1
Introduction

> Although we're Christians and we follow Jesus, we're not going to
> stay inside the church asking God for peace. We have to do some-
> thing ourselves. God illuminates us, but we have to do something . . .
> Even if we're not on our knees asking God for help, God will help.
> But we have to do something too. Since Christ gave his life, we have
> to do the same.
>
> Mirtala López

Over the course of the 1970s, El Salvador slid, or rather crashed, into a political crisis that shared much in common with circumstances elsewhere in South and Central America. Like most of the region, El Salvador suffered extreme economic and political inequities, which economic crises, natural disasters, and military dictatorships only worsened. Also like other Latin Americans, many Salvadorans participated in social movements that challenged the status quo. Throughout Latin America, a number of these movements received sponsorship or at least inspiration from the Catholic Church, which had begun a process of massive self-reflection and reform following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and the meeting of the Latin American Bishops' Conference (CELAM) at Medellín, Colombia, in 1968.

The political, economic, and religious upheaval common to much of Latin America in the 1970s seemed in El Salvador to be magnified in intensity. In a violent and poor region, El Salvador was more violent and poorer than almost anywhere. Responses to violence and poverty in El Salvador also took more intense forms than in most countries. While left-leaning opposition movements mobilized throughout Latin America, El Salvador was one of a handful of countries with a leftist opposition that was genuinely revolutionary, genuinely popular, and gen-

uinely threatening to the status quo. El Salvador's political opposition and eventually its guerrilla army were surpassed in strength and success only by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

Throughout the changes and crises of this period, Catholicism played a crucial role. The Salvadoran church, especially the Archdiocese of San Salvador, had initiated pastoral reforms even prior to Vatican II, and after the Medellín conference numerous new groups, meetings, methods, and projects expanded the process of innovation in the Salvadoran Catholic Church. These reforms, stressing greater participation by laypeople and increased attention to social problems, again reflected changes that were occurring, in varying degrees, in many parts of Latin America. In a number of places, including El Salvador, numerous pastoral workers and even some bishops supported projects and movements that sought social change. In many cases, these efforts brought Catholics into conflict with political, economic, and/or military elites. In El Salvador, again, these conflicts were more explosive and more costly than almost anywhere else in Latin America. By the start of 1981, the country had plunged into a civil war that lasted eleven years and eventually claimed the lives of approximately 80,000 people, including an archbishop and twenty-two Catholic priests and nuns, as well as a seminary student and a Lutheran minister.

Scholars examining the tragic history of El Salvador during the 1970s and 1980s have often remarked upon the central role of the Catholic Church in the conflict. Students of religion and politics in Latin America, in fact, frequently point to El Salvador as an extreme case of the political "radicalization" experienced in Catholic institutions throughout the region.[1] Very few scholars, however, have investigated the sources and evolution of Catholic militancy in El Salvador or, more importantly, the precise nature of "radical" religious beliefs and practices.

In El Salvador, as elsewhere, believers draw on their religious traditions to make sense of their own experiences and to help them continue negotiating those experiences. Religious people often do this via the articulation and diffusion of narratives that put their lives in terms of sacred history, organized around the themes that most resonate in their context. These themes vary, as experiences and historical factors shape the ways people understand and respond to particular topics. Thus, in Brazil, for example, discussion may center on the Exodus (understood as the *caminhada*), while during the revolutionary period in Nicaragua, progressive Catholics seemed to turn especially to the idea of the reign of

God. In El Salvador during the late 1970s and 1980s, I believe, progressive Catholics found the concept of martyrdom most relevant.[2] These diverse cases share a common process by which people construct a theology and ethos, or a "practical religion," appropriating from the symbolic capital of Latin Catholicism those elements (stories, images, values) that resonate most in their particular situations.[3] This can be seen as a particular case of the task of religion more generally to make sense of diverse and often challenging experiences and events and to help suggest and legitimize appropriate responses. In these circumstances, as in many times and places, religion helps render graspable and thus, perhaps, more bearable a world that is often confusing and painful.

If belief systems develop, at least in part, to make sense of the historical and structural conditions of believers' lives, then the particular conditions in which the ideas emerge ought also to be taken into account. In the present case, attention must focus on certain conditions characterizing Salvadoran society in the 1970s and 1980s: extreme economic inequity, lack of political and social openness, and systematic violence against individuals and groups challenging the established order. In and through these circumstances, particular styles of religious community and discourse and distinctive systems of thought developed. An understanding of this context ought to ground any examination of the content of this practical religion and also any suggestions about the ways such an examination can deepen understandings of the multiple relations between religion and politics, in Latin America and beyond.

I. Religion and Politics

Concern for the ways religion and especially religious ideas operate at the grassroots has not played a particularly large role in scholarship on religion and politics. While some anthropologists have focused on the political implications of the ideas and especially the practices of particular religious communities, most social scientists have looked at religious and political institutions, the ideas and practices of elites (religious and political), and documents produced by these elites. Scholars in the history of religion and theology have, in turn, often concentrated on texts rather than on living religious communities. While attention to texts, institutions, and elites is certainly necessary, because those are influential and sometimes determining forces, this type of approach cannot explain relations between religion and politics.

