentary notion of their rights now stand up for them. The potential for a move from CEB activities to participation in larger political circles is clearly borne out in Azuleika's case.

Religion also provided the first basis for questioning traditional authority patterns that Azuleika has always accepted. Although the popular sectors have always engaged in some patterns of behavior which reject or challenge this elitism, they are generally reticent about questioning authority relationships openly. In Brazil, this authority pattern is seen in the widespread submissiveness of employees toward employers, especially (but not only) in household activities. On the part of poor men and women, this submissiveness may be behavior consciously intended to ensure job security and may even conceal significant internalized hostility. Yet despite the private questioning and rejection of these behavior patterns, the highly vertical authority relations have clearly contributed to enforcing elite domination. In the past, popular attitudes towards authority, ranging from

respect to submission through fear, paralyzed vast numbers of Brazilians in terms of acting politically to change their society. As we have seen, Azuleika was no exception to this pattern.

Grassroots Catholic groups helped Azuleika challenge this combination of occasional private rejection with general public submission. In the CEBs, submission to authority figures is no longer perceived as necessary. Indeed, in the case of public authorities, there is a heightened sense of the legitimacy of demanding receptivity to popular needs. These changing perceptions of authority and of legitimacy make possible participation in collective action. Group practice itself enhances equality and participation. Equality among participants is repeatedly stressed, and efforts are made to redefine relationships between the "people" and pastoral agents (priests, nuns, trained lay people).

The story suggests the dramatic transformations in popular religiosity that are sometimes possible. It is this potential for change in popular religiosity that makes religion an explosive issue subject to so much debate and controversy. Note also the popular capacity to seek and to reject religious alternatives, clearly seen in Azuleika's rejection of the mothers' clubs on the grounds that they did not do anything meaningful. Her prior engagement in more progressive religious and political experiences informed this rejection, yet the point that the popular classes are constantly (consciously or not) evaluating the merits of different religious, social, and political alternatives is still valid. They may do so with limited analytical skills, or even in unconscious ways--but the process of evaluation is always going on.

How was such a change in religiosity and politics possible? Part of Azuleika's transformation resulted from her own talents and dedication, but an adequate explanation also involves broader institutional changes, both in the Catholic Church and in local politics. The institutional Church played a decisive role in her transformation, with the two

local priests being the most important individuals. Although individual priests and nuns can and do sometimes encourage progressive change in conservative dioceses, such change is more likely in situations like that of Nova Iguaçu, where the bishop and a significant percentage of the clergy are progressive. Since 1966, when Don Adriano Hypólito became bishop, the diocese of Nova Iguaçu has pioneered in promoting ecclesiastical innovations, with CEBs as a major priority. The diocese also created a wide network of mostly progressive religious institutions and groups. Particularly significant in Azuleika's case were the diocese's chapter of the Justice and Peace Commission, which deals with a wide range of human rights issues, especially for the poor; and the diocesan *Cáritas*, which originated as a relief organization, and deals with material problems of the needy. Her involvement in both organizations helped change Azuleika's life; both organizations exist because of the initiatives of Dom Adriano and progressive clergy. All of this serves to reinforce our earlier point about the importance of pastoral agents; it particularly suggests the ongoing centrality of the bishop, notwithstanding the efforts to decentralize ecclesiastical authority.

Compared to what we shall see in Colombia, most CEBs in Nova Iguaçu place great emphasis on lay leadership, participation, and even autonomy. At the annual diocesan assembly that determines Church priorities, lay people are in the majority, and each one has a vote equal to sisters, priests and Dom Adriano. One popular diocesan publication makes this sentiment clear: "We are the Church, and it is descending from the clouds to be among us. At times, the Church must restructure itself to correspond to what is expected of it." (Diocese de Nova Iguaçu, 1983.) This process is hard to imagine in Colombia. This emphasis on lay autonomy was particularly visible in the priests who so influenced Azuleika's life. Furthermore, these priests strongly encouraged lay involvement in politics. Indeed, within what is an exceptionally heterogeneous diocese in

terms of pastoral and political positions, the bishop and most priests in leadership positions have actively promoted lay involvement in progressive political movements.

Changes in local politics, and in particular the emergence of a neighborhood movement, also formed an important springboard. Without a popular movement, Azuleika would not have had a place to channel her energy. Furthermore, from the beginning of her political involvement, she received the encouragement of secular activists. Azuleika herself is quick to point to the profound impact these secular activists had on her political development.

The narrative also suggests the limits of the Church's ability to promote political changes. Azuleika's evaluation needs no comment: "The CEB was important for me because it gave me a chance to read the Bible, to get involved in the life of the neighborhood, to begin to sense the importance of politics. But few people in the CEB have a political vision. The CEBs discuss a lot, but they don't act...I couldn't realize my objectives in the CEB. The CEB is concerned with the narrow world of the neighborhood and the community."

Finally, the story hints at the fragility of some changes in popular identity, as well as the central role priests and nuns usually have in encouraging base communities. When the priest left Azuleika's neighborhood in 1976, the local CEBs at best stagnated. The same thing happened when the Maryknoll priest had to leave in 1981. Many grassroots people participate partly because of the direct encouragement of priests and nuns and never acquire such an independent stance as Azuleika.

The point of Azuleika's story is not to suggest that involvement in base communities has transformed all individuals in similar ways. Azuleika is unusual in her intelligence, dedication, and courage, just as the Nova Iguaçu neighborhood movement has been unusually successful by comparative standards. Yet even within the diocese of

Nova Iguaçu, dozens of popular leaders got involved in politics primarily because of their Church connection.

