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From Open Violence to Symbolic Confrontation:
Anthropological Observations of Latin America's Southern Cone

The 1980s was a decade of transition for Latin America's Southern Cone. During that decade most of the countries of the region turned from violent and repressive dictatorial regimes to democratic governments. This political change was accompanied by profound transformations in many other aspects. For example, the levels of political violence were drastically reduced. Also, people's perceptions of the importance and value of civil rights, among them freedom of speech and thought, increased significantly. This renewed appreciation of civil rights had a strong impact on some of the religious traditions of those nations; basically, it allowed for greater religious diversity and the formation of a 'religious market', that is, the presence of a variety of religious offers and people feeling free to choose among the alternatives. This was a new situation for most of the countries of the Southern Cone, although there was variation among them. Brazil, for example, had experienced a situation of relative plurality since almost its constitution as an independent nation, while Argentina had had high levels of religious censorship for most of its modern history.

These political and religious changes altered not only the number of religious options available, but also modified the roles that the different religions played in the Southern Cone's nations. This may be clearly seen in relation to the specific topic of this book: religion and violence. With the reinstatement of democracy, religions stopped favouring institutional action at the level of government or NGO's, and undertook a kind of 'grassroots' approach, working with the men and women on the street (although this should be understood more as a relative than an absolute difference). This change of strategy has been clearly related to political transformations. During the dictatorial regimes, violence was exerted from 'above' by the repressive machinery deployed by the

military. During the democratic period, violence has become more a problem of 'sociability'. That is, violence erupts more in daily activity, as in domestic or criminal violence, than by the direct action of the state against the populace (although police abuses against marginalized sectors of society, such as slum dwellers, is still a problem).

These changes in the way violence emerges in society, as in the way religion becomes involved with it, has introduced profound alterations. During the dictatorships, religions acted mainly at the institutional level; that is, trying to influence governmental decisions by putting pressure on state leaders. The roles played by religion during this period were ambiguous. Some religions tried to stop violence by denouncing the abuses of the military, others tried to win state favours by, in some way (sometimes more openly, and others more implicitly), legitimising the military's repressive activities. After democracy was reinstalled, religions prioritised other forms of action. Instead of trying to influence governmental decisions, they tried to influence the behaviour of common people in their everyday activities. This form of action obliges religious agents to try to influence people's perceptions of reality (the way people perceive themselves, their families, their future, society in general, etc.). Thus, this form of religious action implies that religions act at the level of identity. Identities are often constructed in opposition to other identities, that is in a confrontational attitude that opposes one's group to other groups in an antagonistic relation. Therefore if, on the one hand, religion is contributing to peace by helping to overcome the violence that results from the problems of sociability, it is, on the other hand, reproducing the same sociability problems by creating a confrontational attitude among different religious groups. The point of this chapter is that the kind of confrontation that stems from this type of religious action, although risky, is not very problematic as long as it is kept as 'symbolic confrontation'. Within these boundaries it becomes a useful resource in civil society at no great cost. But before developing this point further, it is necessary to explore in more detail the changes which occurred in the Southern Cone, and the relationship between religion and identity that I have only mentioned here in passing.

From Institutional Action to Symbolic Confrontation

I have used the expression 'Southern Cone' as if it were not a problematic designation; but, in rigour, it may only be used in this manner during a short and superficial introduction as the above paragraphs were meant to be. In fact, the countries composing the Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and, to an extent, Brazil and Paraguay) are far from an homogeneous unity. Historical,

economic, ethnic, social and political contrasts, among other cleavages, differentiate these states. The complex scene that these contrasts create, plus the sparse information and scientific research on the religious fields of certain regions and countries, prevent an analysis of the whole Southern Cone. Therefore, we will limit this study to just three cases: Chile, Brazil and Argentina. Still, as will be shown, diversity persists. The roles played by the Catholic Church have not been the same and the degree of religious plurality has also been different in these three societies. However, even with all the aforementioned contrasts, it is possible to discern some common underlying trends when one analyses the situation in these countries since the 1980s.