Scholarship on religion and politics in Latin America and other parts of the "Third World" has also been marred by a tendency to explain religiously motivated political movements as "primitive," "fanatical," or "nativistic." These terms, like certain uses of the term *millenarian*, suggest that religio-political movements in the southern hemisphere (or among native or minority people in the north) are not to be taken seriously; they are seen, rather, as utopian, radical, outside the margins of both rational discourse and political efficacy.[4] This perspective tends to view religious belief as incompatible with a reasoned and realistic understanding of and response to political conditions. Because they do not take religiously grounded belief systems and movements seriously as political ideologies or movements, such approaches cannot illuminate many recent (and older) social movements, including not only dramatic uprisings but also quieter forms of oppositional consciousness and mobilization.

Recent scholarly trends have begun to correct some of the weaknesses of earlier work. A number of political scientists and sociologists, for example, have begun to attend to grassroots religious practices and groups and to the impact of religiosity at the personal level. Many of these new approaches no longer confine "religion and politics" to the institutional dynamics of church and state but assume, to varying degrees, that everyday experiences influence the ways religion shapes people's political ideas and behavior. This perspective also helps make it possible to investigate the logic and efficacy of religiously motivated political movements without recourse to notions such as "fanaticism." I hope to build on the insights of scholars who explore the subtle links between religion and politics, particularly in grassroots religious communities and practices. With these scholars, I believe that the indirect, even hidden influences of religion upon politics, especially changes in individual identity and new forms of associational life, may, in the long run, be more profound than the explicit machinations of church and state. I hope that this study helps to illuminate these various dimensions and underscores the complex connections among them.

In this book, I try to take into account both institutional dynamics and grassroots practices as essential dimensions of the relationship between religion and politics, in El Salvador as elsewhere. However, I concentrate on a third dimension, rarely addressed by social scientists. This involves the ways ordinary people (i.e., neither church officials nor professional theologians) formulate their conceptions of God, Christ, the kingdom, salvation, and sin, and their consequences for believers'

political commitments and actions. These ideas are not irrational or simple (or "untheological," as Hobsbawm calls the labour sects in nineteenth-century Britain).[5] In fact, I argue, religiously based political action generally involves a great deal of reasoned reflection, as well as passionate conviction, on the part of participants.

While theological ideas are important, they cannot by themselves explain religious and political change or the interplay between the two. Ideas, as Daniel Levine reminds us, "never come in the abstract; they appear to particular people in specific historical and social circumstances."[6] Further, ideas never come without a history. Even the most innovative philosophy or theology stands on the shoulders of those preceding it. In the case of Salvadoran Catholic thought, biblical stories, church tradition, and post-Vatican II Latin American theology, along with Salvadoran political history and culture, provide a foundation for contemporary progressive Christianity. What is important in this light is not "ideas for their own sake," but the ways that believers elaborate ideas, by building on their traditions and responding to particular historical circumstances, and employ these ideas to make sense of and act in this situation.

While ideas should not be abstracted from social context, then, neither is it possible to understand how religious ideas affect believers' lives, including their political actions, without knowing what the ideas themselves are. This apparently self-evident truth has not always been apparent to scholars of religion and politics, who at least in research on Latin America often leave the presentation and analysis of religious ideas to theologians.[7] An integral understanding of religion's cultural and political impact at the grassroots as well as in more elite spheres should attend to the substance of theology, in addition to factors such as the religious community's structure, leadership style, and social setting. The interplay among these various factors, rather than any single factor in isolation, shapes believers' political ideas and beliefs.

Another way to frame this discussion is in terms of a dialectical relationship between what I call "internal" and "external" explanations. H. Richard Niebuhr also makes this distinction between internal and external descriptions, which he says "point to the same ultimate realities" but are "seen in different aspects and apprehended in different contexts." The difference between the two types of description revolves not around accuracy, but rather around perspective: "In one case the events of history are seen from the outside, in the other from the inside."[8] In my definition, the content of belief constitutes the "internal" dimension,

that is, the understanding of people within a religious community. This includes, for example, the ways that believers understand political events in biblical or theological terms. When, as often occurs, scholars neglect this dimension, or address it only in passing, they impoverish their comprehension of the ways religion shapes politics and vice-versa. Greater attention to this internal dimension is necessary, not only to unearth local variants of theological doctrine but more importantly to gain the insights of believers "on the ground" regarding the ways religious symbols, stories, and values shed light (a slanted light, but light nonetheless) on the local unfolding of history.

By themselves, of course, internal theological explanations do not constitute a sufficient explanation of the relations between religion and politics. Religious insiders themselves usually recognize the need for both types of explanation, in fact, and point to historical and political factors as well as religious convictions. In scholarly contexts, internal analyses should be related dialectically (in constant, mutually transformative interplay) to "external" approaches to the reasons and ways particular forms of religiosity emerge and affect political behavior and events. External analysis should take into account such issues as the religious community's organizational structure; the origins, character, and role of religious leaders; the style of pastoral work; the form of associational life; and the group's range of activities. In addition, scholarly analysis should explore the particular religious group's linkages to larger institutions and historical forces, as well as the political and economic circumstances of believers' lives.

