



RELIGIOUS CHANGE AND WOMEN'S STATUS IN LATIN AMERICA:

**A Comparison of Catholic Base Communities
and Pentecostal Churches**

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Working Paper #205 - March 1994

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ABSTRACT

The last twenty years have seen the emergence in Latin America of two religious trends that challenge the traditional Catholic culture. These are the Catholic *comunidades eclesiales de base* (base communities or CEBs) and Protestant pentecostal religious groups. The author examines the ways in which women's experiences in CEBs and pentecostal groups may change their gender attitudes and roles and describes the new forms of symbolic and participatory opportunities for women within each group. Do women respond to these opportunities by demanding greater access to traditionally male roles in the religious and public spheres? On the other hand, do women tend to gain greater stature and authority in their more traditional roles within the family as a result of their participation in religious groups? The author finds that while both CEB and pentecostal women reconceptualize gender roles, the two religious settings produce different outcomes. Due to the heterogeneity of available sources and methods, the analysis offers necessarily tentative conclusions. It does yield interesting and suggestive contrasts between the two religious groups, however, which can inform both theory and future empirical research.

RESUMEN

En los últimos veinte años han surgido en Latinoamérica dos corrientes religiosas que ponen a prueba la cultura católica tradicional. Estas son las comunidades eclesiales de base católicas (CEB) y los grupos religiosos pentecostales protestantes. El autor analiza la manera en que las experiencias de las mujeres en las CEB y en los grupos pentecostales pueden cambiar las actitudes y los roles de su propio género y describe las nuevas formas de oportunidades simbólicas y participativas que tienen las mujeres dentro de cada grupo. ¿Acaso las mujeres responden a estas oportunidades solicitando un mayor acceso a roles tradicionalmente masculinos en las esferas religiosa y pública? Por otro lado, ¿Acaso las mujeres tienden a adquirir mayor importancia y autoridad en sus roles más tradicionales dentro de la familia como resultado de su participación en grupos religiosos? El autor encuentra que mientras ambos grupos de mujeres, los de las CEB y los pentecostales, reconsideran los roles de su propio género, los dos escenarios religiosos producen diferentes resultados. Debido a la heterogeneidad de las fuentes y métodos disponibles, el análisis necesariamente ofrece conclusiones tentativas. Sin embargo, proporciona contrastes interesantes y sugerentes entre los dos grupos religiosos que pueden ser útiles para la investigación teórica y empírica futura.

Latin America's culture, including its gender ideology, has been described as deeply rooted in Mediterranean Catholicism. Many scholars claim that traditional Catholicism reinforces women's subordination, particularly their exclusion from public life (Stevens 1973; Molyneux 1985; Goldsmit and Sweeney 1988).¹ Religion and culture, however, are never static. In the past twenty years two religious trends have emerged, challenging traditional Catholic culture. One, the *comunidades eclesiales de base* (base communities or CEBs), is associated with liberation theology and comes from within the Catholic Church. The other, the growth of Protestant pentecostal religious groups, is an external challenge.²

Base communities and pentecostalism offer members strikingly different, alternative religious interpretations of prevailing cultural norms (Stoll 1990; Cleary 1992). Many authors have debated whether CEBs and pentecostals are altering popular economic and political beliefs and behavior.³ Less attention has focused on the groups' impact on gender attitudes and roles, perhaps because many feminists have criticized religion as "the major cultural reinforcer of modern industrial patriarchy" (Briggs 1987: 408).⁴ From this view, neither group would be likely to alleviate women's subordination.

More recent studies of religion and gender, however, show the ways in which religion can empower women. Scholars in this area are recognizing that religions are not monolithic belief systems but multifaceted sets of often contradictory or conflicting symbols open to a range of interpretation. Even religions that are quite conservative in their explicit gender attitudes contain elements that women can and do utilize to combat subordination.⁵

This paper examines the ways in which women's experiences in CEBs and pentecostal groups may change their gender attitudes and roles. Section one describes the symbolic and participatory opportunities that each group offers women. Section two examines the responses to these opportunities and argues that, while both CEB and pentecostal women reconceptualize gender roles, the two religious settings produce different outcomes.

The analysis is pre-theoretical. Few specific hypotheses about the relationship between religion and the conceptualization of gender roles have been put forward. In addition, with the exception of Cornelia Butler Flora's pioneering study (Flora 1975), no direct comparative research exists. The evidence here on CEBs is drawn primarily from the author's case study of women in

¹ By 'traditional Catholicism' I mean both pre-Conciliar and popular Catholicism. That is, the official doctrine and instruction of the Catholic Church prior to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the unofficial folk religion practiced by the urban and rural poor.

² The term 'external' applies to the Catholic Church, not the region. Many pentecostal groups are led by Latin Americans and are in many senses quite 'indigenous.'

³ David Stoll comments that liberation theology and the CEBs are usually identified with 'reformation,' and the evangelical Protestants, perhaps especially pentecostals, are cast as the 'counter-reformation' (Stoll 1990: 22). Examples of the debate over the economic and political impact of the groups include, in addition to Stoll: Kohpahl 1989; Mariz 1988; Novaes 1985.