In concluding this section on Brazil, we should repeat an earlier point: the relationship between change in informal politics and change in political institutions is complex. Clearly, change must become institutionalized through some enduring mediation. To acquire lasting political impact, base communities must go beyond the small group level and influence major mediating institutions in the society. These institutions range from the Church itself to political parties, unions, and the state. The means of exercising influence can be direct (through the participation of CEB leaders) or indirect, through inducing greater responsiveness to popular needs (Cardoso 1981).

The passage from small group to institutional politics is not easy for most CEB participants. There can be competition between the affective goals of grassroots groups and more explicitly political objectives. Emphasis on the affective dimensions of life can lead groups to prefer to remain small and exclusive rather than to engage in mass collective organization or large scale institutions (like political parties or unions). To argue that grassroots Catholic groups have changed the way the participants perceive authority relations does not imply that these changes necessarily translate into changes in institutional politics. The linkages between informal and institutional politics are more complex. In this regard, it is important to recall that only a small minority of the population is engaged in grassroots Catholic groups, and this minority does not necessarily have an impact on the rest of the population. Furthermore, the fact that elitist authority patterns reinforce the mode of domination does not necessarily mean that challenging those authority patterns will cause a change in the mode of domination. To argue that **A** reinforces **B** does not logically imply that the absence of **A** will lead to the change or elimination of **B**.

Nevertheless, under many conditions there is a mutual reinforcement between religious organization and collective action.<sup>11</sup> The existence of strong networks of CEBs often reinforces collective action. The linkage between religious organization and collective action comes partly because the same principles of authority function at all levels. The dissemination of more egalitarian principles about authority at a grassroots level is likely to affect how participants perceive authority relations in the society at large. This may not impel participants to collective action, but it surely increases their disposition in this direction. CEBs have encouraged popular participation in societies where this kind of participation was relatively weak. Moreover, the reworking of perceptions of authority, justice, politics, and legitimacy that takes place in CEBs has redefined the cultural underpinnings of Brazilian politics in small but potentially significant ways.

#### **Successful Ecclesiastical Control Over Popular Groups: Colombia**

The Colombian experience differs in almost every respect. As pointed out earlier, in Colombia Catholic elites are hostile to the theory and practice of autonomous popular groups. In this regard, they are like the nation's social and political elites generally, whose ideologies and key institutions (e.g. political parties) encourage dependent vertical ties and clientelistic relations. When autonomous groups do arise, they are rejected. More importantly, prevailing ideological and structural patterns in Colombia make the emergence of such alternatives unlikely in the first place. Whatever grassroots groups do exist are carefully nurtured along lines which preclude or inhibit autonomy and any hint of spillover to social or political concerns and alliances. Further, unlike Brazil, where a substantial minority in the ecclesiastical elite has supported progressive movements, the Colombian hierarchy has been very unified, and has faced only scattered and sporadic challenges from popular groups, or from progressive clergy or pastoral agents.

This unity in the Colombian Church is built on a vigorous conservative project, stressing the centrality of hierarchy, authority, and unity around core Church institutions (bishops, priests, parishes, etc.). Rejection of popular groups rests on fear of their double-edged political potential. The bishops dislike and fear the possible "political" consequences of grassroots activism. They fear even more the challenge such groups pose to established relations of power and authority within the church. These fears reinforce one another, and together have shaped recent Colombian experience. The end result is that any kind of organization the Church has sponsored, from massive Catholic Action movements to student groups, unions, and now base communities, has been marked by concern for ideological and structural reliability. These are to be ensured by continued, subordinate links to hierarchical authority and thorough control over the training and orientation of intermediaries (priests, sisters, pastoral agents in general).

Just as the orientation of the Church has remained constant, so too the social and political order has also seen little dramatic change. Unlike Brazil, there has been no drastic imposition of authoritarianism, no dramatic restoration of democracy, no open clash of Church and state, and no sudden, sharp escalation of social and political conflict. The churches have neither sponsored activism, nor has activism been driven into them as a result of other pressures. Instead, since 1958 competitive electoral politics have been the rule. Facing a stable political order, with little threat from either revolution or severe repression, the Church in Colombia has pursued an aggressively conservative line, reaching out to capture new groups, domesticate their normal practice, and contain their social and political projection within sharply circumscribed limits.

Consistency of political rule and social organization has thus been matched by continuity in religious ideologies and structural norms. This is not a matter of survival alone: the Colombian Church does more than just survive. It is vigorously creative,



asserting and promoting its lines of action with great energy. All this suggests that a close look at popular groups and base communities in Colombia is likely to show a pattern whereby daily practice is held within relatively narrow limits, and also where any popular action or expression gets under way and operates with tight links to higher authorities.

Vertical control operates in two ways. First, initiatives and projects are monitored by reliable intermediaries and worked out in close coordination with official Church structures and agents. "Dangerous" or suspect alliances, coalitions, or extensions of religiously inspired activism into undesirable terrain are strongly discouraged. Control is further ensured by screening the possible religious character and legitimation of change from the start, and by organizing group life so that its normal practice reaffirms hierarchy and vertical links to established authority. Recall our earlier comment about the bureaucratic and ideological struggles which underly grassroots experience. In Colombia, the battles to train and orient leaders, to legitimize pastoral agents, to produce texts and discussion material, record cassettes, visit and monitor groups and the like have all been won by central Church institutions. Unreliable leaders and programs have been marginalized, and "dangerous" tendencies to autonomy nipped in the bud.

New leaders are sought out and trained with an eye to reliability and loyalty. The ideal group is always portrayed in tight connection to the Church (parish, priests, sisters, etc.) and painted as a seedbed for future clergy and sisters. The ideal member appears as a potential priest or sister, or more likely a lay minister or deacon in training (mini-clergy, if you will). In all these ways, the whole project of base groups is molded to fit existing parameters of Church structures and lines of authority. The theory and practice of democratization, so prominent in discussions of CEBs in many Latin American countries, are carefully kept out of the Colombian scene.