The dynamic relationship between internal and external dimensions of analysis parallels, in some ways, the dialectic between political (and economic, social, and cultural) factors and religious ideas and values. While material and secular circumstances influence the selection of religious themes by particular groups, religious ideas and values also help shape those circumstances. This dialectical relationship results in what David Laitin calls "practical religion—the realm where theology and social and economic conditions meet."[9] Following Weber, Laitin argues that this is not a directly causal relationship but one of "elective affinity," strongly affected but never fully determined by material-structural factors. While acknowledging that theological ideas emerge in the midst of and are shaped by a specific social setting, Laitin argues also that "ideas and values . . . take on a life of their own and affect future understanding of new social settings."[10] Thus, religious ideas maintain a rela-

tive autonomy (but never a complete separation) from material conditions, and the influence of one on the other is always mutual and fluid, never static or unidimensional.

This book presents a relatively autonomous system of ideas, developed for the most part (although certainly not in isolation or spontaneously) by people living in and responding to extraordinary historical events. It departs from most scholarship on religion in Latin America in two senses: first, by looking not at elites but at ordinary, usually poor people; and second, by focusing on religious ideas rather than institutions and practices. The actual ideas of laypeople have received little attention in work on religion in Latin America. Although many Latin American (and other) theologians claim to be speaking for "the people," only a few work closely enough with ordinary believers to know in much detail what "the people" actually believe. Certainly, this distance from "the people" does not invalidate their work. Most of these theologians are intellectually sophisticated as well as politically and religiously committed, and their writings make tremendous contributions to Christian theology and political analysis. Still, for all the talk about the theology "born of the people," we have yet to see much theology or ethics in the specific terms, or even the basic framework, used by ordinary believers.[11] I hope this book can make a start towards filling this gap by detailing a sophisticated, complex, and compelling popular belief system.

The word *popular* requires some clarification, for it has multiple and often contested meanings. I use it in two different senses. When I speak of a "popular political movement," I use the term as a translation of the Spanish term *popular*, meaning of the people and especially of poor people. While not entirely transparent, this term is relatively straightforward.[12] I also use the term in speaking of popular religion (or dimensions thereof). Popular religion is the subject of a complicated debate in various academic disciplines. These debates concern, among other issues, the relative orthodoxy of local lay practices and beliefs; the distinctions between "official" (or "elite") and "popular" (or "folk") culture; the extent to which popular religion is influenced by "official" religion; differences between urban and rural religiosity; the class dimensions of popular culture; and the sources of and influences on popular ideas and practices. Many authors reject the term because of the negative connotations often linked to it. Others prefer to use a more specific phrase, such as "popular Catholicism."[13] While recognizing the importance of many of these debates, I will use here a relatively simple working defini-

tion of popular religion, or more specifically of the sector of popular Catholicism linked to progressive currents in Catholicism in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s. First, this religion is *popular* in the same sense as Latin American social movements, insofar as it involves mainly working-class and poor people. This class dimension is important in El Salvador, since the vast majority of Salvadorans are poor, and thus most "common" religious practices and ideas are tied to the culture, history, concerns, and daily lives of the poor.[14]

Second, this popular Catholicism is not opposed to official Catholicism, although it is quite definitely distinct from it. Official Catholicism, or its keepers (church leaders and pastoral agents), has tended to be concerned mainly with the fulfillment of certain guidelines (i.e., sacraments, moral rules), the maintenance of the church as an institution, and the protection of correct beliefs and values. What I call popular Catholicism, however, consists of the ideas, practices, and values of laypeople who may not come into frequent contact with church officials. They usually operate within traditions and certain broad guidelines set by the official church, but their practices and beliefs do not always conform closely to church orthodoxy.[15] Further, popular Catholic groups, regardless of their ideology or theology, often retain and even insist on a great deal of independence, especially in relation to ritual practices, images, and values tied to everyday experiences.

Further, popular religiosity is not limited to explicitly or conventionally "religious" issues or events. Religion can be defined as beliefs and actions that refer to and look for validation in a dimension or beings beyond the purely natural, or what Peter Worsley calls "a dimension beyond the empirical-technical realm of action."[16] However, religious ideas and actions are also linked to practical concerns and actions. Often, no sharp lines divide religion from other aspects of people's lives, especially in the minds and behavior of believers. Religious values and explanations enter into everyday activities and practical concerns about health, family, livelihood, community, and politics, as well as into efforts to explain and respond to more extraordinary occurrences. Religion seems to play an especially important role in responses to threats (social or natural). In these cases, rites, images, and convictions about human relations to the divine are often central to people's efforts to maintain or recover well-being.[17] This does not mean that "spiritual" or "otherworldly" dimensions are not important,[18] but these are most often embedded in people's thinking and practice concerning practical matters.

Finally, I am concerned with a particular sector of popular Catholicism, or of Catholic laypeople. I look at the history, beliefs, and practices of Salvadorans linked, more or less closely, to the progressive currents that began developing in El Salvador and in Latin America in the late 1960s. Progressive Catholicism, which I will outline later on, includes institutional and academic sectors as well as popular groups. I focus mainly on the "popular" (i.e., lay and poor) dimension of this progressive wing.

Many studies of popular religion, and of popular Catholicism in particular, focus on rituals, processions, and other types of practices rather than on ideas. Scholars often seem to assume that "popular" religiosity is not as theoretically complex or interesting as more "elite" religions. More simply, many writers seem to think that while understanding official Catholicism (or Buddhism, etc.) requires a knowledge of doctrine, we can know all there is to know about popular religion(s) by observing simply what people do during religious celebrations. I believe that, at least in the setting studied here, ordinary believers understand their religion in terms of ideas and values as much as practices. Their religion is not just what they do, but also, and sometimes most of all, what they believe. We cannot understand popular religiosity without listening to and taking seriously these beliefs.