⁴ Although little attention has been paid to this aspect of religious change, several works address the issue tangentially. On women in base Christian communities, see Drogus 1991 and Burdick 1990. On Protestant women, see Burdick, Brusco 1986 and Van den Eykel 1986. Flora (1975) is the earliest comparative work.

⁵ See, for example, Lawless 1988a and 1988b.

Brazilian CEBs, while the evidence on pentecostals comes from studies conducted by others throughout the region. Because of the heterogeneity of sources and methods, the conclusions are necessarily tentative. The analysis, however, yields interesting and suggestive contrasts that can inform both theory and future empirical research.

I. Pentecostal Sects and CEBs as Sites of Cultural Change

Edward Cleary suggests that rapid social change makes Latin Americans “ready for new forms of social organization and of social meaning,” and “[p]entecostal protestants and reform Catholics offer both...” (Cleary 1992: 183). These groups may be particularly important agents of resocialization for women, who comprise the majority of active participants in both (Drogus 1991; Brusco 1986; Mariz 1989). Women, as the bearers of tradition and religious belief in prevailing gender ideology, may find *religious* institutions particularly salient to legitimizing new gender roles and values. Moreover, husbands in many cases would not be as supportive of women’s activities outside the home if these were not *religious* activities. As Flora notes, women can potentially utilize the legitimacy and respectability of religion to expand their extra-domestic activities (Flora 1975: 418).

Religious institutions can contribute to changing attitudes through two means. First, reinterpretations of doctrine or symbols that challenge prevailing cultural norms may alter the religious individual’s world view. Second, religious groups can offer new organizational or participatory structures, drawing people into new roles. Pentecostalism and CEBs have quite distinct religious world views, as the options they present to women will show. Yet both offer new ideas and new roles that women can utilize to reinterpret gender norms.

A. Religious ideas and gender

Elizabeth Brusco calls pentecostal churches’ extraordinary attention to the domestic sphere a “feminine ethos” (Brusco 1986).⁶ Pentecostals stress traditional gender roles, particularly motherhood, rather than challenging them (Flora 1975: 415). They offer practical advice on how to be a better wife and mother through special classes, campaigns, and even magazines. Pentecostal churches in Guatemala, for example, offer a women’s magazine “designed ‘to help women fulfill their God-given feminine destinies’” (Martin 1990: 220). This ethos may attract women converts, who perceive the churches as addressing issues that fall to women in the traditional gender-based division of labor (Brusco 1986: 218).

The religious message is not clear-cut, however. Pentecostal churches also leave an opening for defining women’s domestic roles in a more egalitarian way. Colombian pentecostal churches illustrate the ambiguity of messages about appropriate family roles. Most cite scriptural authority to support the argument that men should have authority over women, but church educational materials also encourage more egalitarian relations within marriage (Van den Eykel

⁶ Brusco suggests this emphasis may result from women’s early involvement in directing the pentecostal churches.

1986: 327-28). Maintaining men's 'ultimate' authority in principle may make the egalitarian familial model more palatable to Colombian men (Van den Eykel 1986: 331). It may preserve male ego while fostering greater equality for women within the household.

In addition, the religious community in some senses becomes the ultimate arbiter for pentecostal couples. Men are the nominal heads of the household but both men and women must submit to the will of God, usually as interpreted through the church. The pastor and the church community can exercise considerable influence over domestic behavior, particularly through public prophetic denunciation. Women, then, can turn to a higher authority in the church in case of domestic disputes. This potentially equalizes male and female relationships.

Pentecostalism's scriptural notion of equality before Christ more directly contradicts female subordination. Pentecostals accept the 'priesthood of all believers': men and women may be called to preach and may do so with equal authority. As Flora suggests, the fact that women are equally called to preach implies a public role for them in spreading the faith (Flora 1975: 416). As we shall see, churches often restrict women's roles in practice. However, the belief in women's equal religious potential provides grounds for enhanced status in both church and family (Van den Eykel 1986: 337; Flora 1980: 92). Women can claim religious inspiration and justification for challenging male authority. Cecilia Lawless has shown, for example, that American women pentecostal preachers exploit the "tension between the God-given inferiority of women submissive to men and the belief in equality before God" to pursue independent, nontraditional paths (Lawless 1988b: 145-46).

In contrast to the pentecostal groups, the CEBs' influence in defining familial roles is highly attenuated. The dominant ethos in the CEBs is created by liberation theology rather than by concerns with personal and familial morality.⁷ Liberationist priests rarely mention domestic issues in their sermons, preferring to focus instead on 'large political and social issues' of interest in the class-based analysis of liberation theology (Burdick 1990: 160). Moreover, Catholic families do not often turn to the priest to resolve domestic issues, since men have little regard for clerical opinions (Burdick 1990: 158).

The CEBs concern themselves primarily with class and community, rather than family. This means that only certain types of domestic problems are likely to be confronted. 'Moral' problems such as alcoholism or adultery are not a usual topic. However, many CEB members are deeply moralistic, and they express particular concern over two scourges of poor youth: criminality and drugs. Unemployment, education, health, and general financial difficulties also provide frequent subjects because they naturally arise as people attempt to understand class issues concretely.⁸ These problems are generally interpreted not as moral or personal but in the

⁷ Family issues are generally left to the Pastoral Familiar and its marriage and prenuptial counseling (Padilha 1982: 197-198). Although these services are available to CEB members, few seem to take part in them. One interviewee in São Paulo had participated in marriage encounters, but she was not a CEB member.