What I perceive as a common element is that with the democratic turn of the 1980s the way religions are acting in these societies has changed. In most cases, during the dictatorships, churches were involved in what I call 'institutional forms of action'. This form of action had as a dominant feature the protagonism of the religious elite of the different churches who tried to influence the political and governmental leaders. In some cases, these actions were meant to promote peace and justice in the violent atmosphere of the dictatorships. In other cases, these actions were oriented towards winning favours from state authorities or, what is more or less the same thing, imposing restrictions through the state on other religious groups. Although during the dictatorial period this was the predominant form of action, especially of the more established churches, smaller and less mainstream religions worked in a different direction. Certain religious groups (such as Pentecostals), prioritised more individually oriented strategies. Although they occasionally aimed at influencing state authorities (as in the case of Chile), they had always been more concerned with 'winning the soul' of the men and women on the street. This strategy proved effective especially among the poorest sectors of society, who were in many cases affected by a permanent state of deprivation, or, as it happened in Argentina, by an economic recession that reduced the traditional living standards of the lower and lower-middle classes. The more successful churches were those able to provide new life-projects and meaningful goals to people who were constantly being rejected by society's main institutions (job and consumer markets, the educational system, etc.).

When the dictatorships ended, and the plural character of the Southern Cone's societies (including their religious fields) became more evident, the effectiveness of this strategy became obvious for most of the religious agents, even of the more traditional churches, who then begun to adopt this kind of orientation. In this way, a religious market emerged. This had an unexpected but beneficial consequence. People – especially poor people – became able to

choose among different religions, and found in this significant resources to overcome some of their problems. Especially, people found in religion a means of expression; that is, ways to construct their own understanding of life, creating in this manner a meaningful existence for themselves. This religious construction of meaning has had political implications, since many times people have used these religious means to contest the economic or political order. But to understand how this actually happened we need to explore more carefully the historical processes that led to this situation.

The Years of Dictatorship: Institutional Action

What makes the comparison between Chile, Brazil and Argentina interesting is that these three countries are at the same time very similar and amazingly different. For example; the three nations underwent violent military regimes more or less at the same time. Chile was under the violent military rule of Pinochet between 1973 and 1990; Argentina had the most violent dictatorship of its modern history between 1976 and 1983; and Brazil was also under the rule of a military regime that committed torture and murder between 1964 and 1985. Thus, as it may be observed, the three countries had similar military regimes in similar historical periods; also, the three countries re-introduced democracy more or less at the same time. What makes the comparison interesting is that, for example, the same churches did not play the same roles in the different countries during these regimes. And that within the same church, different sectors did not assume the same attitude towards the existing political regimes. In order to further document the similarities and contrasts we need to introduce more detail of what occurred in these countries.

Chile

In 1973 the military, headed by General Pinochet, took over power in Chile, overthrowing the socialist government of President Allende. After Pinochet took power he started a violent repression, persecuting all political dissidents and committing all sorts of human rights violations. The churches in Chile did not assume a unified role in the face of these issues. Initially, a group of churches created an ecumenical organisation, the 'Committee for Peace in Chile', that tried to defend human rights in the face of Pinochet's violations. This Committee was composed of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Pentecostal and Orthodox churches. But, for different reasons, mainly due to the lack of protection of the initial coalition of churches, this Committee was dissolved. Instead, the Catholic Church created the Vicariate for Solidarity as a sort of protective shell under which also Protestant leaders of various churches played

a role. On the other hand, some Pentecostal churches supported from the beginning the new regime, partly because of a deep rooted fear of Communism, but also as an opportunity to gain prominence and favour from the Pinochet government.

The facts exposed so far would prompt us to conclude that while Catholics and other religious groups defended human rights, Pentecostals and other Evangelicals became in some sense allies to the dictatorial regime. But this would be a simplification, since what is more striking is that even within the same churches there was argument about what role should be played. For example, historian Martin Poblete (1999:229-233) reports that while Cardinal Silva Enriquez was in favour of defending human rights, some bishops within the Catholic Church argued that they should not intervene in political matters.

