

# *Americas*

*The Changing Face of  
Latin America and the Caribbean*

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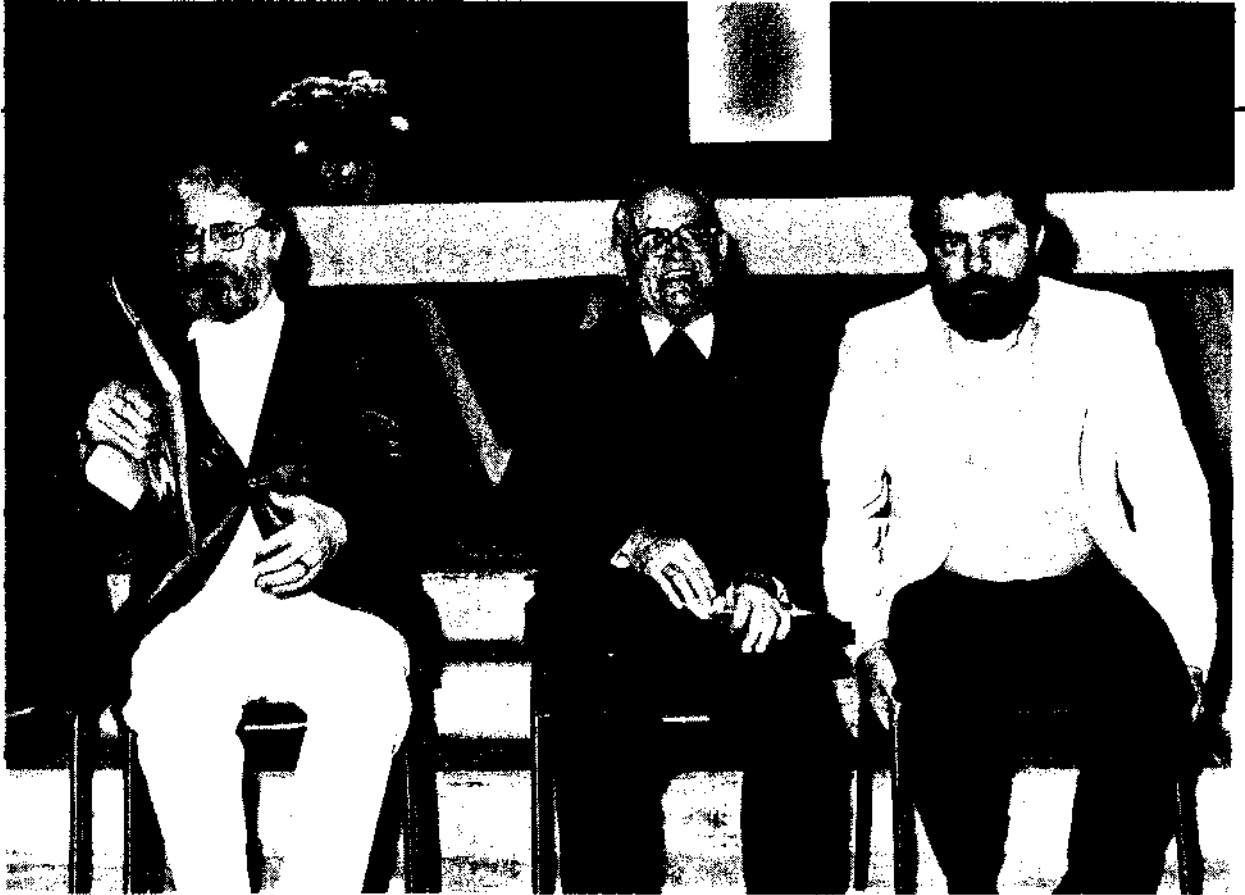
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In the past, a Catholicism that drew on both European and Indian beliefs satisfied the intense religiosity of Latin Americans like these pilgrims at Mexico's shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Over 90 percent of Latin Americans remain nominally Catholic, but many ceased to attend church when they moved from rural homes to city slums.

## *Chapter 10*

### *The Power and the Glory*



Liberation theology, which urged the Church to adopt a "preferential option for the poor" and to encourage grass-roots organizations, was the theme of this 1989 Sao Paulo discussion featuring theologian Leonardo Boff, Cardinal Paulo Arns, and labor and political leader Luis Inacio "Lula" da Silva.



In many Latin American countries, progressives within the Church took the lead in struggles for human rights and social justice, and over eight hundred churchpeople became martyrs for these causes. The most famous was El Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero, who in 1980 was murdered by a rightist death squad while saying mass.



In Nicaragua, progressive clergy even became involved in the Sandinista revolution and several priests were appointed to high positions. Their presence in a "Marxist" government worried Pope John Paul II, who publicly reprimanded Father Ernesto Cardenal in 1983 for remaining culture minister despite papal orders to resign.



Today the Vatican seems more concerned about the inroads of evangelical Protestantism, led by Pentecostals such as "Bishop" Edir Macedo—shown here "laying on hands"—whose Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, which stresses faith healing and exorcism, is one of Brazil's fastest-growing denominations.



The other rapidly growing religion in Brazil is Umbanda, a uniquely Brazilian synthesis of European and African Spiritism that appeals to both the urban white middle class and the black and mulatto lower class. In this Sao Paulo center, a medium possessed by a spirit is helped by assistants.



The dramatic changes in Latin America's Catholic Church have also had a profound impact on North American Catholics, from missionary orders such as the Maryknolls to middle-class laity who risked jail in cities such as Chicago to offer sanctuary to Salvadoran refugees denied asylum by the U.S. government.



**I**N October 1991, Pope John Paul II paid his second visit to Brazil and his tenth to Latin America and the Caribbean in little more than a decade. He met with Indian chiefs in the Amazon and bishops in their urban sees, and talked with landless peasants in the Northeast and elite politicians in Brasilia. Even for so well-traveled a pontiff this was unusual attention, which underscored the importance to the Vatican of Brazil in particular—and Latin America in general.

More Catholics live in Latin America and the Caribbean than in any other region on earth. By the end of the century it will be home to three Catholics out of five. Brazil has the world's largest national Church, with more than no million believers and 350 bishops.

But it was not just the huge numbers of the faithful that persuaded the pope to make a tiring ten-day journey through the continent's biggest country. It was also his concern over the millions of believers lost to religious rivals: Where nineteen out of twenty Brazilians belonged to the Church fifty years ago, its bishops estimate that only three out of four do now. Within the Catholic church as well, Brazil is where the Vatican has faced the most important challenge to its authority from advocates of more democracy inside the Church and greater social activism and political involvement in the world outside. The self-styled "country of the future" 353

may well be where the future of the Catholic church in Christianity's third millennium is decided.

Like much of Latin America and the Caribbean, Brazil is experiencing a revival of religiosity. Brazil's remarkable explosion of spiritual renewal, social activism, and theological debate displays a richness and creativity that reflects its diverse cultures. But throughout the region, people have questioned old religious beliefs and institutions and created new ones. In Jamaica, poor blacks have embraced the neo-African rites of the Rastafarians; in Guatemala, middle-class *ladinos* and Indian peasants have converted to evangelical Protestantism. In Nicaragua, many Catholics joined a Marxist revolution and formed a so-called "people's church" opposed by the hierarchy. This ferment has underscored the continuing importance of faith in Latin America and the Caribbean while pushing churches into uncharted terrain.

That these other Americas would be regarded in 1992 as a land of religious innovation would have surprised most observers fifty years ago. For most of five centuries, the Catholic church has dominated the region's religious life and been regarded as a conservative pillar of the status quo. In 1915, Brazil's bishops told the country's priests to "inculcate the spirit of obedience and submission to those who govern in civil society ... to lead the faithful to accept their proper situation and the conditions in which they were born."<sup>1</sup> But during recent decades, the Latin American Church has been at the storm center of change—and been transformed in the process. It has seen revolutionary priests killed in combat and liberal bishops martyred for their defense of the oppressed. It has opened up its cathedrals to forbidden meetings of labor unions and its offices to victims of human rights abuses. It has helped peasants to organize land seizures and Indians to defend their communities. It has promoted popular participation within the Church and political democracy in the nation. And it has carried on an intense internal debate over the nature of the Church, the character of its mission, and the methods it should employ to pursue these goals.

This extraordinary ferment within the Latin American Church has been prompted by the profound changes taking place within the society and politics of Latin America and the Caribbean. Massive migration from

the countryside to the cities—in search of economic and educational opportunities, or in flight from rural violence and civil war—was one cause of concern, as "cultural Catholics" drifted away from the Church of their childhood. People whose families for generations had attended the same rural church were uprooted and resettled in urban shantytowns hundreds of miles away. In many cases, in these sprawling new communities there were few churches or priests and they often had difficulty responding to the special needs of these poor migrants. Increasingly, the Catholic church was losing the loyalties of these former faithful to religious or secular competitors—Protestant evangelicals, Spiritist cults, Marxist movements—who seemed to offer more definite answers to the problems in their lives and a supportive community to help them deal with their unfamiliar environment. This disaffection reflected many factors, but the common denominator was the perceived irrelevance of the Church to people's lives and needs.

The postwar decades were also a time of intellectual and political ferment in much of Latin America and the Caribbean. Within the Church, many priests and nuns who worked with the poor and oppressed—whether in the Indian highlands of Guatemala or Peru, the migrant slums of San Salvador or Port-au-Prince, or the rain forests of Brazil or Ecuador—were politicized by that experience and opened to new ways of analyzing the region's inequalities and the Church's role in combating them. Some were influenced by Marxist critiques and by the example of social revolution set by Cuba after 1959. In Colombia, Father Camilo Torres, a prominent priest, even took up arms and died as a leftist guerrilla in 1966, after his efforts at peaceful reform were frustrated by entrenched interests. During the past three decades the Latin American Church has lost more than eight hundred Church martyrs to the cause of nonviolent social change. During the 1960s and 1970s, a period of revolutionary upheaval and rightist repression in much of the region, progressive Catholics developed a new "theology of liberation" and prescribed a new political and pastoral practice for the Church.