⁸ Burdick claims that 'domestic problems' are never discussed in the CEBs (Burdick 1990: 158). My respondents, in contrast, often said that they lost their embarrassment and began to mobilize about their economic problems precisely when they discovered that others in the CEBs were in the same boat. Illnesses are also frequently discussed. Burdick may be correct that some types

context of the shared problems of working-class families—a context that tends to politicize them (Mariz 1989).

Although less directly concerned with public and private, male and female roles than the pentecostal 'feminine ethos,' the CEBs' sociopolitical ethos is relevant for conceptualizations of gender roles. Like the pentecostals, the CEBs promote a gender discourse that mixes traditional and nontraditional views of women's role. On the one hand, the CEBs call upon women as 'conscientized Catholics' to take up new social roles, acting in a more equal fashion in the public sphere. This, like the pentecostals' commitment to women preaching, does not reflect any feminist influence. Rather, it results from an undifferentiated appeal to believers to take up the social struggle in a situation where that appeal is made to a predominantly female laity (Drogus 1990).

At the same time as they encourage women to become politically active, the CEBs often reinforce ideas that inhibit a reconceptualization of women's roles. Liberation theology initially ignored sexism as a source of oppression. When theologians began to turn their attention to women as a special group within the poor, they often portrayed women in 'essentialist' terms. CEB discourse rarely speaks of women's 'God-given feminine destinies' as pentecostals do. Reflection materials frequently assert, however, that women have 'special roles' and 'special talents' that spring from their biological role as mothers. As Sonia Alvarez notes, the 'essentialist' interpretations of women's roles in the CEBs "do not question the socially constrictive, exclusive identification of women with maternity and the family" (Alvarez 1990: 388).⁹

The class emphasis of liberation theology often leads to a neglect of specific problems suffered by women. In a 1983 pastoral campaign dealing with street crime in São Paulo, "the specific sexual violence suffered by women was never addressed" (Alvarez 1990: 389). Similarly, though the 1984 campaign addressed the specific oppression suffered by different groups—Blacks, Indians, workers, youth, women—the campaign materials presented women as oppressed only in the sense that society denied them the resources to meet their families' needs. Moreover, while other groups were exhorted to organize themselves, women were told to support their husbands rather than 'standing alone' (Drogus 1990).¹⁰

of domestic problems—adultery and alcoholism, for example—would not be raised in public. But 'domestic problems' more broadly defined are.

⁹ Male theologians have begun to include women in the list of oppressed and to discuss sexism, but the essentially Marxist basis of their analysis remains unchanged. In an effort to recognize women's rights within the Church, however, Leonardo Boff argued that there is no decisive argument against the ordination of women (Sigmund 1990: 84).

¹⁰ Latin American women are producing a feminist theology that is rooted in but also critical of liberation theology. The Second Feminist Encounter for Latin America and the Caribbean included a workshop on "Patriarchy and the Church" which challenged liberation theologians to address the structures of patriarchy, rather than just adding women as one more marginalized sector of the working class (Van den Eykel 1986: 315). From this movement we can perhaps conclude that, at least for more educated women, experiences in the liberationist church have opened possibilities for rethinking the church's traditional construction of gender roles. Feminist theology, however, generally does not trickle down to the base communities. In fact, women in Brazilian CEBs were unaware even of liberationist treatments of Mary, let alone feminist interpretations (Drogus 1991).

In sum, pentecostalism and the liberationist church offer some ideas that move in the direction of reconceptualizing women's gender roles. However, these are embedded in beliefs that largely reinforce those traditional roles. Nonetheless, both groups offer women unaccustomed opportunities for leadership within the religious organization that could contribute to their empowerment.

B. New forms of religious participation for women

Three broad points can be made in comparing women's opportunities for participation in the two groups. First, both are strongly based on women and their networks. We have already noted the numerical predominance of women in both CEBs and pentecostal sects. Second, they legitimize an expansion of women's extra-domestic activities and offer new opportunities for participation in higher status, leadership roles. Finally, however, both groups continue to restrict women's participation above a certain level, both by institutional rule and informally.

Given women's predominance in the two groups, it is not surprising that each affords opportunities for women to lead other women. Both Brazilian CEBs and Colombian pentecostal churches encourage the formation of mothers' or women's clubs (Brusco 1986: 216). In poor churches with few resources, discretion over the women's club earnings can represent a substantial source of power.

Pentecostal *cultos a domicilio*, religious services held in the home, and CEB *grupos de rua*, neighborhood prayer groups held at home, are largely women's organizations as well (Brusco 1986: 212; Drogus 1991). Women can lead religious services in the *cultos* or consciousness-raising discussion in the *grupos*. Through such activities, they may learn valuable practical skills, including public speaking, and they may also gain an important measure of confidence.