When Pinochet's dictatorship ended in 1990, the Catholic Church abandoned its focus on human rights and took up the cause of the poor and disadvantaged. The Vicariate for Solidarity was dissolved and a new Vicariate of the Social Pastoral was created. In this vein Cardinal Oviedo endorsed a pastoral entitled: 'Poor people can't wait'. An interesting issue is that the new orientation towards the poor put the spotlight on the fact that the Catholic Church had lost its monopoly over the Chilean poor. When, in the 1990s the Church directed its action toward the poor it found that 20,2% of the Chilean population were Pentecostals, and that Catholics had decreased from 90% to 75% in 1990.

Confronted with this issue, the Catholic Church has undertaken a strategy of active evangelisation, trying to stop the increase of other religious groups and the slow reduction of its own constituency. In this effort, Cardinal Oviedo came to recognise that it was mainly the 'spiritual language' of Pentecostals that gave them the edge over Catholics, and in that vein he instructed his own followers to regain spiritual insight.

In addition to this missionary action, the Catholic Church pressured Congress not to pass a bill of cults that would give all churches, including the Roman Catholic, the same legal status thus establishing religious equality rather than mere tolerance. The Catholic Church also promoted laws that, depending on interpretation, could be used to restrict the liberty of others. This last kind of action has a paradoxical character and a negative effect. A paradoxical character, because it implies that the same sectors that defended human rights during the military regime, act against one of the fundamental human rights, namely freedom of religion. A negative effect because these attempts to restrict religious freedom increase levels of confrontation.

We may ask here what motivates these contradictory actions in the Catholic Church. I suggest that the motive which Catholics had to act against religious freedom is, finally, similar to the motive which Pentecostals had to associate with Pinochet's regime: in both cases they were trying to win control of the religious field using the State apparatus for that purpose.

Brazil

This kind of problem may also be seen in Brazil. As in Chile, in Brazil the Catholic Church played a fundamental role in defending human rights as well as social rights during the dictatorship. The Church's well known Base Communities played a fundamental role in defending social rights while the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops and the Pontifical Peace and Justice Commission played a leading role in preserving human rights. Because of this, the Church lost (they were killed) some of its members, including prelates. While the Catholic Church opposed the military, creating a certain strain in church-state relations, some religious minorities such as Afro-Brazilian religions, mainly *Umbanda*, and Pentecostals tried to win spaces in the state structure, becoming to some extent accomplices with the regime (Serbin, 1999:214).

As in the case of Chile, when the dictatorship ended, a new situation of religious diversity manifested itself: Pentecostals had won prominence in Brazil's religious field. According to Rubem Fernandes (1993) one new Pentecostal church is being opened in the Rio de Janeiro area every day. After democratisation took place, some Pentecostal churches (especially the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God) have implemented aggressive strategies to transform their new religious influence into political influence. They had a strong participation during the constitutional reform of 1986, and have since been actively involved in politics; usually using political positions to promote their religious cause and thus benefit their churches. Because of this they have been accused of crass patronage politics (Serbin, 1999:216).

This type of aggressive strategy that goes beyond simple evangelisation has led to significant confrontations with the Catholic Church and *Umbanda*, even at some points to open confrontation through the media, or even to almost physical attacks. Other reactions, however, have been the deployment, especially by the Catholic Church, of new evangelical strategies. For example, Catholics have promoted their own charismatic groups – with similar doctrine

and ritual to Pentecostals – and this strategy has not resulted in violent confrontations.

As in Chile, what seems to spark open confrontation in Brazil are attempts to use the institutional apparatus of the state to promote religious causes, or domination of the religious field. When religious competition takes place solely through evangelical or missionary action, the levels of conflict remain low. With its own cleavages this seems to be the case for Argentina as well.

Argentina

Between 1976 and 1983 Argentina underwent a violent dictatorship. Using as an excuse the existence of certain left wing guerrilla movements, the Argentine military created a repressive machinery that resembled the Nazi concentration camps. The repression reached a range of social sectors that greatly exceeded the guerrillas themselves. Even the slightest difference with the military government turned people into objects of violent repression. In this way, during the dictatorship, between 10,000 and 30,000 people were killed. Given the repressive methods used, the (in)famous ‘disappearances’, the number cannot be established with greater certitude.