### ***Toward a Theology of Liberation***

"We have an evangelical commitment to make a preferential option for the poor," said Dom Adriano Hypolito, the progressive bishop of Nova Iguacu, a sprawling working-class city near Rio de Janeiro. "So how are we going to realize this option? It's not enough just to talk and pray. As a Christian and as a pastor, I feel I have a duty to support movements that work for the good of the people."<sup>2</sup> One of the innovations that Dom Adriano supported were the Christian Base Communities, grassroots groups that studied the Bible and related it to their daily lives, often with transforming effects. As one base community leader in Nova Iguacu attested: "I was always a very religious person and was active in the Church. But before coming to Nova Iguacu, I had experienced only the closed Church of Rio. It didn't get involved in politics, or if it did, it was on the government's side. For them, the Bible isn't linked to life," she claimed. What had changed her vision and her life was that "we moved to Nova Iguacu. That's when I started to develop a political consciousness. I participated in the base community and learned a different understanding of the Bible, committed to the poor and social justice."<sup>3</sup>

Ever since the mistreatment of the Indians during the Conquest shocked Bartolome de las Casas into becoming a Dominican crusader for indigenous rights, there have always been voices within the Church concerned with protecting the poor and promoting social justice. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII made such concerns part of the social doctrine of the Church. This was reflected in such organizations as Catholic Action, which, beginning in the 1920s, mobilized lay activists from the middle and working classes under Church direction. In Brazil, Catholic Action influenced such future Church leaders as Dom Helder Camara, teaching them the importance of linking faith with social reform. During the 1950s the Vatican encouraged the creation of national bishops' councils to increase the responsiveness of local Churches to the problems of their flocks. The National Council of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) was founded in 1952 under Dom Helder's leadership as the first episcopal council in Latin America. It

played a central role in the innovations of the decade that followed, including educational reform and grassroots organizing.

But it was Vatican II, the extraordinary conference of Catholic prelates summoned by Pope John XXIII to Rome in 1962, that catalyzed the quantum leap in doctrinal debate, social activism, political involvement, and popular participation of recent decades. The Vatican was responding to the diffuse but dramatic changes of increasingly industrial, urban, and secular societies, while affirming the Church's need to assert a strong moral authority lacking in its muted and tardy response to fascism and the Holocaust. At the same time, as a global institution it was called upon increasingly to deal with the issues of poverty, inequality, and political repression.

In an effort to meet these challenges, Vatican II initiated a dramatic reform of Catholic doctrine and practice, and a revamping of the structures and decision-making of the Church. It committed the Church to a social doctrine that more explicitly stressed the obligation to speak out in defense of human rights—using the "prophetic voice of the Church"—and to promote peace and justice in this world as well as the next. Vatican II also encouraged those who favored a more democratic Church in which collegiality would be the watchword and the magisterium, or teaching function of the Church, would be shared by episcopal councils nationally by the bishops in their sees and by priests and laity at the local level. Behind this ferment lay the notion that the Church was not just the Catholic hierarchy but "the people of God," a community of believers sharing Christ's legacy and united in a struggle for the common good. By the time Vatican II ended in 1965, John XXIII was two years dead. His successor, Paul VI, was a more cautious pope, but he advanced the main lines of his predecessor's reforms, particularly where Third World areas such as Latin America were concerned.

Vatican II built upon ideas and initiatives pioneered in several countries, including Brazil, but it was also central to legitimating them and promoting others. Gustavo Gutierrez, a young Peruvian cleric, was inspired by his experience of Vatican II, but found that the translation of its principles into terms relevant to his poor and exploited parishioners in a

Lima slum demanded a new theology. For Gutierrez, liberating Peru's poor majority from its "bondage" to the wealthy entailed an "Exodus" that the Church had a responsibility to lead. In his rethinking of Catholic doctrine, the structure of societies such as Peru's were "sinful" in oppressing the country's peasants. Salvation required a commitment to social justice, not just to good works, and a communion of people with each other, not just with God.

Gutierrez's theology offered to the poor a Christ whose "Good News" was their liberation on earth as well as in heaven. His was a call to political activism from the pulpit. Silence would mean complicity with unjust structures and "institutionalized violence." The Church had to help the poor to understand their situation and to overcome their powerlessness and oppression. Only then would true Christian reconciliation be possible. The hour was late, the plight of the poor desperate. The intervention of the Church was both a social necessity and a moral obligation.

Gutierrez's ideas helped shape the discussions at the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM), which met in Medellin, Colombia, to apply the conclusions of Vatican II. In a region where poverty was extreme, inequalities glaring, and repression harsh, the translation of Vatican II required an active involvement of the Church in the struggles of the poor, the exploited, and the oppressed. The result was a commitment at Medellin to "a preferential option for the poor" as the way to secure peace, social justice, and human rights, and an endorsement of such new forms of popular participation as the base communities, as a way of reaching the faithful and increasing their involvement in the Church and their community.

Medellin, therefore, reflected not only the reforms of Vatican II, but also the beginnings of grassroots innovations in pastoral practice and the emergence of a specifically Latin American theology, which drew on Marxist critiques of capitalism but above all reflected the region's unique history and conditions. In the wake of Medellin, this "theology of liberation"—in reality a diverse set of ideas by an equally varied group of theologians—would be elaborated by churchpeople of many nationalities,

backgrounds, and beliefs into an alternative vision of salvation and church that would reverberate around the globe.

In Brazil, the leading theologian of liberation was Leonardo Boff, a scholarly and sophisticated Franciscan intellectual whose primary concern is the application of liberation theology within the Catholic church. His work is imbued with a vision of Jesus as "liberator of the poor" and of the early Christian church as a community of believers struggling together for salvation, whose clergy were concerned with service not power. Boff strongly supported the new grassroots organizations—which he saw as "reinventing the Church"—and the sharing of the Church's teaching function with laypeople as part of the democratization of the Church that he advocated.

His ideas would influence clerics in his own country. During the decade that followed Medellín, within a frame of reference created by its conclusions and liberation theology, but impelled as well by their own experience, Brazil's bishops would promote a pastoral revolution that would make the Brazilian Church one of the most progressive in the world.

### ***Miracles Are Not Enough***

At the time of the Medellín meeting, the Brazilian Church seemed one of the more conservative in the continent, its earlier reformist thrust blunted by the fear of communism and the military coup of 1964. The progressive leadership of the CNBB had been replaced by conservatives who supported the military regime and policies that ignored the plight of the poor. The most salient exception was the Northeast, Brazil's most impoverished and underdeveloped region, whose extreme inequalities of wealth and power generated conflicts its clergy could not ignore.

The decade that followed the military coup was an era of economic growth and political repression. The regime trumpeted its economic successes and silenced its political opponents. Increasingly, the Brazilian Church spoke up for the victims and criticized the costs. The Northeast's

poverty and social conflicts had impelled its clergy to promote both popular education and land reform before the coup. With the foreclosure of reform and the repression of popular movements under the military regime, the Church stepped in to fill the gap and defend the powerless.

In the escalating conflict between the military and the Church that followed, the principal victims were local priests and laity; but the chief target was Dom Helder Camara, the reform-minded archbishop of Recife. During these years, the diminutive but fiery prelate kept up his impassioned defense of human rights and advocacy of social justice, despite repeated attempts to intimidate him into silence. Faced with the killing and jailing of clergy and attacks on bishops, the Brazilian Church closed ranks, with even conservative bishops criticizing the military regime. Dom Helder, by the late 1960s an international celebrity, led the way, but other bishops accompanied him on a journey to increasingly progressive positions that led the military to label many of them "subversives."

The Church's preferential option for the poor prompted the region's bishops to advocate land reform and—using the prophetic voice of the Church—to protest "the abandonment of our brothers, the peasants, who are subjected to chronic injustice and permanent exploitation." By 1973, the bishops of the Amazon were also condemning the "Brazilian model" responsible for the economic "miracle" as producing a "development that enriches only a small minority. . . . For the poor, the system offers a future of increasing marginalization. For the Indians, it offers a future of death."<sup>4</sup>

In the north, where the poor had no access to health care, education, or legal advice, the Church went beyond protest to create the institutions that could provide concrete assistance. One was the Indian Missionary Council (CIMI), which stressed the need to respect the Indians and help them defend their way of life. Another was the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), which was formed to link the Church with isolated rural populations, advise them in their struggles, and act as a catalyst for rural reform. With its staff of lawyers and social scientists, the CPT documented human rights abuses and offered legal aid. It also promoted grassroots organizations such as rural unions, and "accompanied" the poor in their struggles



for land and social justice, an activist stance that placed the CPT in the front line of rural conflicts.

But poverty and repression were not confined to the less developed north of Brazil. Nor were the innovations within the Catholic church. If anything, the denial of human rights and social justice were more glaring in the Center-South, where political and economic power were concentrated and experiments with grassroots groups were most intense. In Nova Iguacu, death squads killed over two thousand people, and Bishop Adriano Hypolito was kidnapped and beaten. This violence created more martyrs for the progressive cause, but it did not halt the spread of these popular organizations.

The most widespread and innovative of these organizations were the Christian Base Communities, neighborhood or village groups of twenty to fifty people who met weekly, fortnightly, or monthly to pray together, study the Bible, and discuss its implications for their own lives. Most base communities in Brazil were created at the initiative of priests or other local pastoral agents, in part to compensate for the shortage of priests. During the two decades following Medellin, an estimated eighty thousand were formed, with a membership of perhaps two million. Although base communities stress popular participation and lay leadership, they are linked to the Church by regular visits by priests, brothers, and sisters, and by courses, writings, and cassettes distributed by the diocese.