Participation and status in women's groups is one thing; opportunities in the church as a whole may be quite another. Yet even in mixed groups, women find opportunities to enhance their status. Pentecostal women, for example, can attain leadership and status by becoming faith healers (Conway 1980: 21-22). Pentecostal groups have also long presented important opportunities for women in nontraditional preaching roles. Their tradition of female evangelism includes the woman who brought pentecostalism to Mexico (Martin 1990: 166). Another woman, Aimee Semple McPherson, founded a major pentecostal church, the Foursquare Gospel.

Flora noted nearly twenty years ago that pentecostalism's teaching and preaching opportunities "allow a greater status for women in the same fields of activity which grant status to men" (Flora 1975: 418). In contrast, Catholicism historically offered few leadership opportunities inside the official church structure (Flora 1975: 417). Holy women who led prayers or blessed people were a vibrant part of folk religion, but the Church did not officially recognize their roles (Myscofski 1985). In the CEBs, however, lay women as well as men can organize and lead the official Sunday celebrations conducted in the absence of a priest.

In both organizations, though, women's access to leadership roles continues to be significant but restricted. So long as the Catholic Church bans female ordination, women,

including women religious, will be barred from the top echelons of church roles. Some Protestant churches have no formal ban on ordination, but all seem informally to proscribe women's leadership above a certain level. Because some leadership roles are based on charisma, for example, a woman can preach. In some churches she may not be considered capable of exercising scriptural authority, however, so she cannot pastor. Women also lack access to administrative positions based on working one's way through the ranks, as some key ranks are closed to them (Conway 1980: 21-22; Novaes 1985: 58 fn 17). In short, religion does not open new career or income opportunities for either Catholic or pentecostal women (Mariz 1989: 148).

Despite these limitations, both groups hold a potential for women to engage in nontraditional roles that confer status on both men and women; to take leadership positions; and to participate actively in extra-domestic activities. The legitimizing context of religion may provide a bridge to expanding roles by offering leadership opportunities and skill, as well as a potential justification for greater equality for women in the form of new beliefs about women's worth and roles as Christians. Both CEBs and pentecostal churches offer opportunities to women, but always in context that reasserts traditional values and circumscribes roles as well. The next section explores the ways in which women respond to this mixture of opportunity and traditionalism.

II. Pentecostal and CEB Women: Changing Gender Roles and Attitudes

Women can reconceptualize gender roles in a number of ways, each of which may contribute to enhancing their independence and power. Two questions may help to focus the comparison here. First, do women expand the church opportunities considered 'appropriate' to them by demanding greater access to and equality in traditionally male roles? Second, do they demand greater equality and status within the roles traditionally ascribed to them?

A. Pentecostal women

Religious opportunities are potentially empowering, bridging women's adoption of new roles in other spheres. But to what extent do women take advantage of the new religious roles available to them? Women are crucial to the maintenance and expansion of pentecostal churches. They are active in the single sex organizations, and many devote considerable time to these groups, some in leadership roles (Brusco 1986; Ireland 1991). Women's groups in Colombian pentecostal churches "took on the lion's share of responsibility for the church" (Brusco 1986: 216). Their activities included fundraising, evangelization, social welfare, maintaining the church, and holding midweek women's services. While much of this activity simply replicates women's domestic roles, it may also enhance their status within the church. Moreover, such groups may give women greater skills and enhance their sense of efficacy in bringing about change (Flora 1975: 424).

In Colombia, women are also the key recruiters bringing others into the church. For this reason, pentecostal churches can be described as largely family- and neighborhood-based

(Brusco 1986: 212). Women's groups sometimes even produce vibrant new churches. In Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, for example, a 2,000 member neopentecostal church originated in a Presbyterian women's prayer circle that broke with the parent church to form its own organization (Kohpahl 1989).

Given the critical roles women play in maintaining, expanding, and founding pentecostal churches, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the question of whether they adopt the teaching and preaching roles theoretically available to them. Women pastors, and even lay teachers, could gain skills useful in other public roles. Women with little experience beyond a neighborhood or village may learn how to function independently in a wider realm because their religious vocation legitimizes—and for pastors may even necessitate—traveling alone (Flora 1975: 418).

The potential for women leaders is significant in pentecostal churches, but women do not seem to respond to the opportunities in great numbers. Some women act as pastors in the Foursquare Gospel churches in Colombia, usually serving jointly with their husbands (Van den Eykel 1986: 331). Women are less prominent at the local level, however, than the policy and perceptions of the national Foursquare Gospel church leaders would suggest (Van den Eykel 1986: 232). This church, at least, apparently offers more leadership roles to women than they actually utilize. Moreover, except for a few individual examples mentioned elsewhere in the literature, it appears that in general pentecostal women are not notably active as preachers or leaders outside of sex-segregated prayer groups.¹¹

Little attention has been focused on whether pentecostal women attempt to expand their roles in the nonreligious public sphere. Most pentecostals, like most CEB members, are poor; on average, in fact, they may be somewhat poorer than their CEB counterparts (Mariz 1989). Thus it seems likely that many pentecostal women are employed outside the home. However, like most poor Latin American women, they probably see this not as a desirable expansion of their roles or a key to independence but as an undesirable burden borne primarily to help their children (Durham 1980; Caldeira 1984).