Colombian Catholic elites see many dangers in uncontrolled popular groups, but at the same time they recognize that popular groups are very much in fashion in Latin

American Catholicism today. To adapt to current trends without relinquishing security and control, the bishops themselves have sponsored group formation, often simply renaming existing groups "base communities". Wherever possible, the formation of new CEBs has been managed through highly controlled, very conservative organizations. Thus, official documents claim that thousands of CEBs exist, but a closer look reveals that what pass for base communities in Colombia most often arise out of movements like the Cursillos de Cristiandad, widely known for their stress on personal spirituality and deference to authority (Levine, 1981: 233-37).

In the larger ideological arena, the bishops have tried to capture the high ground, redefining concepts like "base" and "popular" in ways which underscore their subordinate role within larger hierarchical structures. Official visions of "ecclesial base communities" (in pastoral letters, training manuals, and the like) thus give place of preference to the ecclesial dimension, stressing loyalty to the Church. Notions of community run a close second, with the emphasis on the virtues of solidarity in small groups. Base appears mainly in terms of the lowest level of hierarchical structure (here the Church). Definitions of base in social class terms are absent, and the notion of a "popular Church" composed mainly of the poor and identified with them in struggles for justice and liberation is violently rejected.

Despite these constraints, change does get under way in Colombia, but not surprisingly, its effects remain mostly localized, concentrated above all in the growing personal horizons, and sense of dignity and self worth of individual members. To grasp the possibilities and limitations of the process, consider the life and times of one very poor, very devout peasant, Patricio Alvarez.<sup>12</sup>

Patricio Alvarez was born on March 17, 1930 in the hamlet of Agua Fría, where he lived all his life. His parents and grandparents also came from Agua Fría, a small agricultural settlement in the diocese of Facatativa, not far west of the capital city of Bogotá. About 300 people live in Agua Fría (in approximately 75 dwellings) and all of them make a living in some way from agriculture.<sup>13</sup> There is a small irregularly staffed school, but otherwise no services--no light, no electric power at all, no piped water, and of course no sewage or locally available medical care. Public transport comes only through a twice-a-day bus which, on its run between two larger towns will pick up and drop off Agua Fría's people on the road. From the "bus stop," it is about a twenty-minute uphill walk to the settlement. Residents go to Church in the nearby town of Quebradanegra; they sell their produce and buy goods and services in larger regional centers, above all Villeta.

Like many peasants in this region, Patricio Alvarez came to his deep religious involvement through a three day cursillo de cristiandad organized in 1972 by a Spanish priest, P. Román Cortes. This priest served the diocese of Facatativa as a roving missionary, holding cursillos, motivating individuals, and establishing small base communities in a number of rural parishes. We will have more to say about Román Cortes below. Here, it suffices to note his key role, and the very intense character of the cursillos he organized. If one asks Patricio and others in the initial groups about the cursillo, a common response brings up themes like these: we are bad, we became good; once full of vices, now we lead a moral life; we moved from darkness to light; now we know what it really means to be a good Christian.

Like Azuleika Sampaio, Patricio Álvarez has experienced great change through his participation in Church sponsored grassroots communities. Involvement in the CEB opened doors for Patricio to a new world of meaning and contacts far beyond the confines of Agua Fría. The changes have been many. For example, Patricio's limited knowledge of religion, mostly instilled by his mother, was greatly deepened and

broadened. He remembers learning religion as a child by rote: "You had to record questions and answers in your memory [lit. tape them]. But later I learned that Catholicism isn't learning prayers by rote, but rather that we have to incarnate prayers in ourselves, and live in them our actions." Patricio has had only five months of formal schooling in his entire life. Illiterate as an adult, as a result of the cursillo he learned to read and write in order to be able to know the Bible and participate in the life of the community. All his education has come through some Church-sponsored programs.

All the courses I have done have been Christian ones. My formation for entering society is owed entirely to the meetings in our hamlet... My spelling is still not well developed, but I love to read, and I love to write, especially to read. Reading is a great thing!

Raised in the closed environment typical of rural Colombia, over the last fifteen years Patricio Alvarez has travelled extensively to local and regional meetings and even to national Church sponsored encounters of base community leaders. He remains poor, ultimately dependent on very small scale, labor-intensive, unproductive farming. Don Patricio has worked hard all his life, and although his economic situation is little changed, he has become a recognized local and regional leader. He founded the CEB in Agua Fría, and helped establish a cooperative store to get around the high prices charged by local middlemen. He is an articulate, even eloquent man, respected by his neighbors, and able to take on great responsibilities. He is one of the very few peasants in the diocese to become a lay minister.

Patricio is very devout. He reads the Bible every day, "if only a little bit", and reads and discusses it with others in the weekly meeting of Agua Fría's CEB. He goes to mass every Sunday, prays regularly, and has made a number of pilgrimages, promises, and missions in the last 15 years. The position of lay minister is central to Patricio's view of the sense and worth of his own experience, and of the general purpose of group life. It is the foundation for all the rest.

To describe this as a foundation has several concrete meanings. First, it suggests that religious belief and responsibility, organized and mediated by the Church, undergirds everything else. Patricio's vision of his ministry is humble, and rests on a hierarchical, trickle-down theory of religious life. He knows that lay ministries were part of early Christianity, but then disappeared. The priests were careless, and let them slip into disuse.<sup>14</sup>

Later, during the pontificate of John XXIII, he convoked the Second Vatican Council, and in this Council they discovered that there had to be lay participation in the things of religion, that they (laity) could help in their own religious education, in so many aspects of the family, evangelizing in their own family. This is what we are called to. Later these documents began to come out, and the bishops distributed the documents to the parish priests, the priests started distributing them to us, we began interpreting them, and in this way I started to become aware and I committed myself.