I should emphasize here the hopefully self-evident point that the presentation of a popular theology is not an argument that it is necessarily either orthodox or original. Nor is the presentation of other people's theology an exercise in constructive theology. I outline progressive Catholic beliefs in El Salvador as a case study in both the history of Latin American Catholicism and a particular way of approaching the relations between religion and politics. In examining what people believe, in other words, I am interested in why, how, and to what effect they believe it, rather than its truth value or orthodoxy. I cannot explore the why and how, however, without detailing the content of the beliefs themselves.

II. The Structure of the Book

This book examines progressive Catholicism in El Salvador with two goals in mind. First and most specifically, I seek to present the religious worldview of a particular sector of Salvadoran society—specifically, the reinterpretation of the classic Christian category of martyrdom by

progressive Catholics. I have made a special effort to document as carefully as I can the views of the actors themselves, in their own words when possible. Here a clarification may be appropriate. As previously noted, I am not writing my own theology but rather presenting the theology developed by progressive Salvadoran Catholics. Because I am interested in the links between people's ideas and their actions, however, I have approached the worldview of the popular church with what hermeneutic philosophy calls "charity of interpretation." In other words, I take seriously what my informants say and not just what I see them do. I believe this is important not only in this particular case but more generally in understanding the role of religion, especially religious ideas and values, in political action. Taking people's words seriously, of course, does not require accepting everything informants say as true, good, or unshaped by outside forces.

This documentation and analysis of the theology of martyrdom articulated by progressive Salvadoran Catholics occupies the four central chapters of the book. In these chapters, I describe this theology, which is really a theological ethics, largely in terms of a narrative, grounding a complex and coherent belief system, which places contemporary events in the light of sacred history. More specifically, this theology understands political killings as re-enactments of the passion of Jesus and the deaths of later martyrs, with essentially the same causes and consequences. Progressive Catholics in El Salvador built this narrative not only in formal and informal discussions, but also in and through religious rituals, as outlined in chapter 4. The popular understandings thus constructed bring together a number of specific issues, such as the definition of martyrdom itself (chapter 5); the reasons for and inevitability of persecution (chapter 6); and the benefits persecution brings (chapter 7). These theological concepts are sometimes novel, and other times they largely restate traditional Christian ideas. The issue at stake here, of course, is not their originality or value as theology, but their import to the believers. As background for contemporary understandings, I discuss several relevant aspects of early Christian understandings of martyrdom later in this chapter.

My second task, after presenting a theology of martyrdom as the practical religion of progressive Salvadoran Catholics, is to explore the ways their experiences shed light on the links between religion and politics. As outlined in chapter 3, Catholicism in El Salvador reflects and builds on general changes that occurred as churches throughout Latin

America implemented Vatican II and Medellín reforms. These changes in theology, pastoral method, and stance towards "the world" significantly altered the relations between religion and politics in many parts of Latin America, most prominently in Nicaragua, Brazil, and Chile, as well as El Salvador. As noted earlier, scholars often identify El Salvador, along with Nicaragua, as occupying the "radical" extreme on a continuum of contemporary Latin American Catholicism. This perception suggests that the Salvadoran experience can illuminate the range and consequences of possible responses to the Vatican II reforms in contemporary Catholicism, globally as well as in Latin America. For various reasons, however, including the difficulty of conducting research in El Salvador during most of the 1980s, the Salvadoran church has received little serious scholarly attention. With this study, I hope to broaden our understandings of what Vatican II, Medellín, liberation theology, base communities, and other reforms in Latin American Catholicism meant "on the ground."

I also discuss the relations between religion and politics at a more general level of analysis. I am interested, in particular, in the ways religious belief systems affect sociopolitical praxis at the grassroots level, i.e., how religion enables people to make sense of the world and act in it. In exploring religion's political dimensions, I bypass the argument about whether or not religion must always serve as a conservative social force. A number of recent studies have demonstrated that religion can, in certain circumstances, support political resistance.[19] Rather than enter into the debate over "whether," then, I will accept the evidence and turn to the question of "how." I will answer, in brief, that religion strengthens (or can strengthen) resistance not only as one (especially valued or protected) social institution among many, but in distinctively religious ways, particularly through theological conceptions and values organized into coherent narratives linking sacred and secular history. Underlying this argument is an assumption that ordinary people, and not just professional theologians, construct, adapt, and seek to live by theological and ethical systems. I believe that taking these "popular theologies" seriously will strengthen our understandings of the ways that religion shapes political action in particular conditions. It is the interplay of particular ideas and material circumstances that, at different historical moments, makes such action possible. I hope this book both exemplifies and makes a case for this way of studying religion and politics.