Researchers have also failed to ask whether pentecostal women take on new roles in traditionally 'male' areas like politics. This may reflect the conclusion that pentecostals generally appear mistrustful of and not involved in organized political activity. No evidence of political activism by pentecostal women has emerged. However, women from Catholic and various Protestant denominations in Colombia have about the same level of political interest.¹² One clear theme emerges from the numerous portraits of pentecostal life: while they do not attempt to expand their roles, pentecostal women seek to improve their position within the domestic sphere. In fact, most studies of pentecostals point to improved family relations as a benefit of

¹¹ Novaes (1985) provides an example of leadership. Brusco (1986) and Ireland (1991) show women active in sex-segregated groups.

¹² Specifically, there is little difference between women from Protestant denominations that support women's participation and Catholic and Protestant groups that do not (Van den Eykel 1986).

conversion.¹³ The implications of these conclusions for women's status and equality, however, are not clear. Pentecostalism may simply diffuse tension by legitimizing a clearly defined, submissive female role (Burdick 1990: 163). Alternatively, pentecostal women may gain greater stature and authority in the home as their perspective and hierarchy of values is reinforced by the pentecostal moral code.

Most authors support the second interpretation. Brusco argues that conversion empowers Colombian women in their family relations (Brusco 1986). Colombian Protestant families, generally, communicate more and "women, particularly, benefit from this increase in status through inclusion" (Van den Eykel 1986: 337). Van den Eykel concludes that these familial patterns reinforce church teachings that make the man more responsible to the family, and that this in turn facilitates communication and confidence between spouses.

Researchers have often noted a particular long-term strategy pentecostal women adopt to stabilize their households. They attempt to capture a larger share of male income for the sustenance of the family.¹⁴ Goldin and Metz found that, in their conversion stories, Guatemalan women pentecostals generally focused on the problems created by male family members' drinking (Goldin and Metz 1991: 328). Women converts frequently hope to convert their husbands as well, in order to change their behavior (Burdick 1990: 164). Regaining control of income spent on alcohol and extramarital affairs can be of considerable importance to a working-class family in a society in which such activities are a source of male prestige.

While all poor women no doubt hope that they can gain greater control over their husbands' incomes, pentecostal women have a number of advantages in doing so, particularly if they successfully convert their husbands. Emilio Willems noted long ago that the asceticism and moral code expected of pentecostal converts is actually quite consonant with the traditional behaviors and values assigned to women in Latin America. Male converts are essentially called upon to adopt female moral norms (Willems 1967). They must adopt a more ascetic consumption pattern, renouncing spending on drink or women. As Brusco points out, they must bring their spending into line with female preferences for spending on family consumption (Brusco 1986: 200).

Pentecostal communities and ministers can also exert considerable pressure on members' moral behavior and would generally do so in a way that brings men's behavior into line with women's expectations (Novaes 1985; Brusco 1986; Burdick 1990). Women often appear to be the beneficiaries when families submit their disputes to church authorities who endorse a 'female' moral code. Even in such a controversial area as birth control, when Colombian Protestant couples turn to church counseling services regarding birth control, counselors usually support the woman's desire for birth control over the man's objections (Van den Eykel 1986: 326-27).

¹³ Perhaps the earliest study to strike this theme is Willems 1967.

¹⁴ This argument is clearly and fully explicated in Brusco (1986). Other research, including Burdick (1990, 1992) and Goldin and Metz (1991), reaches the same conclusions.

Moreover, a survey comparing two Colombian Protestant denominations that promote substantial religious roles for women (Presbyterians and Foursquare Gospel) with denominations that do not revealed that the women from those two denominations exhibited more autonomy and greater rejection of traditional gender stereotyping of family roles.¹⁵ For example, only seven percent of Presbyterian and Foursquare Gospel women said women should be obedient to their husbands, in contrast to 36 percent of women from other denominations (Van den Eykel 1986: 341). Only 4 percent believed that home duties were exclusively the wife's in contrast to 27 percent of other religious women (Van den Eykel 1986: 340). The overall number of respondents who reject traditional gender assumptions is itself notable, but the women from more inclusive churches still stand out.

Pentecostalism promotes little expansion of women's traditional roles. What is more interesting, however, is that pentecostal women do reconceptualize *men's* roles.¹⁶ Pentecostalism expands men's roles to include more substantial participation and responsibility in the private sphere (Mariz 1989: 196). The practical impact of harmonizing men's and women's expectations and objectives within the family may be greater consultation and equality between husband and wife (Brusco 1986: 198). Thus, although apparently the conceptualization of appropriate women's roles is not expanded, pentecostal women may gain greater power and stature in the home and in the religious community.

B. CEB women

CEB women appear more likely to expand their definition of appropriate roles to include those in the public sphere than pentecostals. The difference should not be overstated, because CEB members differ in the extent to which they adopt new roles and attitudes. Even in religion, however, the evidence suggests that CEB members may respond more enthusiastically than pentecostals to the available opportunities to expand and reconceptualize their roles.