Being a lay minister is important to Patricio Alvarez. "To me, this is a work of great responsibility. I have to be careful to call people. I try to know what is happening to them. I suffer to draw out the truth with them." Patricio weighs the value of group meetings and activities above all in terms of moral regeneration and self-help. In his eyes, Agua Fría appears much improved morally, moving away from vices like alcoholism to a sense of serious and sober community concerns. His personal goals are focused above all on the Church's specifically religious work:

The apostolate, concretely this year. To make myself useful to the Church, to be able to leave this hamlet for others, and promote the Christian movement. Thanks to this the Church noticed me and gave me the ministry.

And for the future?

To prepare myself better for the apostolate. I want nothing else. I don't care about things connected with the cooperatives, communal action, or any of that. It isn't important. I am going to dedicate myself entirely to the apostolate.

Group activities are rooted in Bible study. Each meeting begins with a Bible reading and discussion; then members move on to share experiences and to consider common problems and possible solutions. At first it was difficult: people were

accustomed to acting and working individually, or at best within a limited family circle. They couldn't get used to the idea of acting as a group without outside help. Returning to Agua Fría after the first cursillo with Román Cortes, they wondered:

How can we get started? Who will move us for these meetings? Who will read, and what? We also faced the problem that those who had not gone to the cursillo were jealous and suspicious. They even thought we were not Catholics anymore, but had joined some [Protestant] sect.

As the group developed over time, the normal round of participation and discussion uncovered shared problems, and has led to initiatives of mutual aid and self-help. There is a regular system of rotating voluntary labor, whereby members help one another (and especially poor residents of the area) in specific tasks like house building, harvest, provision for emergency medical bills, and the like. The agenda of group concerns arises in part from shared needs and experiences, and also from themes and programs circulated by the diocese. The diocese of Facatativa has an elaborate structure for reaching and monitoring the groups. There are regular visits, training sessions, and monthly meetings of group leaders in a regional center staffed by two sisters. The sisters play a critical mediating role. They interpret diocesan plans to the communities, facilitate contacts to higher levels, run the monthly meetings, and also visit the hamlets regularly to encourage leaders, and provide concrete advice on a wide range of topics. They are trusted completely by the communities. The sisters themselves see their work as all of a piece. In their view, any community action rests on prior spiritual regeneration and enhancement of the value of the family. According to Patricio, ties to the Church are "through the priest and concretely with Sister Sara. The diocese's plans often don't arrive, and if they are very difficult then Sister Sara is in charge of telling us how to carry them out."

In social terms, the group's main achievements to date have come by pooling labor to put up a small school and playing fields, and cooperative action to establish a

community store. The need for a store became apparent through discussion in group meetings.

At first, we only got together to read the Bible. Later, we started talking about our own family problems. We began to see that one of the problems everyone in our hamlet had was buying things in the markets, which every day is harder and more costly. Finally, we got the idea of creating the cooperative.

The cooperative began on a very small scale in 1975, with pooled resources to buy and sell at better prices in regional markets. Later the store was built, shelving put up and a stock of merchandise laid in. Patricio and others from Agua Fría have also joined an existing cooperative in the local town of Quebradanegra, and use their position to press for better prices and conditions.

If we ask about general social and political projections, and in particular about linkages to institutional politics, it is important to begin by noting the suspicion common throughout rural Colombia of "politics" and of explicitly political organization. This is partly a heritage of the well-known party-inspired violence which claimed hundreds of thousands of lives after 1948.<sup>15</sup> It also arises from active distrust of the motives of politicians and "big shots" generally. With rare exceptions, rural Colombia has little experience of political organization other than the traditional elite-led parties. Almost no one in Agua Fría has ever had contact with trade unions or with secondary associations of any kind apart from those sponsored by the Church.

Patricio's vision of politics is complex. He knows about national and international events, and mentions them regularly in conversation. Indeed, he draws much of his model of a good society and of the possibilities of self-moved change from Israel, whose experience of self-improvement and cooperatives fills him with admiration. Patricio has little faith in politicians and their promises, but no aspiration to other kinds of collective action or to alternative links to power which might change the political landscape in some basic way. He knows that many in Colombia view elections as irrelevant; that there is great abstention. But he votes in good faith: "When there are elections, I always vote for the

one I like the best, the one I prefer, who seems most committed, in spite of the fact that they have fooled us so often, that we have always been victims of trickery." In Patricio's eyes, people should struggle against exploitation and learn to help one another, but violence of any sort is ruled out.

For ten or eleven years now, I have dedicated myself to studying the situation. This has led me to rebellion, but to a Christian rebellion, a peaceful rebellion, not rebellion like those groups who say: No, I will not go along with the government any more, I will not go along with this group or with the other. I'll get a rifle or a revolver or even just a machete and go out to kill. No no, this is not what we are called to do.

Patricio's goals are simple and local: to live a moral life, to serve the Church and spread the Gospel, and to help his community where possible. He is aware of his poverty and lack of formal schooling, but no longer feels ashamed or ill at ease dealing with wealthy and powerful people. He has a strong sense of self-worth and dignity. Witness his account of the problems of sharing experiences with people from the larger towns. It is hard,

because in Villeta they are businessmen, people with money. It is very difficult to share with a group from Quebradenegra, because we are peasants, with no more than a few months of primary school, and over there are very well prepared people, university graduates, doctors and all that. But no matter, this year we had a one day get together with them, and they had to hang their heads before us. We bested them, we surpassed their level, and they were convinced. Economic resources don't matter at all, they have no effect on anything. Money is money, morals are morals.