III. Martyrdom

> They love all men and are persecuted by all men . . . They are put to
> death and they gain life.
>
>   Anonymous, "Epistle to Diognetius"

For thousands of years, diverse groups of Jews and Christians, in efforts to understand their own experiences of persecution, have been constructing the foundations of contemporary "martyrologies." Perse-cution was, of course, a reality for Jews at various points prior to (as well as since) the emergence of Christianity, and early Jewish interpretations of repression helped shape Christian responses to martyrdom. For early Christians, life in the Roman Empire was characterized by "diffuse perse-cution," outbreaks of repression in different regions, alternating with periods of toleration, from around the burning of Rome (64 C.E.) until Constantine's edict of toleration in 313.[20] Early Christians' experiences of persecution, which they interpreted in light of both Jewish tradition and Jesus' own death, helped give the category of martyrdom a central role in defining Christianity's collective identity and illuminating its theological message.

Christianity's assumption that believers must suffer for their convic-tions and that this suffering leads to redemption and/or victory springs from the Jewish tradition. The Gospel notion of Jesus as the "ransom for many," for example, expresses a fundamental Jewish belief that God will deliver the chosen people because of the martyrs' sacrifices, seen, for example, in the suffering of the heroes of the Maccabean revolt (c. 176–63 B.C.E.) to atone for Israel's sins.

Despite clear links to Jewish tradition, what sets Christian concep-tions of martyrdom apart is the fact that this suffering follows a model set by the object of faith. Christianity, as Mexican theologian Carlos Bravo notes, differs from other world religions, certainly from Judaism, in wor-shipping a god who dies in apparent defeat of a divine mission.[21] This theme emerges clearly in the New Testament writings, most of which were produced during the period of persecution. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the disciples to expect difficult times. "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you . . . a servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (Jn

15:18, 20). A number of the first disciples suffered persecution and death for their faith. Their sacrifices served as atonement, as signs of the last days, as witness to the true faith, and, not least, as imitation of the model of self-sacrifice set by Christ himself. For believers, Christianity became the religion of the cross, and bearing the cross became the mark of Christ's disciples.

From its beginnings, then, Christian martyrdom included dual elements of witness to and imitation of Christ. The early Christian martyrs repeated Jesus' passion and death as "an innocent victim who dies for the faith at the hands of a tyrant who is opposed to the faith." Also like Jesus, early martyrs strove to withstand trial and even torture without recanting (and, in the end, to forgive their enemies). Thus, Stephen, the first "canonized" Christian martyr, was recognized as a saint "by way of analogy with the story of Jesus' passion and death . . . To be a saint, then, was to die not only *for* Christ, but also *like* him."[22] Later, as the Christian community's distance from Jesus' death increased, the aspect of witness to Christ, rather than direct imitation of him, took precedence, but the idea of martyrdom as an *imitatio Christi* never entirely disappeared.

Perhaps the most distinctive theological feature of popular understandings of martyrdom in Latin America is the renewed emphasis on sacrifice for a cause as *imitatio Christi*. While faith in and witness to Christ remain important, certainly, Salvadoran and other Central American believers have emphasized the ways that their experiences re-enact Jesus' passion, with the same goals and constituent elements. Like the earliest Christians, many Salvadorans in the 1970s and 1980s believed that the martyrs of their communities gave their lives not only in witness to Christ but in his image.

The central religious value given to sacrifice, as both witness and *imitatio Christi*, made persecution inevitable and even desirable for early Christians. "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus can expect to be persecuted," asserts the second letter of Timothy (3:12); the writer goes on to suggest that, in fact, believers can attain the kingdom of God only through affliction. During the second and third centuries C.E., believers came to understand persecution not as a threat to avoid, but as a sign of the new age, to be accepted with stoicism and even joy. In this view, the new covenant must be sealed in the blood of the innocent, beginning with Christ's crucifixion and continuing in the sufferings of his followers.[23]

As persecution came to occupy a central practical and theological space for early Christians, they celebrated the sufferings of their contem-

poraries just as they commemorated the passion of Christ in the eucharist. According to the story of Polycarp's martyrdom, the faithful commemorated the anniversary of his death "both as a memorial for those who have already fought the contest and for the training and preparation of those who will do so one day."[24] Martyrs provided a focus and a point of unity for early Christian communities. In gatherings and rituals,

> the witness of sisters and brothers in captivity for the faith, or martyred, was always recalled and celebrated as fidelity to the example of Christ. The martyrs were honored not as dead, but as living, united with the celebrants as permanent intercessors before the throne of God.[25]

The notion that martyrs were "not dead, but living" highlights the paradox at the heart of Christianity. Early Christians believed that they, like their martyred founder, could achieve victory over death only through death. Thus, a Christian named Julius, told by the emperor Maximus to sacrifice to Roman gods to live, responded, "If I choose life, I choose death; if I die, I live forever."[26] Because of their conviction that they would share in Jesus' resurrection only through unhesitating witness, many accepted persecution and martyrdom as a route to eternal life. They not only followed the route taken by Jesus himself, but even brought him into their own history. For early Christians, as Herbert Workman notes,

> When martyrs are delivered up to death, it is Christ who is made manifest in them. And what looks like defeat is exactly the opposite: brute force is incapable of subduing those who have made this radical option . . . The one who vanquishes death is the ultimate ruler of the world. Over such a one, the powers of evil can no longer prevail.[27]

This paradox formed the core of the Christian theology of martyrdom that developed, in varying circumstances, over the first three centuries after Jesus' death.