Some of the most active base communities were in the new working-class suburbs on the periphery of Sao Paulo, settled by the flood of rural migrants who flocked to Brazil's industrial capital in search of jobs after 1970. Sao Miguel is typical of these Sao Paulo communities, an area of respectable houses and impoverished shantytowns, where many people spend up to four hours a day commuting to and from work in other parts of the city. To ask them to attend a meeting after so exhausting a day is to ask a lot.

Yet some fifty people gathered in an unheated community center on a cold June night in 1991 to discuss the Christian family, the theme for the year chosen by Brazil's National Council of Bishops. Most were leaders of

the sector's base communities—male and female, young and middle-aged, workers and middle class. Their metal folding chairs were arranged in a circle to emphasize the democratic character of the meeting. There were two priests present, but neither one wore a cassock, and their leadership was exercised in indirect, subtle ways. Most of the delegates were articulate and poised. "It is by participating" in the base community, Waldo explained, "that I gained this self-confidence."

Waldo is a metalworker with a wife and children. He joined the base community in the early 1980s when his union was on strike and his personal life was in turmoil. It had helped him to surmount those problems and to better understand "the true message of Christ, the liberator of the poor." For Waldo, the base community had revitalized his religious commitment and his links to the Church. It had also given him the opportunity to emerge as a leader and to develop the skills and self-confidence that then enabled him to become a leader in his union and a political activist as well. Waldo's base community is regarded as one of the most successful in the sector, and Waldo's leadership is a major reason for this success.

Waldo's story is not unique. Most members of base communities join for personal or religious reasons. Many become politically aware from participating in the group and some go on to become active in their neighborhood or workplace or party. But base communities are fundamentally religious groups and not all are political in their concerns or progressive in their orientation. Much depends on their leaders and the local priest. Padre David is a North American, one of the many foreign priests brought to Sao Paulo after 1970 to deal with the enormous problems of ministering to the needs of its millions of poor parishioners. He was one of the foreign priests praised by his bishop of many years for "living lives of true sacrifice." Today, roughly half of Brazil's priests are foreigners, a reflection of the crisis of vocations within the country, but also of the impact of liberation theology in Europe and North America.

Much has changed in Padre David's sector of Sao Miguel since he began to live and work there over a decade ago, and the church groups he helped organize and orient deserve much of the credit for these improvements. He recalled urging people to talk about their needs: "First one and

then the others talked about how when a child fell sick there was no way to get medical care. 'What do you think should be done about this problem?' I asked. 'We need a hospital here or at least a clinic/ they said. I then met with other groups, who said the same thing. So, they began to work together and today there is a modern hospital a few blocks away."

But not all of Padre David's work with grassroots groups is oriented to community action. Many of the residents of Sao Miguel are recent migrants from rural areas, whose spiritual needs are particularly great. "They arrive here from a village in the Northeast or Minas Gerais, where they knew everyone, and the church was the center of the community, and they are lost, completely lost," he said. "They go to church and they don't know anybody. Even the base communities are too large. So we formed small street groups to meet their needs."

*And I remember one night we were reflecting upon the Exodus and the Israelites' forty years of wandering in search of the promised land in the book of Genesis.... So I had the people just talk about themselves and their parents, how they got here. . . . It was wonderful. They loved telling their story: how they moved first from the Northeast to Minas Gerais and then to Sao Paulo, a real journey . . . and why they came to Sao Paulo, because at that time it was the promised land where they could get jobs . . . and it was marvelous, because they could make the connection between Exodus and their own lives and it was a great help to them, and helped them connect with each other as well.. .. Now you can't do that in a parish church with five hundred people on a Sunday morning. That is why these grassroots groups—the base communities, the street groups, the Bible circles, the workers' commissions—are so important.*

Leaders of those grassroots groups credit Padre David and the sisters who work with him for much of their success. "Padre David opened our eyes to the fact that the roots of our problems were in Brazil's unjust society," Waldo said. But to the North American priest, the credit for promoting these grassroots organizations and encouraging the work he did with them went to his Brazilian superiors, particularly Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, the archbishop of Sao Paulo, and Dom Angelico, the bishop

of Sao Miguel for most of Padre David's years there. "It was Dom Angelico who inspired and oriented our work."

Angelico Sandalo Bernardino was one of nine children born to a metalworker and union activist in the interior of Sao Paulo State. In 1975, after he had spent fifteen years as a worker-priest in the provincial town of Ribeirao Preto, Cardinal Arns brought him to Sao Paulo as bishop of Sao Miguel. Dom Angelico's predisposition in favor of the poor came from his family background and his practice from his early training in Catholic Action, but his vision of the Church was shaped by liberation theology, which took "our reality in Latin America as its point of departure." It informed the "new road of the Church" in Brazil, the grassroots organizations which were central to the success of a "people's church," and their members, who "were taking possession of the Word of God and mixing it with their lives. Out of this mixture is emerging a new force," asserted Dom Angelico, with whom the Church should share its teaching function, traditionally a clerical monopoly. "There are laity, men and women, who are called to be ministers of the word, ministers of baptism . . . animators of groups, animators of communities," he emphasized. "Within the base communities, there has been a true ministerial explosion."

The neighborhood base communities, moreover, were not the only grassroots organizations promoted in Sao Paulo. "We also work with groups that have a more acute perception of reality," Dom Angelico explained. "Some from the world of labor or the land, who feel called to work for labor reforms, for agrarian reforms; and others who feel more called to work for health or human rights." Dom Angelico himself felt called to work closely with industrial workers. He had played a leading role in the Pastoral Workers' Commission introduced to Brazil's industrial center by its archbishop, Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns.

Under Cardinal Arns, what had been a conservative diocese became one of the most progressive in the continent. As head of the Church in Brazil's industrial heartland, Arns promoted the Pastoral Workers' Commission to help workers at a time when unions were repressed, strikes banned, and labor leaders persecuted. As leader of an archdiocese that contained one thousand slums, he also encouraged the formation of base

communities and other neighborhood organizations, hundreds of which proliferated in the Sao Paulo area. Although Cardinal Arns modestly affirmed, "The base communities came from the grassroots. All I did was support the pastoral agents who had already started something new,"<sup>5</sup> his bishops and priests stressed how important such "support" from their archbishop had been to their work. It was the combination of international mandate, episcopal support, local priest initiatives, and grassroots leadership that made Sao Paulo a model of progressive Catholicism and the Brazilian Church a leader in applying the principles of Vatican II and Medellin to the concrete realities of helping the poor to help themselves.

But Cardinal Arns's work was not limited to reforms within the Church. If anything it was his bold public stands on the larger issues confronting Brazil, and his role in opposition to the military dictatorship, that made Dom Paulo one of the towering figures of that traumatic era.

When he became head of the world's largest archdiocese in 1970, Arns was known as a scholarly Franciscan and a diplomatic moderate. But in January 1971 the new archbishop was confronted by the military's imprisonment of a priest and an archdiocesan social worker. Arns personally intervened, but was treated rudely himself and shocked by their appearance and their story: Both had been brutally tortured. Arns responded with a denunciation that he ordered nailed to "the doors of all the churches" of Sao Paulo and, with CNBB support, circulated nationally, defying the military censors. His elevation to cardinal in 1973 placed the papacy behind his bold human rights stand. "In a public audience in St. Peter's Square," Arns recalled with pride, Pope Paul VI "called me to his side, saying, 'This man defends human rights and so prevents the deaths of innocent people.' "

What further enhanced Cardinal Arns's immense moral authority was that he went beyond protecting clerics and Catholics to defending the human rights of *all* Brazilians. He formed the Peace and Justice Commission mandated by Vatican II and turned it into a human rights commission with a large staff of lawyers and social scientists who investigated, documented, and denounced human rights violations, in addition to assisting the victims and their families. In 1975, the universality of Arns's defense of human rights was underscored by his response to the imprisonment and

death by torture of the prominent Jewish journalist Vladimir Herzog, a turning point in Brazil's political opening. Arns not only denounced Herzog's murder, but invited the head rabbi of Sao Paulo to join him in an ecumenical service in the cathedral. "The stance of Dom Paulo Evaristo was of critical importance," Dom Angelica stressed. "He made it legitimate to defend human rights." To Arns, however, the significance of the Herzog case went further. "For me, Vladimir Herzog was the beginning of the end of torture, of censorship, and of arbitrary imprisonment and disappearances."

Arns also became one of Brazil's most trenchant critics of an economic model that increased inequality even in the industrial heartland of the economic "miracle" and left Sao Paulo's poverty unsolved. "He has really been a second St. Francis of Assisi," Dom Angelico said, "a man profoundly committed to the poor of God, to the cause of social justice and human rights." Under Dom Paulo, moreover, the Sao Paulo Church served as an umbrella for the new social movements that would play central roles in the struggle to restore democracy. In that elongated transition, Cardinal Arns also played a leading part, opening his churches for forbidden union meetings and allowing his clergy and laity to help the charismatic labor leader Lula form the Workers' Party, a democratic socialist party imbued with progressive Christian ideals. "By working with the most socially conscious politicians and the most responsible parties," argued Dom Angelico, "we were changing the country."

They were also changing Brazil's Catholic church. By 1978, the Brazilian Church had won an international reputation as one of the most innovative and progressive in the world. This was symbolized that year by the possibility that Cardinal Aloisio Lorscheider, archbishop of Fortaleza, would succeed Paul VI as the supreme pontiff, before the ailing Brazilian discouraged his own candidacy. Later that year, after the brief papacy of John Paul I, the puff of smoke over the Vatican signaled the election of John Paul II, a Polish prelate with a very different historical experience, cultural background, and political orientation than Lorscheider. His accession would have a profound impact upon the divided Latin American Church.

Not all the Latin American bishops were as open to change as Brazil's.