Like their pentecostal counterparts, women in CEBs play a critical role in maintaining and expanding the groups' activities. In the Brazilian CEBs this author studied, for example, women's prayer groups commonly formed the first nucleus of the base community. One member described her community's history:

Ten years ago the *cúria* gave this land to us. And we were just women who met to reflect on the Gospel. And they offered this land to us, and we accepted, but we didn't know what to do. Then, we began to clear off the brush, we got enthusiastic...and then we managed to get the men involved through the construction... (Interview conducted by the author #01-29.04.86)

In addition to being instrumental in founding the groups, mothers' clubs in these CEBs run them on a day-to-day basis. They perform virtually identical activities to pentecostal groups and are so

¹⁵ Only the Foursquare Gospel is pentecostal, but Van den Eykel does not suggest any evidence of a difference between the two groups (Van den Eykel 1986).

¹⁶ Flora also noted that the reconceptualization of men's roles under pentecostalism is more dramatic and clear than that of women's (Flora 1975: 414-15).

crucial to maintaining the community's life that many people commented that "if the Mothers' Club closes its doors, the CEB will close" (Drogus 1988).

In contrast to pentecostals, CEB women appear to be more heavily involved in religious activities in sex-integrated groups. Women often predominate in community councils, liturgy committees, and important public ministries such as baptism. They generally lead the Sunday worship services. Many serve as community representatives to the diocese, although women's participation above that level appears to drop dramatically in both Brazil and Colombia (Van den Eykel 1986: 317; Drogus 1991).

Some roles are continuous with those women have traditionally played: for example, they take care of the church and clean the priests' house. Others place women at the front of the church in a role very similar to that of the male priest, and require new skills. These new roles may help to explain why the overwhelming majority of women in Brazilian CEBs believe that Jesus wants women to be treated as equals. Sixty percent also believe that the Catholic Church treats women as equals today. That level of approval comes from the women who are active in predominantly female CEBs rather than traditional parishes or male-dominated groups (O'Connor 1993). Opportunities for leadership appear to be correlated with a sense of women's equality with men.

This sense of equality leads some women CEB leaders to push for a greater voice in the Church. Many interviewees complained that while they do most of the work, they are denied access to decision-making roles above the community level. Interviews conducted by the group Rede Mulher in CEBs throughout São Paulo suggest that this sentiment is widespread among women leaders.¹⁷ Since 1990, several women in the diocese of São Miguel Paulista have experienced significant rifts with the diocese over what they perceive to be a disregard for their views and their work with women's groups (Drogus 1992: 82).

CEBs appear to give women leaders, at least, a sense of empowerment in the religious sphere, perhaps as a result of their new opportunities for participation and status. They also appear to facilitate women's expansion of nonreligious, public roles (Mariz 1989: 195-96). While only a small segment of the women expand their public roles, those who do experience a heightened tension between their domestic and public lives. In part this reflects the unresolved process of rethinking traditional gender roles and in part it reflects the CEBs' failure to affect men's attitudes toward gender roles.

Overall, CEB members probably differ little from their pentecostal counterparts in terms of domestic gender roles.¹⁸ For example, of the women interviewed in São Paulo, 85 percent were currently married or widowed. All of those were mothers, with an average of three to four children. While nearly half had worked outside the home at some point, only about a third were currently employed. In fact, active CEB leaders are usually drawn from housewives or the

¹⁷ This interpretation is based on unpublished transcripts of interviews conducted by Rede Mulher in 1984 and 1985. I am grateful for access to this material.

¹⁸ This section is drawn largely from the research reported in Drogus (1991: ch. 5). It is based on interviews and participant observation of thirty CEB members in the eastern periphery of São Paulo conducted in 1986, with a follow-up in 1990.

unemployed because, as Mariz points out, CEB work is very demanding of time, particularly time during the work day (Mariz 1989: 86-87). It is not clear whether CEB members view women's employment differently from most poor urban women. Certainly their opportunities are equally limited, and most work in areas that afford no possibility of a career: e.g., maids, street vendors, and seamstresses.

Only four of thirty women interviewed decided to work largely for their own fulfillment. One took a job over her husband's objections as part of a self-conscious attempt to 'liberate' herself. Another told me in 1986 that her dream was to have a 'terrific job.' In 1990, after separating from her husband, she found fulfilling work on a social service project. In contrast, three respondents strongly believed that women's first responsibility is to their families. One stated that even women who say they are forced to work by financial circumstances are really just trying to escape their home duties. In between these extremes, most members believe that women should have the right to work and are capable of working in all or most fields of their choice. Few have the personal opportunity to do so, however, and none expressed this desire. Overall, it seems unlikely that CEB women are significantly less traditional than their pentecostal peers on this subject.