The Politics of Martyrdom in Early Christianity

Martyrdom inverts the usual logic that equates rightness with historical success, ultimate victory with temporal survival. The martyrs insist

with their lives that certain principles transcend life itself. Thus, martyr-dom raises crucial theological and ethical questions: To what does a believer owe ultimate loyalty? What works does faith demand? What are the consequences of meeting those demands? Martyrdom is never just a religious issue, however. Because it has to do with repression and power, it also asks essentially political questions: What is the relationship between faith and political action? Between religious and secular authority? Martyrs dramatize the limits that faith imposes upon allegiance to civil power and provide a model for believers' correct response to a political situation.

This model is an absolute one. In early Christianity, as in other times and places, the public message of martyrdom was that true commitment to God makes compromise impossible, even when the only alternative is death. In this light, renouncing the faith meant degradation and medioc-rity. Certainly, this pressure to take risks for a cause can be manipulated, even instilled, by sometimes unscrupulous leaders. However, the drive to martyrdom is not only imposed from above. For many early Christians, a strongly felt personal relation to Jesus lay beneath their willingness to take risks. "For eighty-six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?" asked Polycarp.[28] In this radical fidelity, martyrs believed they imitated both Jesus' sacrificial faithfulness to God and Yahweh's covenant with Israel. As God was radically true to God's word, so believers must not betray theirs. The early church generalized this absolute commitment: "The liv-ing of the radicality of the gospel was a demand upon all, without distinc-tion. All were expected to be ready to give a living account of their hope, to confess the faith when interrogated."[29]

The requirement for a radical attachment to Christ made Christ-ianity unable to coexist with other religious or secular powers. In the Roman era, this caused conflicts and persecution, since Roman citizen-ship required obeisance to Roman gods as well as to the emperor. Christianity's insistence that believers have no master except the one God motivated accusations that Christians were hostile to the Roman state. Although early Christians often saw themselves in opposition to "the world," and not necessarily to the authorities or the Roman Empire in particular, many Romans viewed Christian behavior in political terms, and not as a religious response to a belief in the approaching apocalypse. Christians' claim of a "heavenly citizenship under a deity who transcended the Roman gods and the Caesars" threatened the Roman political order as well as the religious status quo.[30]

Early martyrs sought, above all, to clarify the "double citizenship" of Christians in the empire. Like the monks who withdrew from the world, martyrs specified the point at which allegiance to Caesar began to clash with the greater pull of loyalty to Christ. Martyrs usually endorsed loyalty to the empire up to that point but maintained the priority of faith, providing exemplary responses to the dilemmas of how to respond to "the world" and bringing "into sharp focus the line of demarcation that separated the followers of Christ from the pagan world."[31]

Christianity also created a political threat to the empire because it drew people from all spheres, even women and slaves. Christianity's egalitarianism and its insistence that the state had no absolute claim on one's loyalty appealed to people dissatisfied with Rome's rule, especially in northern Africa, where rural conditions were poor and the new church provided refuge that traditional religions could not. By the 270s C.E., Christian monks were leading popular opposition to Rome, thus strengthening the link between religious persecution and political mobilization. In Egypt in the late third and early fourth centuries, Christian martyrs became a symbol of national resistance against Rome and helped convince north African Christians that the empire had lost its power to the moral and social strength of the resisters.

The experiences of Christians in the Roman Empire demonstrated several ways martyrdom can prove helpful for resistance struggles. One of the most important political lessons of early Christian history, in fact, was that repression intended to destroy a movement can instead reinforce it. In many cases, persecution did not halt but rather strengthened recruitment and evangelization by early Christians. "As the killing went on, so more turned to Christ," according to historian W. H. C. Frend. "Persecution even quickened the pace of conversion," as public trials and executions made the new faith more visible and more compelling. Paradoxically, as the Donatist Petilian wrote in the late fourth century, "Christianity makes progress by the deaths of its followers."[32]

This progress occurred, in part, through the public relations value of martyrdom for the victims. "Martyrdom is a dramatic strategy that cannot lose," claims Olga Klapp (with some exaggeration); "the resister, being passive, is extremely hard to see as a villain, while the opponent, whether he [sic] wins or not, can hardly avoid being cast as an aggressor by an open-minded audience."[33] While the public "spin" on martyrdom is probably less predetermined than Klapp suggests, in certain conditions martyrdom can badly damage the attackers' image and moral legitimacy, as, according to many historians, it did in the Roman Empire.

Martyrs' sacrifices also strengthened early Christian communities by providing examples of extraordinary faith, which often intensified ordinary devotion and encouraged believers to reject compromise. In his Letters, Cyprian wrote to believers in prison: "We are still in the world, still drawn up in line of battle; we fight daily for our lives . . . You have been made an example to the rest of the brethren for whose lives your life and reactions ought to be a stimulation."[34] (Conversely, of course, martyrs could not sustain their motivation without a supportive community of fellow believers.)

The Politics of Martyrdom

This discussion of the ways that martyrdom contributed to early Christianity requires a few caveats, which also apply to the contemporary case that follows. What believers—in Rome or elsewhere—understand as the fortification of their position often appears to outsiders (and scholars) as radicalization and social polarization. In sociological terms, popular responses to repression often entail an "ascendancy of the resolute,"[35] intensifying the conviction of average members and bolstering the influence of more determined participants. In addition to radicalizing the victims' side, violence can often harden positions among the attackers, to whom ritualized "acceptance" of persecution demonstrates not authenticity but irrationality and extremism. The stiffening of both these positions, in turn, can alienate those outside the conflict.