In Argentina, only four out of eighty defended the cause of human rights during the "dirty war" that followed the military coup of 1976, despite the record number of "disappeared." Colombia's hierarchy remained as closed to the new currents within Catholicism as its elite was to demands for social reform and political participation.

Four years after the Medellin conference, the city's conservative archbishop, Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, became secretary-general of CELAM by a narrow margin, determined that the next regional bishops' conference, set for Puebla, Mexico, in 1978, would be different. During the decade between Medellin and Puebla, Lopez Trujillo purged the CELAM staff of progressives and prepared the way for a document that would repudiate liberation theology. Before the key conclave, he sent a letter to conservative bishops urging them to "prepare your bombers, get some of your delicious venom ready. . . . May your blows be on the mark."<sup>6</sup>

Yet despite his efforts and the presence of a new, more conservative pope, Puebla would be different than Lopez Trujillo envisioned. In part, this was because many progressive prelates were selected by their colleagues to attend; in part because the Brazilian Church, the largest and best organized, under the leadership of Cardinal Lorscheider, who presided over the Puebla conference, mobilized the region's progressive and moderate bishops to modify conservative designs. But John Paul II also shaped the outcome of Puebla. This was his first encounter with the poverty of Latin America, and it so shocked him that he endorsed the Church's "preferential option for the poor," while warning against the involvement of priests in politics or any embrace of Marxism.

The result was a set of conclusions sufficiently general and ambiguous to allow both progressives and conservatives to claim "victory." The principles of Medellin and Vatican II, committing the Church to the promotion of peace, justice, and human rights, were reaffirmed, but the debate on how best to promote them—by evangelization or politics, reform or revolution, ballots or bullets, capitalism or socialism—remained unresolved.

Even as the bishops at Puebla were congratulating themselves at their success in forging a consensus in increasingly complex circumstances, the

events that would create problems for this consensus were beginning to unfold. In the mountains and shantytowns of Nicaragua, the guerrilla war and popular rebellion that would oust the Somoza dictatorship and inaugurate the Sandinista revolution was entering its final phase. In July 1979, Anastasio Somoza would flee and a leftist revolutionary government would take over in Managua.

At the end of the year, a reformist coup in El Salvador detonated a decade of repression and civil war that would soon claim a martyred archbishop as its most prominent victim. There a few priests even embraced the guerrilla cause and endorsed violence as the only way to change "unjust structures" in the face of an intransigent elite determined to hold on to its privileges and security forces prepared to kill those who demanded reforms. Together, these Central American upheavals would challenge Puebla's consensus.

### ***The Red and the Black***

In the heat of an August morning in 1984, the men whirled and danced outside the hilltop suburban basilica of Santo Domingo to honor Managua's patron saint, whose image they had borne on their shoulders from the distant city center. They had been up all night dancing, singing, and praying. Their hands held crosses, but they moved to a more ancient rhythm in trances that evoked the vision quest of their Indian forebears. Their faces were masklike, painted red and black, colors identified not with the saint but with the Sandinista revolution. They would dance until Archbishop Obando y Bravo came to give a sermon sharply critical of the Sandinistas and of those clergy who supported their revolution. With its diversity and conflict, spirituality and politics, Nicaragua represented the divisions and ferment within the Latin American Church in their most extreme form.

In 1979 Nicaragua was a country where most people were poor, land was unequally distributed, and economic progress had been purchased at a high social cost. Like Brazil, which also had an authoritarian government,



Nicaragua had witnessed the emergence of a progressive clergy and grass-roots organizations in the wake of Vatican II and Medellin. Yet, as citizens of a small nation that has experienced dictatorship for most of its history, U.S. hegemony for most of this century, and revolutionary upheaval for most of the past decade, Nicaraguans have also had to struggle with issues that Brazilians have not had to face, such as the relationship between revolutionary politics and Christianity. These issues made tiny Nicaragua a big symbol for both progressives and conservatives within the Catholic church.

Nicaraguans are an intensely devout people, but in 1979 most of them saw no contradiction between being Christians and being revolutionaries. The overwhelming majority of Catholic priests and laity supported the Sandinista-led rebellion against the corrupt, brutal, and exploitative Somoza dictatorship. The growing opposition of the Catholic hierarchy to the Somoza regime culminated in June 1979 in an unprecedented pastoral letter that legitimated the popular rebellion then under way. This step identified the Church with the Sandinista-led rebellion, as did the prominent roles played by base communities and priests within the Sandinista movement.

When Somoza fled in July 1979 and a coalition "government of national reconstruction" replaced him in Managua, several priests were named to cabinet positions, while others headed its economic planning and its literacy campaign. Here at last was a revolution that had come to power with the support of the Church, under leaders who professed their faith, a revolution free from the anticlericalism of the Cuban and Mexican revolutions.

Yet, four years later, relations between the Church hierarchy and the Sandinista state were tense, the pope was demanding that priests leave the government, and Archbishop Miguel Obando y Bravo, the primate of the Nicaraguan Church, had become a leading critic of the Sandinista revolution. What had gone wrong in this partnership between Catholic revolutionaries and their Church?

For the most part, the trajectory of church-state relations in revolutionary Nicaragua paralleled the breakdown of the coalition that had brought

the Sandinistas to power. The euphoria that followed Somoza's fall soon gave way to a growing concern among the Sandinistas' centrist partners that their revolution was a Marxist wolf in Christian sheep's clothing. Archbishop Obando y Bravo shared these concerns. He had opposed Somoza, but he did not share the social radicalism of Nicaragua's progressive clergy or their openness to Marxist analysis of Nicaragua's problems. Nor did he accept the legitimacy of their efforts to create what he viewed as a "people's church" sympathetic to the Sandinistas and largely autonomous of episcopal control. On the contrary, he was a staunch anticommunist who worried about the Sandinistas' ideology and the progressives' theology.

Obando y Bravo's opposition was encouraged by the United States, which sought to reverse the Sandinista victory. Washington viewed the Church as the Nicaraguan institution that could lead the internal political opposition to the Sandinistas that would complement its own economic pressures and Contra guerrillas. It looked to the archbishop to legitimate this opposition, and to Pope John Paul II to restore order and orthodoxy to a divided Nicaraguan Church.

For a Polish pope who had spent his life confronting a Communist regime, the triumph in Nicaragua of a Marxist-led revolution with the help of the local Catholic church was a disturbing development. His concern deepened with the Sandinista promotion of the "people's church" advocated by some progressive clergy, which identified "the kingdom of God" with their revolution and challenged the authority of the Catholic hierarchy by drawing on arguments from liberation theology and the conclusions of Vatican II and Medellin. Within this context, the presence of priests in high office within the Sandinista government was a red flag to the former Cardinal Wojtyla. In 1981 the pope ordered the priests to leave their government positions.

Yet only one of the priests had obeyed his directive when John Paul II landed at Managua airport on his first trip to Central America in March 1983. Father Ernesto Cardenal, the minister of culture and Nicaragua's leading poet, was on the tarmac to greet the pontiff. But as Father Cardenal knelt to kiss the pope's hand, John Paul II wagged a finger with the admonition: "You must straighten out your position with the Church."<sup>7</sup>

It was a sign of conflicts to come in a papal visit that was filled with confrontations. The most dramatic took place at an historic outdoor mass in Managua attended by an estimated half-million Nicaraguans, including the nine-member Sandinista Directorate, in a setting dominated by murals of revolutionary "martyrs" and a giant billboard proclaiming: "THANK GOD AND THE REVOLUTION." When the pope seized the occasion to criticize the government for dividing the Church by promoting "unacceptable ideological commitments," organized Sandinista supporters drowned him out with chants of "Popular Power" and other revolutionary slogans. A furious John Paul II tried to silence them, but the confrontation between contrasting visions of the proper relationship between Catholic church and revolutionary state was not so easily suppressed.

Despite his appeals for dialogue and reconciliation, which the Vatican continued to reiterate during the months that followed, the pontiff's visit seemed to harden Nicaragua's political lines and the divisions within its Catholic church. Father Cardenal and the other priests remained in the government and a minority of committed Catholic revolutionaries continued to support the Sandinistas and a "people's church" centered on grassroots groups such as shantytown base communities. A vocal conservative minority, led by Bishop Pablo Vega before his expulsion in 1986, increasingly opposed the Sandinistas, and some even supported the armed Contra resistance to their rule. Archbishop Obando y Bravo himself, at the urging of the Vatican, became less aggressive in his opposition to the regime, but he questioned the legitimacy of the Sandinista draft in their civil war against the Contras, for whom he held a Miami mass in 1985 after his elevation to cardinal. A majority of Nicaraguan Catholics, including moderate bishops, preferred reconciliation within the Church, a negotiated resolution to the civil war, and peaceful reforms within society. In Nicaragua, the Catholic church was as divided as the rest of society and along very similar lines. Yet, by the end of the decade, moderation would prevail both in the pulpit and at the polls—in an election that was the result of a negotiated settlement in which Cardinal Obando y Bravo would himself play a mediator's role.

The impact of the pope's 1983 visit to Central America was not

restricted to Nicaragua. In war-torn El Salvador and Guatemala, John Paul II's promotion of a middle way between "rightist authoritarianism" and "leftist totalitarianism" fell on more receptive ears, as did his urging the Church to promote a dialogue between warring extremes.

John Paul II apparently left Central America persuaded that a lasting peace could be achieved only if human rights and social justice were secured, although he urged the faithful to pursue those goals by nonviolent means. But the pope's experience of Sandinista Nicaragua seems to have persuaded him that he had seen the future of liberation theology and the "people's church," and did not like it. In its wake, he reaffirmed his ban on priests in politics and elaborated his own "theology of reconciliation," which held that personal conversion, not class struggle, was the solution to "social sin," and that "spiritual mobilization," not armed revolution, was the way to transform oppressive structures.