There is little sign here of the traditional combination of personal passivity and public submission. Patricio has no awe of the wealthy and powerful. But he also has little drive to change the pattern of social relations. His energies go to moral regeneration and very small scale collective enterprises. Despite great poverty, (exacerbated lately by illness, especially arthritis) he has little sense of material deprivation. Patricio feels fulfilled: His world has changed, and he has a clear sense of himself as a person of dignity and realized potential. At age 55, he wants above all to do his duty, to serve God, the Church, his family and his community.



How can we summarize the experience of Patricio Alvarez, in ways which make sense for the issues being considered here? First, it is clear that the initial stimulus for change comes from religion, specifically from the intense conversion experience of the cursillo. Second, the critical changes are at the personal and small group level, and are found above all in a growing sense of self-worth, dignity, and capacity for action. Third, any kind of collective action is undertaken in close connection with the institutional church (diocese, parish, and especially the sisters). Fourth, both "protest" and "politics" in any conventional sense are absent or at best notably muted here. They are excluded from the initial structuring of experience, not represented in the discourse of the people, and not represented in their texts, discussion materials and conversations. Moreover, any horizontal contact to possible allies in social or political groups is simply not there.

The sorts of change exemplified by Patricio Alvarez make sense in the context of broader institutional patterns in Colombia as a whole, and more specifically in the region where Patricio lives and works. We have already commented in general terms on the nature of prevailing ideological and structural patterns in Colombia. Consider now the impact of the diocese of Facatativa.

On the Colombian Church scene, Facatativa is generally viewed as "progressive". The diocese is new (founded only in 1962) and its leaders have always stressed grassroots organization. Religious innovation (seeking to teach and spread the Gospel in new ways, encouraging lay participation) has been joined from the outset to encouragement of social and economic reform, especially through self-help programs. The diocese has put great resources into grassroots promotion.

In the early 1970s, along with two other dioceses, Facatativa was designated as a pilot experience in base community formation. Concretely this meant that local resources were channelled in this direction, in close coordination with the national programs and staff of the Bishops Conference. Religious personnel (especially sisters) were

concentrated in pilot parishes and communities, and charged there with stimulating and encouraging groups. Moreover, with financial help from Catholic Relief Services of the USA, and from various European sources, the diocese has underwritten a team of specialists (educator, catechist, cooperative expert, agronomist, teachers) who encourage and evaluate requests for help, get projects under way, and ultimately help direct and coordinate small scale self-help programs much like Agua Fría's community store.

All these efforts have been undergirded and knit together by a general stress on the formation of communities. Even before the general notion of CEBs was widely diffused, energies and resources in Facatativa were devoted to the formation of small groups of this kind throughout the peasant hamlets of the diocese. This is where the efforts of P. Román Cortes come in and help make sense of the whole. Let us consider his work in closer detail for a moment.

P. Román Cortes came to Facatativa from Spain in 1970 with the specific mission of stimulating base communities, and through them, spurring a general process of religious renovation and social change. He died of cancer in early 1982. In his memory, the diocese issued a book with his deathbed "messages" to clergy, (Cortes Tossal, 1982) pastoral agents, laity and the like, and also with remembrances of him and his work by friends and collaborators. These documents give extraordinary insight into the kind of base communities in Facatativa, and help understand how the experiences of someone like Patricio Alvarez took on a recognizably and distinctively Colombian form, even within the relatively "progressive" diocese of Facatativa.

Cortes' vision of base communities was firmly grounded in religious fundamentals. All communities were to begin through very intense religious renovation (hence, the cursillos) and operate subsequently in a way which made the sacraments, love of the Church, and attention to family and community (in that order) central. The

normal progression he foresaw thus took off from religious renovation, moved through a reorganization of family life and reinforcement of mutual support, and then evolved through concerns about ecology and community ending with cooperatives and self-help projects. He stresses constantly that the cursillos are only a means: "We do cursillos so that people will form groups and communities; we don't create communities so that people will go to cursillos. The community is the splendor of the garden whose gateway is the cursillo."

Exactly what sort of community is stressed here? What does it mean to form a community, to live in a community? Cortes stressed commitment to Christ and to the community. He acknowledges how hard this can be; and he urges CEBs to seek help and guidance from the Church. The whole apparatus of personnel and structures carefully created in Facatativa is there precisely to ensure a successful and harmonious convergence of religious and social renovation in the towns and villages of the diocese.

Learning to live in a communitarian way in such an individualistic world is not a matter of a moment. Do not despair! Try and try again. Seek the help of the Diocese. Seek the help of your parish priests to live in community. Try communitarian living. Learn to pray together, to love together, to share together the Word, the Mass, food, money, life, everything. Share everything personal, everything we know is part of being a person. Learn to share as brothers and sisters, and to form yourselves and help yourselves and commit yourselves together. Those who are already living a communitarian life will give you the message: commitment, commitment, commitment. No one can be a good cursillista who is not living in community, no one is truly living in community without commitment.

While the program of base communities covers much of the diocese, the scale and scope of any particular program is limited. The typical group agenda is constrained within clear boundaries. Once outside the immediate group of friends and neighbors, all ties are vertical, managed through sisters and clergy and reinforced by regular visits, training sessions, and the promotion of lay ministries as an ideal outcome. In Colombia, then, most religiously inspired grassroots activity remains deliberately bound to Church

structures and programs in a way which reinforces a hierarchical vision of the world, and in the process sets clear limits to the potential "political" impact of CEBs.