In early Christianity and other cases, the radicalizing tendencies of martyrdom may well emerge from genuinely popular (although generally not "spontaneous") responses to persecution. Ordinary people, in other words, often perceive violence against themselves or another social group in black-and-white terms, regardless of public or elite interpretations of this violence. This "extremism" is not necessarily irrational. It often represents one of the few possible responses to an extreme situation, in which the patterns and goals of mainstream (instrumental) rationality may not be useful or appropriate.

Radicalization can also stem from the manipulation of images of martyrdom by political and religious leaders seeking to intensify positions on either side of a struggle. This manipulation may involve the idealization of dead heroes, sometimes in support of causes that they themselves did not support, or at minimum for exaggerated versions of their own ideals. Dead heroes can also be used by different groups in dif-

ferent ways. The fate of Nicaraguan journalist Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, assassinated in 1978, illuminates this process through his passage from banner of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (*Frente Sandinista para la Liberación Nacional,* or FSLN), whose ideology was, in fact, to the left of his own, to the emblem of conservative-centrist forces running against the Sandinistas in the 1990 elections (won by Chamorro's widow, in no small part because she was his widow). In this and countless other cases, differing and sometimes opposing forces compete as the "true" heirs of a fallen hero. One side eventually wins the contest, often not because of the accuracy of its portrayal of the martyr's vision but because it presents the version that most appeals to its base of support.

Sometimes these elite understandings or public portrayals of persecution do not coincide with the ways ordinary people understand the fallen hero, the killing, and/or the issues at stake. In such cases, the leaders may well fail to rally support in the name of their martyr, whose "cult" sooner or later fades. A persistent and well-organized public relations campaign, of course, might eventually resonate with people who were initially indifferent, or at least create the appearance of a cult of personality even in the absence of much popular support.

In many ways, then, martyrdom enters into politics and is used or misused for more or less admirable causes. Early Christianity seems to present a case in which, for the most part, genuine (although never unanimous) popular sentiment honored and kept alive the memory of believers killed for their refusal to compromise their faith. Similarly "authentic" popular cults of martyrdom have arisen in many times and places since (and before) that time, as, of course, have countless cases of elite manipulation, disingenuous propaganda, and distortions of other "sacrificial" deaths. While acknowledging the diverse forms taken by cults of martyrs, I focus here on a relatively "authentic" case. By this, I mean that ordinary Salvadorans revered and sustained the memory of persons killed for a cause that both the fallen and the survivors for the most part supported. This popular cult of martyrdom represented not only a tribute to the dead but an ethical and existential code for the living.

Martyrdom in Contemporary Latin America

Early Christians articulated a theology and ethics of martyrdom to make sense of persecution that, while occasionally intense, probably claimed, over two-and-a-half centuries, no more than a few thousand

lives throughout the Roman Empire. Contemporary repression in Latin America, while not focused on a single religious group, has occurred on a much larger scale.[36] In El Salvador, political violence touched virtually every citizen and prompted searches for new ways to understand and respond to such massive suffering.

Religion played a central role in this effort, both because Salvadoran culture is highly religious and because many of the victims were practicing Christians, whose religious faith motivated the commitments and actions that led to their deaths. These commitments cannot be dismissed as manipulation by radical leaders, religious or political. Nor can popular interpretations of these deaths be seen as only the results of an elite-constructed ideology. Deeply embedded Catholic and biblical themes, as well as pre-Hispanic indigenous traditions, provided resources on which many ordinary Salvadorans drew to construct relatively autonomous worldviews, political attitudes, and rationales for action regarding a number of topics. The political repression of the 1970s and 1980s proved no exception.

At this tremendously cruel point in their history, Salvadorans sought to glean from the events of their lives not only meaning but also a reason to keep struggling towards a less tragic future. For many, a re-interpretation of martyrdom, focusing on the story of Christ's passion, helped make political killings more comprehensible by placing them in the light of God's perceived plan for humankind. This interpretation also prescribed a particular course of action—political resistance—in response. I hope this study of the religious worldview of progressive Salvadoran Catholics, placed in their historical and material context, can suggest both the value of looking carefully at popular belief systems in studying religion and politics, and, more simply, the compelling power of an ethos that ordinary people have constructed and, in the face of enormous obstacles, sought to live by.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Daniel Levine's use of El Salvador as an example of the "radical" type of popular Catholic organization, in *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 48.

2. Recinos also sees martyrdom as the dominant "root metaphor" in Salvadoran popular Catholicism. See "The Politics of Salvadoran Refugee Popular Religion," 42.

3. For a historical perspective on this phenomenon, see Orlando Espín, "Trinitarian Monotheism and the Birth of Popular Catholicism," *Missiology: An International Review* 20, no. 2 (April 1992): 177–204.

4. Even writers sympathetic to these movements, such as E. J. Hobsbawm and Peter Worsley, tend to question the "rationality" of millenarian or other religiously based political movements. See Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959) and Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo" Cults in Melanesia* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

5. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels*, 132.

6. Levine, *Popular Voices*, 180.

7. Weber's classic study of the Protestant ethic serves as a rare example of sociological analysis of the political role of religion that takes the content of religious belief seriously. Weber focused on theology, of course, partly because he did not conduct field work. Contemporary studies of religion and politics can correct this weakness and still retain Weber's emphasis on the relevance of ideas. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

8. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: MacMillan, 1941), 45.