The roles played by the churches in this context were diverse and contrasting. Within the Catholic Church, the dominant religion in Argentina, the leadership played an ambiguous role, partly silencing the information they had, and in some cases (as the military vicariate) even giving moral support to those in charge of torture and murder. The reasons for this kind of complicity are historical. The trajectory of the Catholic Church in Argentina seems to have pushed her in two directions; first, to establish a strong alliance with the more conservative, authoritarian sectors of society; second, to distrust its own control over the spirituality of the popular sectors and to try to use the state apparatus to guarantee this control. The Church’s affinity with the military government manifested these two elements: i) A certain adhesion to its ideology, noticeable, as mentioned, in the action of the military vicariate and in a sometimes very explicit anti-marxism; and ii) the tendency to restrict, through censorship and state control, the freedom of religion.

It is important to note that the role played by the churches during the dictatorship cannot be restricted to that played by the Catholic leadership. Almost as an exact opposite to this image, dissident sectors of the Catholic Church and members of the Protestant churches actively participated in human rights movements, trying to counter the political violence exerted by the

military government. In this sense, the role played by the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights (made up of Catholic as well as Protestant churches) was prominent. Members of different Protestant churches – usually those more closely related to the World Council of Churches, which participated in the Ecumenical Movement for Human Rights – also worked in secular human rights organizations like CELS (Centre for Legal and Social Studies), the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Permanent Assembly for Human Rights.

Thus explored, the Argentine case shows that the relationship between religion and violence is contrasting when looked at as a whole. There are sectors within the religious field that favoured, or at least did not act against, the violent action of the military and other sectors that promoted human rights, trying to stop violence and abuse. After the grey years of dictatorship, the religious field in Argentina followed the trend of diversification characteristic of its Southern Cone neighbours; although, since religious restrictions had been greater, the contrasts with the previous situation were starker. As in the cases of Brazil and Chile, in Argentina Pentecostals became a prominent actor of the religious field, especially among the poor and mainly because of their charismatic rituals. Also, other religious minorities (like Afro-Brazilian religions) won space and visibility, remaining, however, very small groups. These groups, including Pentecostals, also acted, as in the other countries, more at a grassroots level than at an institutional level (although attempts to influence state institutions were also undertaken by Pentecostals). The reaction of the Catholic Church was a combined attempt to restrict the newly acquired freedom and, when most of these efforts proved futile, to regain adepts by invigorating their own charismatic groups.

Conclusion

The cases of Argentina, Brazil and Chile show that during the dictatorships religions in the Southern Cone did not play a fixed role. The roles played by the different churches or by the same churches in different countries have alternatively been in favour or against violence. What does seem a common trend is a change in the way religions are behaving in the region. Although the situation is not completely homogeneous, almost in every case religions have ceased to privilege institutional action – trying to influence governments and state representative – and instead have embraced the strategy of trying to influence ‘small people’, to win the men and women on the street. This new trend has favoured the poor and disfranchised in society, but has also created new bases for conflict. We will explore this situation in the next section.

Symbolic Confrontation

Before explaining what symbolic confrontation is and how it actually takes place in the Southern Cone, it is necessary to make explicit some of the theoretical elements that underlie the concept. The first thing is to show the importance of symbols in social life, and how they are associated with the construction of perception and meaning. Connected to this issue are the relations between identity and power, and how religion plays a role in this. Only when the conceptual links between these elements are made clear, will we be able to show what symbolic confrontation is and how it takes place.

The analysis of the roles that symbols play in social life has been one of the most significant contributions of anthropology to our understanding of human societies. Although it is not the purpose of this chapter to make a thorough analysis of how this emerged in the discipline, a brief overview is necessary. It was probably the prominent anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973:5) who was responsible for proposing that men and women live 'suspended in webs of significance they themselves have spun'. What Geertz was trying to explain is that societies induce in every person a certain perception of reality by attaching meaning to things. For example, we dress in a certain manner, hiding certain parts of our bodies because we consider them as 'private'. This is because Western societies attach a certain *meaning* (private, sinful, etc.) to these body parts. We then individually *perceive* these parts according to the socially constructed meaning of them.