In contrast, CEBs have had an impact on women's political roles. Most importantly, they contributed to the formation of women leaders involved in social movements and partisan politics.¹⁹ One interesting aspect of this group's participation is their conceptualization of the economic problems confronting working-class women. They often have no personal stake in a social movement's goals. They may, for example, help organize a movement for a day care center even though they have no small children and do not expect to be employed by the center (Drogus 1988). This kind of broader neighborhood activism arises in part from the fact that CEB activists conceptualize the problems of working-class families in a broader social context. They attempt to identify the common needs of families in their neighborhood and to act on those. Collective strategies for improvement, in contrast to the pentecostals' personal strategies, thus begin to appear relevant.²⁰

Of the women interviewed, 40 percent—twelve of thirty—have become politically active in an ongoing way. However, this group represents a small fraction of all who come into contact with the CEB since, for example, over a hundred may be present at Sunday celebrations. Even most of the active members participated politically only casually or not at all. Ten did not participate in either local social movements or electoral politics beyond obligatory voting. The remaining eight had participated in one social movement but did not participate in party politics.

Nonetheless, all the women claim that the CEBs have legitimized political discussion for them. The interviewees almost unanimously claimed that they had no interest in politics before

¹⁹ On political attitudes and activity specifically, see Drogus (1991: ch. 7).

²⁰ This broader conceptualization should in no way be taken to indicate a highly developed class consciousness or radicalism on the women's part. In fact, it is quite consonant with the typical thinking of the working poor, except for the element of conviction that they can bring about change. Most women remain quite unchanged in their political thinking otherwise (Drogus 1991, 1992).

joining the CEB. One woman always liked to 'talk politics' but mostly as idle chit-chat. Two others said that they were interested but were never motivated to act on that interest before joining the CEB. More commonly, women said they simply ignored the topic and voted the way their husbands told them because it was a civic obligation. They claim subjectively to have increased both interest in and knowledge of politics (Drogus 1991: ch. 7).

For many, the CEB was a revelatory experience, giving them practical skills and opening up a realm of possibilities for participation in the public arena that they had never even imagined. As one woman expressed it:

Being in the struggle, with the participation we have, is a beautiful thing. Even if we haven't had a chance to study, like me, myself, I don't know much. A person without schooling doesn't know much, not even how to get around, eh? And that was a very important thing. While we were that way, I, like I said, was a housewife. And look, nowadays we go to every blessed place trying, looking for things (Interview conducted by the author #(C) 02-01.07.86).

The CEB was an important step which raised and legitimated political interest, and also gave women practical skills.

Taking on new roles, however, does not necessarily lead the women to reassess their domestic roles. Some who strongly identify with traditional roles justify incursions into politics as the moral or religious actions of mothers who of necessity are forced into the distasteful world of politics. Even women leaders generally continue to accept their domestic roles as primary. At the same time, however, the twelve activist women also seem to be in a process of rethinking the balance between domestic and public roles, a process that is unresolved and sometimes traumatic.

Many CEB women leaders believe in women's equality and right to participate. They reject a submissive attitude toward men as dehumanizing. They may even criticize the church because, as one woman said:

There's that idea, you must be submissive to the man, that was put in women's heads... But it can't be that way. Because we have to be free, too, we have to be something (Interview conducted by the author #04-08.08.86).

Their husbands' roles, and their husbands' perceptions of women's roles, however, often remain unchanged. Indeed, since most of their husbands are not active in the CEBs, they would not have even a limited religious motivation to reconceptualize gender roles.

In contrast to most pentecostal women, then, CEB leaders' new roles often produce domestic conflict rather than harmony. The religious context provides legitimacy up to a point: many respondents said that they were able to maintain active participation in the CEBs only because their husbands could not possibly disapprove of their 'going to church' (Drogus 1991). When activities become more clearly nonreligious and public, however, conflicts often arise.

This is a source of great anxiety for the women activists, who reject submissiveness but continue to value their domestic roles. Some have had to go behind their husbands' backs to participate. Many live in uneasy truces at home or find that they must constantly pour oil on troubled waters if they wish to continue participating. It also inhibits other women from following

their lead and can attract criticism from those whose own occasional forays into the public sphere are so limited that they do not disrupt their domestic lives (Drogus 1992: 80).

Many active women CEB members both expand their public roles and begin to believe in greater equality for women within and without the home. While this may entail a reconceptualization of both male and female appropriate domestic roles, CEBs offer women few means by which to bring men to share their new perspective. Indeed, many appear to remain convinced of the old gender stereotype of *machismo* which portrays men as simply errant, petulant little boys who must be humored rather than changed (Stevens 1973). Ironically, then, while some women achieve greater status and authority in both the religious and political realms through the CEBs, they do not generally achieve this in their domestic lives.

III. Religion and Gender: Implications for Research

Cecilia Mariz has broadly summarized the contrast between changing gender roles in the CEBs and pentecostal churches. Pentecostals, she contends, bring men into the private sphere, while CEBs politicize women and bring them into the public sphere (Mariz 1989: 196). Both religions seem to offer women opportunities for greater equality and authority, but in distinctly different ways. While pentecostals may gain authority, status, and more stability at home, many CEB women sacrifice domestic peace for more equal participation in public—especially political—roles. This large contrast suggests several areas for further inquiry. Two of these are purely empirical. The others, while empirical, have greater implications for theoretical issues.

On the empirical side, more systematic research is needed on changing conceptualizations of women's roles generally in Latin America. Despite the tradition of *marianismo*, women's actual roles in the region are in flux. They are increasingly entering the paid labor force, gaining more education, and becoming more visible in politics. We need to know how these religious groups compare with the general tendency in society in order to evaluate just how much of an effect may be specifically attributable to religion.