Nor was John Paul II willing to accept a democratization of the Church that could call into question his own supreme authority, or those of bishops within their dioceses or priests within their parishes. During the years that followed, he backed efforts to contain the influence of liberation theology, beginning with the largest and most independent of the region's Churches—Brazil.

### *A New Catholic Counterreformation?*

The value placed on consensus and the ascendancy of the National Council of Bishops within the Brazilian Church enabled it to avoid the polarization of a Nicaragua. But during the 1980s, a battle was waged for the soul of Brazil's Catholic church, one in which the pope played a major role.

Tensions between the Vatican and the Brazilian Church had been growing since John Paul II's first visit, in 1980, as the pope sought to limit the autonomy of the world's largest national Church, and they intensified after his 1983 trip to Central America. Equally important, the situation in Brazil had changed as well. After 1980, Brazil's gradual transition to democracy accelerated, and in 1985, the last military president was replaced by a

civilian leader elected by the Congress. In the political context of a transition to democracy, most moderates agreed with Dom Eugenic Sales, the conservative archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, that "a new period for the Brazilian Church is beginning. The Church had a very active role in the period when Brazil was becoming a closed society. It was the 'voice of those who had no voice.' Today the parliament, press, and parties are functioning fully. They should speak, and the Church should take care of its own affairs."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, many moderates felt uneasy at the extent to which progressives had become identified with leftist labor unions and political parties. In Sao Paulo, Cardinal Arns had allowed clerics to promote Lula's Workers' Party and base communities to help in its campaigns. This made some moderates more receptive to the message of conservatives within the Church hierarchy, led by Cardinal Sales.

Sales accepted the decisions of Medellin and Puebla, but sharply criticized the way they were implemented by progressives. Dom Eugenio did not oppose the preferential option for the poor, but he interpreted it to mean "an evangelical option that includes all the poor in any sense of poverty, material and spiritual. The poor," he stressed, "are all those who need God's greatness."<sup>9</sup> In practice, this meant a deemphasis on the economically deprived and a stress on the spiritual needs of the middle class and educated youth. Sales and his top aide, Swiss-born Bishop Josef Romer, did not oppose liberation theology outright, but they damned it with faint praise. "The intentions of liberation theology are good," affirmed Romer, "because it is impossible for the Church in Latin America to live with such great poverty." But "liberation theology also has a big demerit: using Marxism instead of the Gospel and talking of class struggle as if it were a biblical postulate."

Sales and Romer were also accepting in principle, yet critical of practices of Brazil's Christian Base Communities. Here, too, Bishop Romer argued, "the idea and the intentions were good, a way for the priests to share with the people their anguish, fears, and suffering, and to offer them solidarity," but the results had been problematic. "Many people began talking of the base communities as if they were a new church, a *people's* church," he explained.

But, Dom Eugenic insisted, the communities were part of the Church and they required close supervision by the hierarchy. "Their mission is not determined by the people," he stressed.<sup>10</sup> For Cardinal Sales, the mission of the base communities is not social and political action, but deepening the religiosity and promoting the personal transformation of their members. Although many progressives might endorse these goals, they would also insist that for Brazil's poor such personal transformations also required reforming the structures of society, and that entailed social and political action.

"The base communities have great potential to help the poor to help themselves," Romer argued, "but in Brazil they have sometimes been distorted by political interests." That was not the case in Sales's archdiocese. "Here in Rio de Janeiro, we do not allow base communities to be used as a vehicle for a political party, as has happened in other places in Brazil," Romer asserted, with a swipe at Cardinal Arns. "Here in Rio ... we do not confuse politicization with evangelization. We stress that we want to promote political participation in the name of the Gospel, but not evangelization in the name of a politician."

When the Vatican decided to move against the autonomy of the Brazilian Church and the power of the progressives within it, Cardinal Sales became its chief local spokesman and his archdiocese the showcase for an alternative model of Catholicism than that identified with the progressives. It also promoted the conservative movements of European Catholicism—Opus Dei and Communion and Liberation—which progressives point out were also actively involved in politics. Moreover, where the most progressive of Brazil's prelates stressed that all members of the Church could participate in deepening its teaching function, Sales took a narrower view. Sales stood as well for a more traditional Church in which consultations might occur but the bishop's word was supreme in his diocese and papal authority was unquestioned in the Catholic world.

Beginning in 1984, the Vatican stepped up its attacks on liberation theology. The pope publicly condemned its Marxist elements, Gustavo Gutierrez was criticized by the Vatican, and Leonardo Boff was officially "silenced"

Increasingly, Pope John Paul II used his power to appoint and transfer bishops to dilute the power of progressives within the Brazilian Church. The most dramatic reversal came in Recife, in the impoverished Northeast, a bastion of liberation theology under the inspired leadership of Dom Helder Camara—for decades "the prophetic voice of the Brazilian Church," stressed Dom Angelico. When Dom Helder retired in 1985, John Paul II nominated a combative conservative as his successor. The result was an undeclared ecclesiastical war in which many priests refused to meet with the new archbishop, who closed two seminaries, fired eight priests, purged the local Pastoral Land Commission, and phased out the Peace and Justice Commission.

But even in Sao Paulo, where Cardinal Arns remains archbishop, John Paul II has curtailed his power and limited his influence. In 1989, Dom Paulo's huge archdiocese was divided into five independent sees, leaving Arns with the mostly middle-class center of the city, but without authority over many of the working-class suburbs that were the sites of his most progressive innovations. Arns had favored restructuring the world's largest archdiocese, but not along these lines, and his twelve recommendations for the prelates whose authority would replace his own were ignored by the Vatican.

In Sao Miguel, this meant the replacement of Dom Angelico by a new bishop, who was less supportive of base communities and worker commissions, and more interested in reaching the middle class and talking about the family. Progressive priests like Padre David continued to promote grassroots organizations and democratic participation, while trying to reconcile their concerns with those of a more conservative bishop, but it was a difficult task, and in 1991 there was a sense that the base communities and street groups were in decline.

Part of the problem was "burnout" within the communities, after two decades of intense activity, along with the loss of the most able and committed leaders to political groups such as Lula's Workers' Party within the altered political context of Brazil's restored democracy. But the character and concerns of the new bishop had also played a role. "The energy is gone," Padre David lamented. "Without the support of your bishop, you feel like you are out there on your own."

The priorities of the new bishop had also led to a greater attention to the needs and concerns of the middle class who had bought houses in Sao Miguel during the past decade. As a result, one lay missionary worried that the shantytown dwellers whom she had cultivated for more than a decade were feeling increasingly ill at ease in the base communities and were participating less. At a 1991 meeting of base community leaders to discuss the family, the theme for the year, a group of workers were openly critical of the new priorities. One asked angrily: "What has happened to *our* concerns?"

Yet, in Vila Brasilandia, on the other side of Sao Paulo, an area similar in character to Sao Miguel where Dom Angelico was now bishop, those concerns still claimed priority, and progressive priests and laity spoke of continued support from above and dynamism below—although Arns himself recognized that many CEBs were floundering after "twenty years of existence." Within the archdiocese of Sao Paulo, Cardinal Arns pressed on with the elaboration of his progressive vision of the Church. After a year-long process that included consultations with non-Catholics as well as Catholics and a vote by a council composed of both clerics and laity, the archdiocese decided in mid-1991 that its priorities for the next three years would be work, health, and housing, "the three main problems of the people," one priest underscored. In the Brazilian Church, much still depended on the local bishops—and they spanned a broad spectrum of views.

The result was a mixed picture of conservative advances and progressive continuity within a national context of moderation set by Brazil's National Council of Bishops. By 1991, one half of Brazil's 298 active bishops had been appointed by John Paul II, giving the CNBB a more conservative cast. But the majority of Brazilian bishops remained moderates, balancing articulate conservative and progressive minorities with their own desire for consensus and concern for the autonomy and unity of Brazil's Catholic church.

By 1991, moreover, progressives themselves had shifted their stand, sometimes as a tactic, more often as a result of their own rethinking or the new concerns of their flocks. Liberation theology, always a diverse body of opinion that reflected the society and era in which it was created, changed



over time, as did the stance of its advocates. Dom Angelico talked of "doing the same thing as before, but in a different way."<sup>11</sup> But he also agreed with Bishop Romer that "it is not the function of the Church to get involved in party politics." Significantly, as the political preoccupations of base communities and other grassroots organizations receded—in part out of disillusionment with party politics—spiritual concerns have taken center stage. Dom Angelico's Workers' Commission now organizes pilgrimages and several of Padre David's base communities have constructed chapels around which their activities now revolve. Today few Brazilian bishops favor identifying the Catholic church with a particular labor union or political party. Fewer still condone violence as a political tactic or social strategy.

Yet most back the Pastoral Land Commission, which continues to support Brazil's landless peasants and poor squatters in their struggles to acquire land in a country where 2 percent of the landowners hold 57 percent of the arable land, struggles that cost seventy-five lives in 1990. The Land Commission, with its support for rural unions and land seizures, remains an anathema to conservatives such as Bishop Romer, who criticizes it for "provoking conflicts instead of resolving them." But the CNBB continues to back the Land Commission as fulfilling the Church's preferential option for the rural poor, and both conservatives and progressives accept the CNBB's authority.

Progressive Catholics may be on the defensive in the final decade of the millennium, but they have made their mark on the world's largest national Church. As a result, there is a consensus in Brazil in favor of a strong Church stand on human rights and democracy, and even conservatives talk of the need for social justice and a special concern for the poor. Moreover, as the pope himself stressed on his 1991 visit to Brazil, the Church also endorses land reform and indigenous rights, while opposing policies that have created "two Brazils: one poor and one rich."

Within the Church, the CNBB has established itself as a national force with a capacity to innovate and shape a Brazilian Catholicism. Grass-roots organizations such as the base communities have proliferated throughout the region and established a popular participation that the

Vatican may want to redirect into more exclusively spiritual channels but is reluctant to reverse.