Two important things should be realised here. First, there is a certain differentiation between meaning and perception. Meaning is a collective element (the socially constructed understanding of things). Perception is an individual element, the particular way an individual understands things, which is influenced by the socially constructed meaning. Societies induce individual perception through socialisation, which guides people into accepting the socially constructed meanings. A second element is that meanings and perceptions are not inscribed in the nature of the things themselves or in the instinctive character of human beings. The meanings societies attach to things are, in a sense, arbitrary – each society constructs an understanding of reality which is its own, but does not have an intrinsic justification in the nature of things themselves. Since human beings' understanding of reality is not instinctive, they depend on the socially constructed meanings (the webs of significance) to understand themselves (have an identity) and the world around them. Thus, these constructed meanings and perceptions are fundamental for human beings in order to survive and also overcome the sense of meaningless

and chaos that results from not knowing (instinctively) what is the purpose and meaning of human existence.

Two more elements must be introduced before we may define symbolic confrontation and show how it is taking place in the Southern Cone. First, we need to make clear what symbols are; second, how power relations are involved in all this. As *perceptions*, the webs of significance have a private existence in people's heads; it is the way a person conceives herself or himself (their identity) and the reality around him or her. But, since these perceptions are common to a group of people, they have also a public existence, which is expressed in symbols. For example, during the sixties hippies used worn-out jeans to express their repudiation of consumer society, thus the jeans were a symbol of their political stance. What existed in their heads as a political ideology was expressed in an external symbol: the jeans. It is these public expressions of meanings what anthropologists understand as symbols. Thus, we may conclude that symbols are external manifestations (things or actions) that express the meanings or shared perception of reality present in a given social group; symbols synthesise and express meanings.(Geertz, 1973:10)

But there is still another dimension of symbols that must be considered. Symbols, as the public expression of meanings, allow for communication between people. Through these communicative processes people may also negotiate *new* meanings. We may use language to discuss with others our perceptions of reality and reach a new consensus; in that way we create new collective meanings. An alternative outcome of this process could be that no new consensus is reached, and then persistent conflict between alternative perceptions ensues. This again brings us to the issues of meanings, symbols and power, which we need to discuss next.

The fact that meaning and power are related is now common wisdom in the anthropological discipline. Usually, the meaning of things is in part constructed from the standpoint of certain social sectors. Imposing these meanings may help in establishing social control and dominance of these sectors over others. Western societies are strongly influenced by the Christian tradition. In this way, we immediately recognise that religion has played a part in the meanings westerners attach to things. While there is a restrictive side of religion (it may be used as an instrument of dominance), to believe that this is the only way in which religion operates in society would be misleading. Other observations show that religion, even Christianity, has served to construct a certain understanding of reality that, given the non-instinctive character of human beings, has been a positive contribution. Also, one could think of cases where

submerged social groups used their religions to contest the established meanings.

In sum, religion provides a rich set of symbols that contains a certain understanding of the world and humanity. In this way it solves one of the fundamental human needs which is to find meaning in life. Since religion is this rich system of symbols creating meaning, it is also involved in power relations. Religion may be used to impose a certain view of reality on others, but it may also be used to contest these efforts of domination. And, as in any symbolic system, religion may also serve to construct new meanings and perceptions. In fact, what very often happens is that efforts of domination and contestation end up in creating new meanings and perceptions of reality through syncretism.

We have now brought in all the necessary theoretical tools to introduce the notion of symbolic confrontation. We will now present a brief and abstract definition. In a following section we will show how it may be employed in the Southern Cone context. Hopefully, we will then be able to reach a more complete understanding of it.

In a very general sense, symbolic confrontation is the struggle that takes place when different social groups try to impose their own understanding of reality as the true one. Of course, this kind of confrontation may become more than just symbolic (eg. during the Inquisition), but at other times it remains at a symbolic level, as in the case of the gay and lesbian parade where the established understandings of the body and sexuality are contested by symbolic means only. *Therefore, symbolic confrontation consists of a struggle among social groups or sectors to impose through persuasion their own system of meanings and symbols, excluding as confrontational resources both physical violence and attempts to institutionally restrict the expressive capacity of others.*

Symbolic confrontation often takes place by disputing the meanings beyond the same symbols. For example, in the Afro-Brazilian cult of *Umbanda* certain spirits of African origin were (and still are) given the name of Catholic saints, and in fact *Umbanda* followers believe that the saint and the spirit are the same; moreover some *Umbandists* may even say that they are also Catholics. In contrast, in the official Catholic doctrine the African spirits are not accepted as saints, thus there is a dispute over the real standing of these spirits. In the case of Pentecostals, both saints and spirits receive a different interpretation. *Umbanda* spirits are defined as devilish and, contrasting with the Catholic tradition, saints are not viewed as intermediaries between God and his

followers but as fake figures produced by human ignorance that lead Christians astray into idolatry. Thus, it becomes apparent here how the same elements (Catholic saints and African spirits) are given different meanings by different groups, and that there is a confrontation (a symbolic one) among them.