Pentecostalism's impact on women's status and well-being in the family deserves further analysis as well. An implicit debate has emerged between those who believe pentecostal women purchase peace and perhaps enhanced financial support through submission, and those who believe that pentecostalism brings men's behavior into line with women's preferences, enhancing women's status and authority as well as well-being. Most authors—Brusco, Willems, Van den Eykel—support the second interpretation, and it has been given the greater weight in this paper. More systematic attention should be paid to the specific ways in which pentecostalism bolsters women's equality and status, however, and the possible limitations on those changes.

In addition to these two specific research questions, a number of questions can be raised that have important theoretical implications. One theoretical interpretation of the evidence so far comes easily to mind: while women in both groups take advantage of opportunities to reinterpret gender roles, the form of that reinterpretation differs because it is shaped by a distinctive religious ethos. The CEBs' sociopolitical ethos offers a specific framework and direction for women to

reinterpret their roles to include more public activity, especially in politics. The pentecostals' emphasis on family and personal morality seems to steer women of that faith toward reinterpreting domestic roles and particularly toward reasserting moral control over men's behavior.

The movement from doctrine, official symbolism, or dominant ethos to the particular behavior and attitudes of believers is, however, always fraught with difficulty. As the ambiguities in beliefs about gender roles show, religious beliefs are never monolithic and are always subject to a range of interpretations. The real challenge, then, is to explain how and why the faithful respond to and utilize certain interpretations and not others.

The first step in such an explanation is to examine other variables that might influence women's interpretation and expansion of their roles. One hypothesis to explore is that income level, family stability, or both together may provide an alternative explanation for women's responses to religious opportunities. Although most CEB members and most pentecostals can be broadly identified as part of the 'poor,' some evidence suggests that CEB members are more financially secure and freer from problems, such as alcoholism, that undermine family stability (Mariz 1989). It may be that only women in secure financial and family situations can effectively take advantage of opportunities to expand their roles, while those in the opposite situation benefit most directly from greater control in the household. Financial and family stability, then, alone or in conjunction with religious opportunities, may be an important factor in women's responses to the two groups. They might also distinguish the minority of women leaders in CEBs from those whose attitudes and roles remain unchanged.

The diversity of responses within the CEB suggests another hypothesis. Religious personality or some other aspect of personal history may be a key factor in the extent to which women capitalize on available opportunities and the direction their reinterpretations take. Lawless shows that pentecostal women preachers who utilize their religious calling to forge independent, nontraditional roles often note an early certainty of being 'different' from other women (Lawless 1988b). Similarly, CEB women who became politically active often say that they felt a certain restlessness in their domestic roles. They may say, for example, that they were waiting for the opportunities the CEB offered (Drogus 1991: ch. 4). Many also share a very public- and community-oriented religious personality (Drogus 1991: ch. 5). Either or both of these factors may be important in their subsequent expansion of gender roles.

This hypothesis must be examined with respect to pentecostal women as well. The portrait of pentecostal women that has emerged thus far is much less differentiated than what we know of women in the CEBs. Yet pentecostalism certainly offers women opportunities to reinterpret their roles in nontraditional ways. Where are the pentecostal women who do so? If further study reveals such women in Latin America, then personal religiosity or personal history must be considered as a possible explanation for their different response to pentecostal opportunities. If, on the other hand, pentecostal women are fairly uniform in their responses, this might lend credence to the hypothesis that conversion religions produce greater uniformity of

belief than groups that are essentially continuous with previous religious identity, like the CEBs.²¹

Finally, research into alternative variables will play an important role in answering the theoretical question of the direction of causality at work in these religious groups. Most research has suggested, at least implicitly, that religion influences the way people think about gender roles. It is also possible, however, that women are attracted to religious groups precisely because these confirm their pre-existing beliefs about gender roles. Religious groups may still play an important part in consolidating and acting on these beliefs. Women in the CEBs, for example, sometimes claim that the Church provided their first viable outlet for political involvement. Nonetheless, the question of causality remains an important theoretical issue.

Religion has played a significant part in shaping Latin American culture, including beliefs about gender. Changes in religious beliefs and opportunities for women may have important ramifications for attitudes and participation in society as a whole. But women themselves must draw upon and utilize the empowering aspects of religious traditions that remain ambiguous with respect to women's status. We are beginning to amass evidence that some women do so, but in strikingly different ways. The task now is to explain the different responses of women both within and across religious groups.

²¹ Some other hypotheses relating to the religious groups, rather than the characteristics of members, should also be investigated. Ireland (1991), for example, suggests that different types of pentecostal groups—established churches versus breakaway sects—have quite different potentials for political rebelliousness. Thus differences among pentecostal groups might be explored. Another hypothesis suggested by the available evidence is that the degree of women's predominance is a key. O'Connor (1993) found more challenge to traditional roles among women in CEBs with few male participants. While both pentecostal and CEB groups are predominantly female, the pentecostals generally appear to be more gender balanced. This difference may explain pentecostal women's greater reticence in challenging stereotypes of women's gender roles.

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