Progressive theologians might trim their sails to accommodate the changed winds from Rome, but "people have been touched by the message of liberation theology and *that is* consolidated," one lay missionary stressed, reflecting on her Sao Miguel experience. "They themselves tell us that, and you can see it in the connections they make between life and faith—even in what they sing." She smiled at the memory: "They love to sing that song about the Exodus that goes: 'We are the People of God'—and, when they reflect on that line, they say: '*We too* are the people of God.' Now *that* won't go away!"

### ***Is Latin America Turning Protestant?***

In Ipanema, the beautiful beach community of Rio de Janeiro, Sunday is a special day. Along the broad strand of golden sand one half of the coastal road is closed to traffic, and filled with joggers and exercisers toning their halfnaked bodies for the weekend ritual. By midmorning the beach is filled with sun worshipers spread-eagled on the altar of hedonism, living witnesses to the Brazilian cult of the body beautiful.

A few blocks away, in the main square of Ipanema, a different ritual is being enacted. In the church of Sao Francisco, a Catholic mass in Portuguese is being intoned by the parish priest. The church is full, mostly with wealthy couples, many of whom seem more interested in who else is there than in the words of the sermon echoing through its neo-Gothic space. But there are also people of intense religiosity, like the beautiful adolescent girl with long blonde hair and eyes welling with tears, who burns a candle and kneels in prayer at a side altar of the Madonna, oblivious to the larger ceremony around her, then crosses herself and slips silently out a side door.

Across the square, in a plain upstairs hall filled with electronic synthesizer music an equally large number of people are gathered, listening intently to a young man preaching with a hand-held microphone like a

religious rock star. Most are poor women, many of whom work in the homes of the wealthy attending the Catholic mass across the square or in the shops and restaurants that line the commercial district of Ipanema. They have come for a prayer meeting of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, one of the largest of the Pentecostal sects that are the fastest-growing religious groups in Brazil.

There are now more Protestant preachers than Catholic priests in the world's largest Catholic country and estimates of "born-again" Brazilians range as high as thirty million. They are the most dramatic evidence for the recent inroads of evangelical Protestantism in many of the countries of Latin America, inroads that have led to claims of forty million converts and brought observers to ask: "Is Latin America Turning Protestant?"<sup>12</sup>

The conventional wisdom is that Latin America is Catholic territory, with some 95 percent of its population born into the Church. Until recent decades, Protestant penetration of this Catholic preserve was restricted to Caribbean basin areas colonized or influenced by Protestant nations such as Britain, Holland, and the United States, or else to regions of Protestant immigration, such as the German Lutherans of southern Brazil. But since World War II, Protestants have emerged as a serious challenge to Catholic hegemony in a continent that Rome has long considered its own.

Today roughly half the region's Protestants live in Brazil. The dislocation of rural migrants that posed new problems for the Catholic church created new opportunities for Protestant rivals—such as the Pentecostals, who took off from Methodism's theology and Baptism's recipe for salvation but stressed conversion through direct experience of the Holy Spirit. In 1930, Pentecostals represented only one in ten Brazilian Protestants (aside from the German Lutherans); by 1964, they accounted for seven of eight.

The oldest and largest of these Pentecostal churches is the U.S.-based Assemblies of God. Their Brazilian church was founded in 1911 by two Swedes who received "the call" to spread the word in Para, at the mouth of the Amazon, while attending a revival meeting in South Bend, Indiana. Their preaching won the support of many of Para's Baptists and the Assemblies of God expanded from there. In the countryside, they captured the disillusioned followers of a failed local messiah. In the villages, they

won converts to their chapels among migrant laborers. In the towns and cities, they held open-air prayer meetings and established "mother churches" that spread a network of satellite churches through urban neighborhoods and surrounding communities. Their stress on the capacity of ordinary people filled with the Holy Spirit to become church leaders turned every member into an evangelist and the Assemblies of God into Brazil's fastest-growing denomination. By 1964 the Assemblies of God claimed one million Brazilian believers, and by 1984, six million, half their Latin American members and roughly half of Brazil's Protestants.

Though the largest, the Assemblies of God were just one of many Pentecostal groups in Brazil to experience a rapid increase in membership during these decades. Some had only a handful of believers meeting in a *favela* shanty or a storefront; others claimed hundreds of thousands of members and boasted ample, modern facilities and access to the mass media. Prominent among the latter were such homegrown churches as "Brazil For Christ," founded in 1956 by Manoel de Mello. He began with the Assemblies of God but formed his own church after becoming a successful evangelist. By 1964, Brazil For Christ claimed three hundred thousand members, recruited largely from the migrant urban lower and working classes, and it was the fourth largest Protestant group in Brazil. Today it has four hundred fifty thousand members. It boasts the biggest religious temple in Latin America, a huge Sao Paulo mother church that twenty thousand people attend each week, and a media arm that broadcasts nearly three hundred radio programs daily over 250 stations.

The emulation of U.S. media evangelists is even more apparent in the spectacular rise of "Bishop" Edir Macedo and his Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. Macedo began preaching in a Rio funeral home to a few followers and during the 1970s formed his own Universal Church, which today has temples throughout Brazil, a membership estimated in the millions, and a publishing house of its own. Recently, Macedo bought control of Rede Record, a radio and television network, for an estimated forty-five million dollars, a sign of his understanding of the power and potential of the "electronic church" pioneered by such U.S. televangelists as Jimmy Swaggart and Pat Robertson, both of whom have had a major impact on

evangelicals in Latin America and the Caribbean. Macedo's ability to accumulate that kind of money is testimony to the hold that he has over his mostly poor followers. Their willingness to reach into their shallow pockets and share their meager earnings was as evident in Ipanema on Sunday morning as their readiness to raise their arms in praise of the liberating power of the Holy Spirit.

Instead of a theology of liberation from worldly evils, Macedo offers a cult of liberation from evil spirits, which he sees as his divine mission: "By the work of the Holy Spirit, our church was raised up for a special task: Liberating people possessed by demons."<sup>13</sup> He calls his church the final stage in the development of Protestantism that began in Europe but will culminate in Brazil:

*We have already passed through the era of Protestant prayer 'with Luther, of revivalist prayer with John Wesley and now we have to go beyond merely Pentecostal prayer, which is in fashion, to the complete prayer that distinguishes us. We have to go beyond saying that Jesus saves [like the Baptists], and baptizing with the Holy Spirit [like the Pentecostals], in order, above all, to liberate people who are oppressed by the devil.*<sup>14</sup>

Churches that practice exorcism like Macedo's Universal Church now occupy a significant place in Brazil's broad religious spectrum.

The proliferation of Protestant churches in Brazil is as astonishing as their rapid growth. There are many reasons for this Protestant explosion, and only some are religious. Most boast charismatic preachers, like Manoel de Mello or Edir Macedo. Their enthusiastic practices, including possessions by the Holy Spirit, exorcisms of evil spirits, and speaking in tongues, offer a powerful and immediate religious experience, which brings the believer into direct contact with the divine. Their faith healings are today's miracles, testimonies of grace and substitutes for the modern medicine that the poor cannot afford and rural migrants do not trust.

But there are also more secular reasons for the dramatic success of Pentecostals among the poor migrants to Brazil's burgeoning urban slums. Their informal meetings of small prayer groups are congenial to those

intimidated by the anonymous city. Many Pentecostal groups cut their converts off from the surrounding society, creating comprehensible communities comparable to the rural villages they had left. At the same time, these congregations function as support groups that help the new arrivals adjust to urban life and find jobs and housing. They also act as escalators of personal advancement. Stressing sobriety, thrift, and self-help, these groups confer an enhanced sense of self-worth and self-confidence on their members, who are encouraged to participate actively in the life and leadership of the congregation even if they are poor, black, or illiterate. This egalitarian promotion of lay leadership offers the poor the exhilaration of empowerment.

Though many of these features are also characteristic of the Catholic base communities, much of this Pentecostal expansion seems to be at Catholic expense. Claims that Brazilian Catholics were converting to evangelical Protestantism at the rate of six hundred thousand a year may be exaggerated, along with projections that show Latin America becoming Protestant territory early in the next millennium. But the stress that Pope John Paul II laid on the Protestant challenge during his 1991 visit to Brazil and the extent to which the Vatican has retooled to combat it—including plans for its own electronic church, *Lumens 2000*—underscores the seriousness with which this Pentecostal expansion is regarded within the Catholic church.

Catholic conservatives and progressives may disagree on other issues, but both share a concern with the inroads of evangelical Protestantism among the faithful. Where there is less agreement is over *why* Brazilians are leaving the Catholic church for these Protestant sects. Conservative clerics like Bishop Romer stress the Church's failure "to meet the spiritual needs of the people." At the Rio prayer meeting of Macedo's Universal Church, believers agreed with this diagnosis. Carlos, the teen preacher, told how he had been brought up as a Catholic, but left the Church because it was "spiritually dead." Margarethe, a woman in her thirties with two young children, stressed that she had become a "believer" because in the Catholic church "you worship a dead god and here I found the living God."

In response, the Church has promoted Catholic charismatic move-

ments, with many of these same characteristics, including speaking in tongues and possession by the Holy Spirit. Their rapid spread, with more than one million adherents in Brazil by 1991, suggested that such movements were responding to a real spiritual need. Even progressives were willing to concede that "we have stressed the historical Christ too much and neglected the Holy Spirit," as one catechist in Sao Miguel put it. The recent spiritual focus of many base communities reflects this realization. Dom Angelico, who claimed to be "concerned about the quality of belief, not the quantity of believers," also recognized a need to improve the evangelical work of the Church. His solution was to create more base communities and street groups, ones small enough to offer the intimate community of the Protestant sects and with a similar degree of participation and shared prayer and self-help.