We do not mean to suggest that there is some normal progression from the religious to the explicitly political which is thwarted in Colombia. No sequence of any kind is inevitable, and none can be taken as "normal" by definition. Rather, our argument is that in Colombia (in contrast to much recent Brazilian experience), the particular legitimation and structuring of group activities makes such a progression unlikely. It does so above all by maintaining and reinforcing the hierarchical expectations so prominent elsewhere in the society. The Church in Colombia will not provide a source of new cultural orientations to authority. No matter how critical its stance on a given issue may be, no matter how strongly much injustice or inequality may be condemned, the process will always be one in which messages, orientations, and legitimations flow from the top down. This clearly fits the overall institutional and ideological pattern prevalent in Colombia, and makes it hard for any effective alliances or coalitions to form (or even be tried out or imagined) at the local level, through which grassroots religious groups could join forces and ideas with others.

This does not mean that the groups have no importance. But it does suggest that their significance is to be found mostly at the level of personal growth and somewhat in the informal politics of group relations. Left to their own devices, members do talk, share experiences, and come up with solutions. But the point is that they are hardly ever left to their own devices for long. At a minimum, the groups provide some space and a sense of legitimacy in a hostile or indifferent environment. They also help overcome the distrust and mutual suspicion endemic in rural Colombia. When Román Cortes first came to many towns and hamlets, people hid. The cursillos he started opened the communities and their inhabitants to new horizons. One woman in a parish near Patricio's put it this way:

Another thing. People here lived in fear. Fear of the army, of the guerrillas. This hasn't gone away, but it is better now. Now people talk among themselves with more confidence.

Why?

It must be the meetings. Because as for the rest, what is there, what is there? We don't even have a schoolteacher. The only thing that functions is this. This is the only way people can meet others apart from those in their hamlet (Interview, 30 March 1983).

To her, the Church is practically the only institution available, and certainly the only one worthy of trust. No other can be relied on for probity, moral rectitude, and caring about the interest of the people. This positive image rests in part on the diocese's active and innovative programs, and on the lasting influence of P. Román Cortes. It also reflects the basic legitimacy religion gives to any undertaking in this milieu. But without denigrating the worth of these achievements, we can still note that links to institutional politics, to the possibility of enduring collective organization, and hence to power are at best a weak reed here, as among grassroots groups generally in Colombia.

### Conclusions

The lives of Azuleika Sampaio and Patricio Alvarez have much to say about the churches, politics, and societies they live in. Although these two lives differ in many ways, consider a few of the more noteworthy similarities. Both are poor and started life with few advantages and many problems. Both have become leaders in their communities. Religion is central to the daily experience of both, and it was in part through the Church that both came to occupy their positions of leadership.

As noted earlier, both progressives and conservatives often question the authenticity of the religious motives of one another. But the tremendous power of religion in the lives of Azuleika and Patricio suggests how shallow such arguments are. Different kinds of religious experience, with different political implications, not only remain

central in the lives of hundreds of millions of Latin Americans; if anything, the vitality of religion is greater today than it was three decades ago. Religious institutions, and in particular the Catholic Church, have clearly changed to meet the challenges of the time.

Looking at Azuleika and Patricio together points up the great vitality of the Catholic Church in many Latin American countries. This vitality is by no means uniform: the energies go in opposite directions. Thus, the churches in Brazil and Colombia are both exemplars of religiously based dynamism, but they are working with remarkably different models of the Church. At the same time, each church does reach out in new ways to the poor, with kinds of grassroots initiatives that had few precedents in the past. The result, particularly in these two countries, is an institution that has become more dynamic than it was during most of its past history.

Religion was the common source for change in the lives of Azuleika Sampaio and Patricio Alvarez. But the content of their religious experience differs sharply, as does the nature of the religious institutions that sponsored the grassroots changes. Both individuals stress commitment to the local community, but the nature of this commitment, and the conception of faith which underlies it, are much at variance. Azuleika's faith demands an effort to fight for social justice. In the repressive context of the military regime of the 1970s, this effort required considerable courage. For Patricio, faith involves above all the search to better oneself and others in spiritual terms, and to help the local community. Azuleika's commitment to her community was expressed in her involvement in religious matters, but also through her leadership in popular movements. She perceives her political involvement as an expression of her faith; the neat analytical distinction between religion and politics thus dissolves somewhat in the unity of her thought and practice. Patricio, in contrast, finds his commitment to the community above all through his lay ministry.

These contrasting visions of faith have led to very different levels and directions of political activity. Azuleika has become one of the outstanding popular leaders in the seventh biggest Brazilian city; Patricio is not especially interested in politics. Azuleika's political life has involved her in a world of complex and sophisticated political debates, a world where the Left holds considerable sway; Patricio's political references are more traditional, and in any case far less central to his life. These differences are not simply idiosyncratic details in the lives of two people, but rather reflect and illuminate broader patterns in the Churches and societies. In the dozens of dioceses in Brazil where bishops have encouraged base communities, one encounters individuals like Azuleika. For the progressive clergy who have really let go of traditional clerical authority, she is something of a model lay leader. Patricio, is also something of a model lay leader in Colombia, where traditional authority lines remain unchallenged even as the Church has successfully incorporated greater mass involvement. Don Patricio represents what much of Colombia's hierarchy and clergy have sought: a stronger understanding of Catholic faith, a deeper commitment to the Church than were common in the past, coupled with an unswerving loyalty to Church leaders.

Each of these Churches has shown great vitality in the past fifteen years, but for quite different reasons. Since the early 1970s, Brazil has arguably had the most progressive Catholic Church in the world. It stood out for its defense of human rights, its trenchant criticisms of the military regime, and its panoply of grassroots innovations, most notably the CEBs. This was a traditionally weak Church along many parameters: number of priests, influence among vast sectors of the population, institutional development. The Church often was an object of state attempts to win support and legitimacy, but its pastoral work with the popular classes was particularly lacking. Through the CEBs, the Brazilian Church changed this, acquiring not only a greater influence among the popular classes, but also international attention for its innovations.