9. David Laitin, "Religion, Political Culture, and the Weberian Tradition," *World Politics* 30, no. 4 (July 1978): 589.

10. Ibid., 586.

11. Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978–1982), four volumes of conversations at a Nicaraguan base community, represents the major exception. Although it includes no analysis, and Cardenal's voice often dominates discussions, the volumes provide invaluable documentation of a progressive grassroots theology emerging from a particular historical situation (Nicaragua in the 1970s).

12. See Kenneth Aman and Cristián Parker, eds., *Popular Culture in Chile: Resistance and Survival* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 2–9, for a discussion of the meaning of the Spanish term *popular*.

13. William Christian argues for the term "local" religion; *Local Religion in Sixteenth Century Spain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 178. Michael Carroll prefers to speak of popular Catholicism; *Madonnas that Maim: Popular Catholicism in Italy Since the Fifteenth Century* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). For other helpful discussions of popular

religion, see Thomas Kselman, ed., *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to American and European Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

14. Class constitutes the defining feature in a number of recent definitions of popular religion. See Lynn Stephen and James Dow, "Introduction: Popular Religion in Mexico and Central America," in *Class, Politics, and Popular Religion in Mexico and Central America*, eds. L. Stephen and J. Dow (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1990), p. 7; and Michael Candelaria, *Popular Religion and Liberation: The Dilemma of Liberation Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 196.

15. Here I depart from Carroll's definition of popular Catholicism as developing within the "allowable limits" set by official Catholicism; *Madonnas that Maim*, 8.

16. Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, xxxv.

17. On the practical dimension of popular religion, see Dow and Stephen, "Introduction," 8, and John Ingham, *Mary, Michael, and Lucifer: Folk Catholicism in Central Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 1. On popular religion as a response to threats, see Carroll, *Madonnas that Maim*, 138 and Christian, *Local Religion*, 20.

18. Here I disagree with William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, who argue that spiritual values are not at all important to popular religion. *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 70.

19. See, among others, Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila Press, 1979); and Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

20. Ivo Lesbaupin, *Blessed Are the Persecuted: Christians in the Roman Empire, AD 64–313* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 8.

21. Carlos Bravo, Centro de Reflexión Teológica, Mexico City, interview by author, 30 May 1990.

22. Kenneth Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 129, 53. Emphasis in original.

23. For a full discussion of martyrdom in early Christianity, see Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among*

Christians and Jews in Antiquity (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), esp. chap. 4–7.

24. William Clebsch, *Christianity in European History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 49.

25. Lesbaupin, *Blessed Are the Persecuted*, 18.

26. Herbert B. Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 31.

27. Ibid., 87.

28. Quoted in ibid., 29.

29. Lesbaupin, *Blessed Are the Persecuted*, 48.

30. Workman, *Persecution*, 35; see also Clebsch, *Christianity*, 20.

31. Clebsch, *Christianity*, 36. See also Winston A. Van Horne, "St. Augustine: Death and Political Resistance," *Journal of Religious Thought* 38, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 1981): 43.

32. W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 520–521, 555–556.

33. Olga Klapp, *Symbolic Leaders: Public Dramas and Public Men* (Chicago: Aldine, 1974), 86, quoted in Anita Weiner and Eugene Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1990), 42.

34. Quoted in Lesbaupin, *Blessed Are the Persecuted*, 53.

35. Weiner and Weiner, *The Martyr's Conviction*, 63.

36. On the centrality of martyrdom in theological and other works on Latin American Christianity since the late 1970s, see the following: Centro Pastoral de la Universidad Centroamericana, "Tiempo de pasión en El Salvador: quince estaciones en el Vía Crucis salvadoreño, *Christus* (Mexico City) 55, no. 632 (Feb. 1990), 5–27; "Conmemorando a nuestros mártires," *Mártires de El Salvador* (Managua), no. 61 (Jan.–Feb. 1990), 7–9; Enrique Dussel, "The People of El Salvador," *Concilium* 169 (Sept. 1983): 61–68; Roberto García Ramírez, "El Martirio en la Iglesia Latino-Americana," *Nuevo Mundo: Revista de Teología Latinoamericana* (Buenos Aires) 30 (1985): 43–70; Juan Hernández Pico, "Martyrdom in Latin America Today: Stumbling-block, Folly, and Power of God," *Concilium* 163 (March 1983): 37–42; Michael James Higgins, "Marytrs and Virgins: Popular Religion in Mexico and Nicaragua," in *Class, Politics, and Popular Religion in Mexico and Central America*, eds. Lynn Stephen and James Dow (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1990);

Instituto Histórico Centroamericano, *La sangre por el pueblo: Memoria de martirio en América Latina* (Bilbao, Spain: Descleé de Brouwer, 1983); Martin Lange and Reinhold Iblacker, eds., *Witnesses of Hope: The Persecution of Christians in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981); José Marins et al., eds., *Memoria peligrosa: heroés y mártires en la iglesia latinoamericana* (Mexico City: Centro de Reflexión Teológica, 1989); and Manuel Useros and María López Vigil, *La vida por el pueblo: cristianos de comunidades populares en América Latina* (Madrid: Editorial Popular, 1981).