But to conservatives like Bishop Romer, progressive base communities were part of the problem, not its solution, because they offered "sociological support," not the "human support" that the Protestant sects provided. Romer might be correct, but for different reasons than he claimed. The problem was not the social concerns of the base community, but the character of its members and the burdens of its theology. The base communities, with their stress on Bible reading and analysis of the written word, emphasized a literacy that many poor Brazilians did not possess. In one Rio shantytown, an illiterate woman who left a base community to become a Pentecostal, explained that

*/ used to be a Catholic. But 'when these Bible circles came, all they did was read, read, read. There 'was no more prayer. Ifelt they only liked those who could read. The Assembly of God is a place of prayer. They know that the Word kills, but the Spirit revives.<sup>15</sup>*

But in another *Rio favela*, a teacher who had no literacy problem had also left a base community for an evangelical congregation because of the difference in the people. "Here I found peace and love and a community of help. Elsewhere there is a lot of egotism, but here people always help you with your problems," Cecilia explained after an upbeat prayer meeting

at the local Universal Church. "When I first came here I had many problems—especially family problems. But with the help of the Holy Spirit and the pastor and the people here, I overcame these problems." In her local base community, Cecilia had been reluctant to discuss her family problems in front of neighbors who might gossip about her. The Universal Church congregation, composed of people who had themselves come seeking help, was more supportive as a community. "Many people come here desperate because of their problems, but they leave here feeling peaceful."

Community support might be one reason, but an absolution from personal responsibility embedded in Macedo's theology was another reason for this inner peace. "I learned that many of my problems were caused by evil spirits," Cecilia said. In the Catholic church individuals are responsible for their sins. But in the Universal Church, if your husband left you or your child was unruly or you fell ill, evil spirits are to blame, and prayer, exorcism, or the laying on of hands could solve the problem.

The return of democracy in Brazil brought Pentecostal leaders into the political limelight. Most were drawn to a right of center politics and many supported the military regime of 1964–85. But this identification of Pentecostals with the political right is not universal, as is often claimed. One of the largest and most flamboyant evangelical churches—Brazil For Christ—shared with progressive Catholics their opposition to the military and espousal of liberal causes. Benedita da Silva, the Rio slum-dweller and federal deputy, belongs to the generally conservative Assemblies of God, but represents the same leftist Workers' Party as many progressive Catholics. As a teenager in a Rio shantytown, Benedita had developed leftist views and leadership skills participating in Dom Helder Camara's youth movement, but she later joined the Pentecostals out of "a need for greater intimacy with God." Yet Benedita's conversion to a Pentecostal church with a reputation for conservative views has not altered her politics. She is as known for her progressive stands in the Assemblies of God as in the Brazilian Congress: "I belong to a minority there too," she said. "They're always talking about life after death. I say, fine, but let's not forget life after birth."<sup>16</sup>



Benedita's family was as much involved in Afro-Brazilian religion as in the Catholic Church. The explosive growth of Brazilian Pentecostalism is not only a response to the Catholic failure to meet the spiritual needs of poor rural migrants, but is also an alternative to the expansion of Spiritist religions of African origin among these newly urban populations.

In Copacabana, Rio's most famous beach suburb, a pastor in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God is carrying out public exorcisms of evil spirits with the support and praise of his congregation. But these are not just any demons. The names by which the pastor calls them are those of the spirits worshiped by the Afro-Brazilian cults that are the Pentecostals' chief rivals for the adherence of the country's urban poor. The exorcisms are part of "a holy war" declared by Bishop Macedo on the gods of Africa that the slaves brought with them to America. Using a microphone and a powerful speaker system, the pastor commands the spirits to leave the body of an ailing *mulata*. Soon she is rolling on the floor in agony and ecstasy while the congregation condemns the exorcised Afro-Brazilian spirit "to burn in the Holy Fire of Jesus of Nazareth."

### *Houses of the Spirits*

Outside a large building in a prosperous residential neighborhood in Brasilia, the parking lot is filled with late-model cars and old jalopies. It is Friday night and inside the white-walled structure an Umbanda ceremony is taking place. The devotees sit on plain wooden benches waiting their turn to consult the spirits. They seem a racial and social cross-section of Brazilian society—white and mulatto, black and Asian. There are poor people with shabby clothing, but most are middle-class and some are stylishly dressed. Mariana is a social worker, Sebastiao a construction worker, Herminia a housewife, and Sergio a government bureaucrat. All are members of the same "Spiritist center."

These are but a few of the millions of Brazilians who practice Umbanda, a uniquely Brazilian religion that combines the rites of Brazil's

enslaved Africans with the seances of European pseudoscience. "Most Brazilians may be nominally Catholic," asserted anthropologist Jose Jorge de Carvalho, "but Spiritism is the real religion of Brazil."

Belief in communication with the unseen spirit world has a long history in Brazil. It already existed among indigenous peoples when the Portuguese arrived in 1500. During the centuries of slavery that followed, Africans brought with them to the New World their own rites of spirit possession and divination. But the story of contemporary Brazilian Spiritism begins in France in 1855, when a Parisian spiritualist began to receive messages through a medium from a "Druid" spirit who identified himself as Allan Kardec. These seance "psychographs" formed the basis of "Spiritism," which combined the evolutionism of nineteenth-century Positivism with Christian ethics and Hindu notions of reincarnation. "Kardec's" *Book of the Spirits* reached Brazil in 1857 and within three decades Brazil had become the most important center of Spiritism in the world—a title that it has retained ever since. By 1990 the number of Brazilian Spiritists was estimated at seven million, while those who consulted one of Brazil's fifty-five hundred Spiritist centers in times of need was calculated at twenty million.

In France, Spiritism remained a scientific philosophy on the margins of polite society. In Brazil, Kardecism was transformed into a mystical religion of the educated middle classes. Its seances centered on miraculous cures through spiritual healing by the laying on of hands, *pases*, and spiritual vibrations designed to draw out evil fluids and infuse beneficial ones, and around moral instruction from "evolved" spirits—including such philosophers and political leaders as Confucius and Abraham Lincoln—intended to free mortals from suffering caused by the errors of their past lives.

Afro-Brazilian and Amerindian deities were recognized as real, but were rejected as "ignorant" spirits whose lack of culture and uncouth behavior barred them from Kardecist rituals, which were carefully controlled by specially trained mediums. Socially, Brazilian Kardecists distinguished themselves from the mostly black, lower-class devotees of Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Candomble and Macumba, which they referred to disparagingly as "low Spiritism." Yet it was through its fusion

with these Afro-Brazilian beliefs that Kardecism would have its greatest Brazilian impact, in the cults of Umbanda.

Umbanda is an urban twentieth-century religion centered on the Brazilian spirits excluded by Kardecism. It was founded in Rio de Janeiro during the 1920s by middle-class whites who had become dissatisfied with an overly refined Kardecism. They were attracted to the drama and power of Candornble and Macumba, but repelled by their blood sacrifices, black magic, and lower-class settings. Their solution was to synthesize European and African Spiritism into a uniquely Brazilian religion that would satisfy the spiritual needs of the educated white middle class, within whose ranks Umbanda expanded rapidly during the decades that followed World War II.

Umbanda devotees today number in the tens of millions and its cults span a broad spectrum of rites and society. At one end are the thousands of Umbanda centers, often in lower-class neighborhoods, that remain close to its Afro-Brazilian roots. Its *chefes*, or chiefs—Pais or Maes de Santos (Fathers or Mothers of the Saints)—may lead Umbanda ceremonies one day and Candornble the next. One of the most noted is Jose Paiva de Oliveira, president of a Brazilian federation of Candornble and Umbanda, and a faith healer of repute. The walls of his center are decorated with photographs of the politicians and other famous people who have consulted him at his suburban "farm" in Luiziania near Brasilia, where Pai Paiva presides over Afro-Brazilian rites that run from "light" Umbanda to "heavy" Candornble. Each rite has its place in the calendar and space within his compound. There are rooms for each of the West African *orixas*, or deities, of Candornble, where the initiated celebrate their cults.

Umbanda, on the other hand, is celebrated in the open courtyard of his compound, around a table strung with colored lights on which the symbols of the spirits to be called have been placed. Chief among them are the proud, unconquered Indian Caboclos and the passive but wise Preto Velho slaves from Brazil's past. Here Umbanda's material symbols seem kitsch Candornble. Its Pretos Velhos are minstrel-show blacks, tourist figurines of pipe-smoking Uncle Toms. Its Caboclos are cigar-store Indians, whose appearance owes more to movies than to anthropology. They

might have Brazilian names like Tupinamba, but their feathered head-dresses recall the Comanches of the U.S. plains as imagined by Hollywood Westerns, not the naked, painted bodies of Amazon Indians. These images of Indian and African spirits reflect common myths of Brazil's past, but as visualized by popular culture in the age of global mass media.

Brazilian Candomble, like Haitian Voodoo, is at bottom the religion of African villages transported to American plantations. Umbanda, on the other hand, is a translation of African beliefs for Brazilian city dwellers, many of them white, middle-class, and upwardly mobile. For Pai Paiva, Umbanda is a simplification of Candomble, a lesser truth within the same Afro-Brazilian tradition for a broader public. Its songs are simpler—and sung in Portuguese, not Yoruba—and its dances less complex. In Candomble, he explains, the African *orixas* themselves possess their worshipers; in Umbanda they are usually distant astral figures who are too evolved to descend to earth. Instead, they send spirit intermediaries, most of whom are pseudohistorical figures from Brazil's distant or recent past: Indian chiefs and black slaves, or bandits and prostitutes transmuted into Exus, the unruly messengers of the deities. It is also "lighter" than Candomble, demanding less of its devotees and restricting its scope to socially acceptable forms of desire and benevolent "white" magic. Its ceremonies do not use liquor or drugs; their stress is on charity and good works; its offerings are honey and grains, not blood sacrifices. "Candomble is African," said Pai Paiva. "Umbanda is *Brazilian*."