The Colombian Church was traditionally much stronger in its own society, but here the hierarchy has enhanced its own institutional strength in the years since the second Vatican Council, especially the late 1960s (Levine, 1985b). The conservative nature of the predominant theology in the Colombian Church can easily obscure the important changes which have been put into effect at the grass roots. While it is true that the Church remains conservative, its conservatism is more assertive, and its institutions more dynamic, than in the past. It is precisely this combination of conservatism and dynamism that have made the Colombian Church the "leading edge of the old wave." The political consequences of these changes are markedly more conservative and less salient in terms of popular mobilization, but the ecclesiastical and social implications of the new grassroots groups are not less important for that reason.

The vitality of the Colombian Church suggests a point generally overlooked by proponents of the popular church: conservatives do have popular appeal. In the past, conservative pastoral positions were associated with elitist stances that disdained the popular classes. But today there are many priests like Ramón Cortes in Latin America. These men are not political radicals, but they sympathize deeply with the poor, and find a great receptivity among them. Conservative ecclesiastical sectors clearly reject the politics and theology of radical Catholics, but have learned much from them about how to work with the poor. The result in many countries is escalating competition to control popular religious organizations; in the late 1960s, the conservatives were ill prepared to compete in this terrain.

In current battles to win popular sympathies and control the Church, conservatives and moderates have clearly gained the upper hand. As a result, throughout Latin America, progressive grassroots innovations are under attack. Conservative bureaucracies in CELAM and in the Vatican see them as undermining authority lines in the Church, and furthermore as interfering in politics in improper ways.



These concerns are most visible in the crisis atmosphere of Central America, especially in Nicaragua, where conflict is joined very sharply (Dodson, 1986; Crahan, forthcoming). But the Brazilian CEBs are also objects of considerable suspicion. This has been clear in many Vatican edicts, including the veto of two proposed Masses for use with popular groups; punishments of brothers Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, reknowned liberation theologians who have worked extensively with CEBs; and consistent support for bishops who oppose the more autonomous and progressive CEBs.

We have shown that the way CEBs evolve depends in great part upon the pastoral agents who work directly with them and upon the bishops. These developments are also conditioned by the broader political context; here too, we find differences between Brazil and Colombia. In both countries, popular organizations are peripheral to the main currents in political life. But in the late 1970s, new challenges to the traditional elitist pattern of popular exclusion emerged in Brazil. A more dynamic and autonomous labor movement emerged; peasant unions were formed and grew rapidly all over the country; and neighborhood associations also sprang up in great numbers. In terms of partisan politics, the Workers Party has captured the imagination of many grassroots activists. Although it has not become one of the biggest parties in Brazil, its presence represented a kind of political alternative unknown in Colombia (Keck, 1986). In the midst of many signs that the new democracy will be quite elitist, (Mainwaring, 1986b) this strengthening of popular initiatives is somewhat limited. But the point remains that in tandem with other grassroots groups, CEBs became a prominent part of the political scene (Ireland, 1983).

All this is hard to imagine in Colombia. Popular organizations there have shown less capacity to influence national politics, or even to forge enduring links to them. Moreover, there has been no shift in the pattern of political rule; no consistent transformation of religious ideologies or structures. Instead, older patterns are vigorously

reinforced in all areas: traditional civilian leadership persists, as does a pervasive stress on hierarchically dominated, paternalistic organizations in politics, social life, and in the churches. Sporadic challenges erupt, but without exception are easily contained and short-lived.<sup>16</sup> Like popular groups generally, CEBs sputter in Colombia. They have few consistent sponsors, no reliable or enduring allies, and face more or less continuous harassment. At the same time, the extreme vertical structuring of Colombian programs effectively precludes much spillover to social or political arenas. Coalitions with other groups are restricted, all significant action is cleared with the parish, and independent initiatives of any kind are actively discouraged. It is not always possible to control all groups, but the effort is strong and consistent, and fits well with the restrained and constraining ideological leadership the Church provides on national and regional levels.

In contrast to Brazil, popular initiatives and protest with religious roots in Colombia faced steady opposition from Church and political elites alike throughout the period. Most energies in this process went to promote control, not activism. For these reasons, as we have seen, popular groups in Colombia have rarely been able to accumulate a critical mass of moral and religious legitimacy for social action, not to mention practical experience, which together make for impact beyond the confines of the group itself.

Looking at Brazil and Colombia together highlights the central role institutional churches can play in stimulating, shaping, focusing, and often constraining popular initiatives. Bishops, priests, sisters, and pastoral agents of all kinds enjoy considerable prestige and legitimacy among popular groups. This popular acceptance gives them an edge in setting the agenda of such groups, and thereby giving a particular tone to the informal and implicit politics of popular practice. Moreover, even though progressive bishops are not always directly responsible for initiating grassroots pastoral groups, their support for--or at least toleration of--these groups has been indispensable. Whether the bishop supports pastoral agents in creating and working with base communities, and what

kinds of resources and attention are allocated to the CEBs, are critical issues in determining the role of grassroots groups in the Church and society.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>During the late 1960s and much of the 1970s, much theoretical work on Latin America focused on how elites dominated their societies. In particular, attention was devoted to dependency, the so called "new authoritarianism," the state, and multinational corporations. Although there were some good studies on the popular classes and the ways they resisted domination, this theme was subordinate. While the analysis of popular subjects was somewhat reflected by Latin Americanists during the 1970s, elsewhere it burgeoned. Although they were not the only sources of reflection in this subject, the British school of "history from below" (Thompson, 1964) and the work of Michel Foucault (1980) were highly influential. A major recent statement in this line is Scott, 1986. In recent years, there has been much new research on popular religion and politics across a wide range of regions, disciplines, and intellectual traditions. For detailed comment see Levine, 1986d.

<sup>2</sup>On Brazil, see Mainwaring, 1986b; Bruneau, 1974, 1982, 1985, 1986; Della Cava, 1978 and forthcoming; and Souza Lima, 1979. On Colombia see Levine, 1981, 1985b, 1986c; Wilde, 1986.

<sup>3</sup>In this sense, while we agree with Foucault (1980) that there are multiple loci of power (and politics) in society, we believe that these are more concentrated than he suggests, and have a logic of domination that clearly favors some groups and classes over others. Institutions are critical, and while we center attention here on informal politics and popular groups, we stress the critical nature of their linkage to institutions.

<sup>4</sup>Of course, the centrality of religious motivation to political action does not apply exclusively to one side of the religious spectrum. Frequently, sympathizers of the "liberationist" Church recognize the religious motives of Catholic radicals, but see the actions of conservative religious leaders as inspired by purely political considerations (eg. defending the status quo). Conversely, conservative critics often charge that radicals use religion for political purposes when generally the opposite is true, i.e., the radicals act politically out of religious conviction. Although there may be isolated cases of individuals who use religion for instrumental purposes, at both ends of the spectrum, religious motivation must be taken seriously.

<sup>5</sup>We discuss CEBs in detail in Levine, 1984a, 1984b, 1986b; and Mainwaring, 1986b (chs. 5, 7-9). See also Bruneau, 1980; Betto, 1981; C. Boff, 1979; L. Boff, 1977; Ferreira de Camargo, et al., 1980; Hoomaert, 1978; Ireland, 1983; Souza Lima, 1982.

<sup>6</sup>Of course, not all cases followed so stark and clear a path. The case studies of Brazil and Colombia, presented below, show how different the sources and pathways of religion and politics turn out to be in each case. Brazil is close to the trajectory just outlined; a progressive Church became more progressive and more attuned to the popular classes because of political closure. In Colombia, on the other hand, a consistently conservative Church fears and distrusts popular initiatives. The generally open and clientelistic character of Colombian politics reduces the opportunities and legitimation for popular action.

<sup>7</sup>Although a plethora of (mostly non-critical) literature on CEBs has emerged, there is still a relative paucity of information on the origins of CEBs. An analysis of the precursors to CEBs in Brazil is Teixeira, 1982.

<sup>8</sup>The most visible exception to this generalized pattern has occurred in Nicaragua, where much of the grass roots Church has expressed a rejection of the conservative bishops and the pope. Even here the evidence is far from conclusive. Apart from the possible Nicaraguan example, the only exceptions have occurred in situations where an already well institutionalized network of grass roots groups came into conflict with a new bishop who attempted to curtail CEB activities.

<sup>9</sup>El Salvador and Nicaragua represent exceptions here. In both countries, the explosive political situation eventually led most grass roots Catholic activists to engage in institutional politics. On CEBs in El Salvador, see Cáceres, (1982) and also Berryman, 1986. On Nicaragua, see Dodson, 1986; Crahan, forthcoming; Williams, forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup>This account is based on formal interviews Mainwaring did with Azuleika Sampaio on March 27, 1981; June 6, 1981; and December 20, 1985. Numerous informal discussions with Sampaio also provided some basis for reflection. Additional information came from other interviews Mainwaring conducted in Nova Iguaçu. For a detailed discussion of the Church and the popular movement in Nova Iguaçu, see Mainwaring, 1986b, Chapter 8, and Mainwaring, forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup>Bruneau, 1986, provides support for this assertion. He analyzed a large sample of CEB participants in the Amazon and found that their voting patterns and political behavior in general was more critical than that of the population at large.

<sup>12</sup>This account is based on three interviews Levine conducted with Patricio Alvarez on 19 November 1982, 6 January 1983, and 15 January 1983. Information also comes from other interviews Levine conducted in Agua Fría, in the region around it, and throughout the diocese of Facatativa.

<sup>13</sup>Most residents engage in small scale, labor intensive farming. Major products are coffee, sugar cane, and a locally processed crude brown sugar known as panela.

<sup>14</sup>Patricio's account is reminiscent of Alberto Gruson's (1980: 233) characterization of conservative pastoral strategies: "There is a kind of catechism whose goal seems to be to convince the student that he knows nothing, that the catechist knows more (but not much), that in turn who really knows is the sister, who knows more than the sister is the priest; he in turn is subject to the superior knowledge of the theologian controlled by the bishops; and episcopal declarations frequently cite the Pope. [There is] a practically static stratification, like a caste system, based on learning more in its transmission than in its elaboration." On this point, see also Segundo, 1978 and L. Boff, 1986.

<sup>15</sup>On the violence, see Levine and Wilde, 1977. For a detailed account of the precipitating incident, see the oral histories collected in Alape, 1983. A useful account of the violence in towns and provinces is Sanchez, 1983.

<sup>16</sup>Indeed, challenges may be more extreme in Colombia given the tremendous weight of conservative domination. The well-known short and sad career of Camilo Torres is a case in point. While Camilo Torres remains a powerful symbol for radical political Catholicism in Latin America, it is important to recall that the politics he promoted had little in common with the grass roots movements discussed here. Camilo Torres tried to fashion a broad political movement, using his image as a priest as a magnet for popular support. He attracted little effective support, and left no enduring legacy of organization. On Camilo Torres, see Levine, 1981: 41-44, and the sources cited there. See also Levine, 1986e.

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