This identification with Brazilian nationalism was a source of Umbanda's broader acceptance after World War II, but there are more profound reasons as well for its spectacular leap in recent decades. Pai Paiva's claim that "one third of Brazil's 150 million people are devotees" may be exaggerated, but no one doubts that tens of millions have sought the aid of its *chefes*. Many are rural migrants trying to cope with unaccustomed lives in anonymous cities. Some converted to Protestantism, but more turned to Umbanda, which was closer to their cultural heritage and required less change in their lives, even allowing them to remain nominally Catholic. For these migrants, Umbanda provided both a supportive community directed by benevolent human and divine patrons and an explana-

tion of the difficulties that they faced in their daily lives. Pai Paiva stressed that "Umbanda is a very practical religion," whose rituals are designed to solve the problems of the faithful—their lack of work, money, or love—through the advice dispensed by the spirits, the support network created through the center, and the charity of the *chefe*.

It is this concrete, problem-solving character of Umbanda that many devotees cited when asked why they were Umbandistas. Joao, a recent migrant from the Northeast, had become an ardent follower when his Pai had arranged for him to work at a factory managed by another member of his local center. Sebastiao, a black construction worker, had become a convert when his Mae had cured an illness with herbs and purification after medical doctors had not helped him. Herrninia, a middle-aged *mulata* housewife, had turned to Umbanda when other methods had failed to restore her husband's fidelity. Pomba-Gira, the brazen Exu of aggressive sensuality, had revealed to her that her problems were the result of a spell cast by her rival and showed her how to get her husband back. All had become firm believers in Umbanda because of the concrete benefits they had received.

There are also urban centers of "Pure" or "White" Umbanda throughout Brazil that cater to an educated, middle-class clientele. Brasilia's Spiritist Center of Our Lady of Glory—associated with Yemenja, the Yoruba goddess of the sea—is located on a large lot in a comfortable neighborhood, its identity announced by a discreet sign and the concentration of cars in its ample parking lot. The temple is adjacent to an old-age home supported by the center, a symbol and incarnation of its commitment to the Kardecist ideal of charity. Its decor is austere. The temple walls are pure white, on which the abstract signs of *orixas* have been drawn. In the front is the ritual sector where the *chefe* and mediums receive the spirits, presided over by a statue of a beneficent Madonna. The rectangular hall is divided in half by a fence with gates leading to a back waiting area with simple benches, where the clients wait to consult the spirits. The mediums and their assistants are dressed in white uniforms, like hospital orderlies, but there is an otherworldly quality to the scene and an almost monastic air to the ritual that is accentuated by the a capella singing of hymns.

The Umbanda ceremony begins with an invocation of Jesus, its link to Christianity. A reading from Allan Kardec suggests its other European source of inspiration. The invocation of God the Father initiates the shift to African ritual, as the creator invoked is not the Hebrew Jehovah but the Yoruba Oxala. The major African *orixas* are then honored in turn, but not called upon to appear. It is with the calling of the spirits, by songs and clapping, that the main part of the ceremony, the possessions and consultations, begins. At irregular intervals, the mediums go into trances and take on the personalities of the spirits. One is visited by the Caboclo Tupinamba, a proud warrior spirit who demands a cheroot and staggers around emitting war whoops. He is known for his herbal remedies. A Preto Velho, Rei Congo, comes next, greeting the *chefe*, telling his story, and offering counsel. His medium is a woman whose voice suddenly drops in register and calls for a pipe.

The petitioners who wish to consult the spirits remove their shoes, enter the ritual sector of the hall, and approach the possessed medium, who embraces them. They are then cleansed by a laying on of hands that draws the evil forces that are afflicting them out of their bodies. This is accompanied by a rhythmic finger clicking that contrasts with the irregular cries of the possessed. Tupinamba bathes his client with cigar smoke and the consultation begins. What had been an orderly ceremony seems to disintegrate into anarchy, as devotees come forward to consult the spirits and some of them are also possessed. But the appearance of dissolved order is an illusion. When all those waiting have been served, the *chefe* comes out of his trance and leads a brief hymn to Yemanjá and a final song of thanks to Oxala, bringing the ceremony to a close. The devotees genuflect as they leave, as in the Catholic church many attend on Sundays.

Public ceremonies are usually held two or three times a week, although on other nights Umbanda *chefes* may hold personal consultations. But their responsibilities include more than spiritual mediation. They also devote time and energy to the organization of their center, although the larger and more prosperous centers have administrators and boards of directors. Pure Umbanda *chefes* are often middle-class professionals, even military officers or government bureaucrats, who generally do not depend

on their Umbanda earnings, and may donate more to their center than they receive from its members.

Their clients, however, often see Umbanda as a source of material as well as spiritual fulfillment. In another Brasilia Spiritist center on a Friday night in late June of 1991 more than two hundred petitioners lined up to ask the spirits for the material goods—money, cars, houses—they desired. They had taken numbers earlier in the evening and bought foods such as flour and honey from the center to offer the spirits when their turn came. To the repeated chant of "Now that Exu Two Winds has arrived, life will be better," the consultations begin. The clients wait for their number to be called, then make their offerings to the spirits and line up for the opportunity to consult the Mae de Santo, an old black woman who has been possessed by the Exu Two Winds, known for his power to grant material wishes.

Despite the chanting, the atmosphere seems less sacred than mundane, with the devotees talking among themselves about what they will ask the Exu for when their turn comes. Many of them are educated and sophisticated, like Mariana, a government social worker, and her teacher friend Katia, who sit next to me so that they can practice their English. They stress that this center also offers Kardecist sessions and "study groups" on other religions. It is an eclecticism common in Umbanda, which has few fixed dogmas and is continually creating new spirits. This has allowed Umbanda to absorb influences from theosophy and Rosicrucianism, as well as aspects of Kardecism, Candomble, and popular Catholicism. "Umbanda is like Brazil," declared Katia. "It takes in everything, mixes them together, and then makes them into something all its own."

### *The Center of the World*

Brazil's syncretic religious creativity is particularly in evidence at the Valley of Dawn, a cult center of twenty thousand near Brasilia. It was founded some three decades ago by Tia (Aunt) Neiva, who was a truck driver until she picked up a "divine hitchhiker" who revealed that she was

destined to found the religion for the third millennium—a recurring theme in the "country of the future." Valley of Dawn, the Spiritist religion that she established, is extremely complex, combining Christianity, Umbanda, and theosophy with an imagined re-creation of religions from other geographic areas and historical eras. Today there are Inca, Greek, Egyptian, Islamic, and Tibetan rites among those celebrated at the Valley of Dawn. Most involve "historical" role-playing by costumed acolytes—saris for the Indian rites, jaguar masks for the Aztec—in "sets" whose religious aesthetics almost border on camp, as in a "Temple of Isis" that owes more to Cecil B. DeMille than to Egyptology. And Tia Neiva's theology allows for the revelation of still other rites in the future. To the unbeliever, Valley of Dawn's religious celebrations often look more like Carnival pageants than divine revelations, but it is all done with total seriousness by devotees who may be educated civil servants by day, yet find in its nocturnal rites the satisfying spiritual experience missing in their lives.

If the Valley of Dawn is the ultimate cult of Spiritist syncretism, the Temple of Good Will is the last word in ecumenical mysticism, a New Age pyramid for a futuristic capital. "To many of us, Brasilia is not only the capital of our country, but also the center of the world," explained Anselmo. He is studying economics, but even that most rational of social sciences is no barrier to mysticism in Brasilia. This modern capital built on an imperial scale at the geographic midpoint of Brazil is also thought of by many of its residents as a New Age global navel constructed over the planet's biggest crystal formation. "An American astronaut confirmed that looking down from outer space," said Antonio Haroldo Franco da Rocha, administrator of the Temple of Good Will, which advertises itself as the ultimate in "unrestricted ecumenicism." It is certainly the ultimate New Age pyramid, constructed of seven slabs of luxurious white marble joined at the top by "the world's largest crystal," a self-styled "conjunction of Superior Spirituality, Culture, Art & Ecology."<sup>17</sup>

Inside the circular sacred space, meditating worshipers follow a stone spiral to the exact center of the pyramid under the great crystal, where they receive its healing energy. Once purified they pray "in their own way" at the altar near the "throne of God," a modern construction representing the



four elements—air, earth, fire, and water—before exiting on the far side of the sanctum, in a spatial analogue to their search for spiritual perfection. In a side chamber, a photograph of the founder of the Legion of Good Will, Alziro Zarur, a Brazilian radio personality of Christian Arab descent, is flanked by a picture that groups Jesus, Mohammed, and Buddha with Allan Kardec and Karl Marx. The Legion promises to "inaugurate the Kingdom of the Love of God on earth for all creatures, religious or atheist."<sup>18</sup> It already has groups in North America and Europe, confided administrator Franco da Rocha, but its only temple was in Brasilia, "the center of the spiritual world."

The religious imagination of Brazilians seems inexhaustible. There are space-age cults that worship UFOs and others such as Orion, whose mediums contact spirits from other galaxies. There are messianic movements and religions of Japanese origin. Brazilians seem open to a variety of religious experience that belies their Catholic orthodoxy and underscores their social disquiet and cultural diversity. Nor is there any sign of this religious ferment slackening. On the contrary, as a new millennium approaches, there is every reason to believe that the number of new religions will multiply in the "country of the future."

The rise of popular participation within the Catholic church, the explosion of Protestant sects, the expansion of Spiritist cults, and multiplication of new religious experiences all bear witness to a religious revival of unprecedented proportions in Latin America and the Caribbean. Miracles may not always be enough and worshipers may be motivated by the concerns of this world, but this religious ferment is at bottom a testament to the region's intense religiosity. The question that this poses, mused Jose Jorge de Carvalho, is "how to pass from the world of the spirits—to the world of the Spirit."