The example shows how symbolic confrontation actually may take place in several ways. If we explore the process by which African spirits came to be named as Catholic saints, we may see how this was a symbolic confrontation of the social order: African slaves tried to preserve their religious creeds by disguising their spirits as saints; in that way they resisted the enforcement of a new religion upon them. Moreover, religious symbols and rituals were many times used to conspire against white slave owners. This was the case of '*capoeria*' a kind of martial art that slaves practised, disguised as a sort of ritual dance, and that was frequently used as a fighting technique to escape from the *haciendas*. Thus, we see how symbolic confrontation took place between submerged sectors and the established power. This is one way in which symbolic confrontation may occur. In contrast, symbolic confrontation may also take place among the submerged sectors themselves, as when Catholics, *Umbandists* and Pentecostals collide over the real meaning of saints and spirits. Thus in the case of religion (although in other fields this also occurs), symbolic confrontation takes place at least in two ways. On the one hand, submerged sectors may use religion to contest, and also adapt, to the established social order. Adaptation, however, should not be taken simply as a docile kind of integration, as Hobsbawn (1973:3) put it, adaptation of the submitted sectors implies many times 'working the system to their minimum disadvantage'. On the other hand, symbolic confrontation may take place as a dispute among disadvantaged sectors of society. I would like to explore now, in more detail, how these two forms of symbolic confrontation take place in the Southern Cone.

Symbolic Confrontation as the Contestation of the Social Order

There are several anthropological studies that show how in Latin America in general, and the Southern Cone in particular, the social order is contested through religious symbolism (Taussig, 1980; Mariz, 1994; Isla, 2001). Although an exhaustive account of this matter is impossible here, I want to give several examples of the many ways in which this occurs. The examples show two types of symbolic contestation of the social order. The first set of examples, show a rather open condemnation of the social order in contexts where submerged sectors are suffering extreme forms of exploitation and manifest forms of violence. The second set of examples illustrate more adaptive roles played by

religion. In these cases, although a certain condemnation of the social order does occur, it is less confrontational. In this, more tempered, type of confrontation, submerged sectors are many times able to improve their condition.

A first example may be taken from Michael Taussig's (1980) account of devil mythology in Colombia and Bolivia, that has striking parallels in some regions of Argentina (Isla, 2001). Taussig shows that a similar mythology related to the figure of the devil appears among the tin miners of Bolivia and the peasants who were becoming wage-workers in the sugar cane plantations of the Colombian Cauca Valley. Taussig shows how devil mythology was used to understand and condemn the capitalist social order in Bolivia and Colombia. In the Argentine northwest similar mythology has been used by wage workers of the sugar cane plantations. This mythology was analysed by Alejandro Isla (2001) who found that devil mythology varied greatly according to different socio-historical conditions. The basic myth Isla found was quite similar to the one described by Taussig: plantation owners become so by making a pact with the devil. Because of this pact the owner becomes rich fast, but his soul is then taken by a fierce black dog called *El Familiar* – the incarnation of the devil. This dog does not only take the man's soul after his death, but also occasionally takes the life of one of the sugar cane wage workers. According to the myth, the bodies of those taken by *El Familiar* are never found; only their clothing is left behind. The variations of the myth and their correspondence with socio-historical conditions are quite striking. For example, during the government of Perón, when working conditions were improved by legislation and unions were powerful and could defend the workers rights, a new version of the myth was created in which *El Familiar* did not eat human flesh but only animals. In contrast, during the 1976-1983 dictatorship, the new version of the myth was that *El Familiar* preferred those sugar cane workers who were political activists or union leaders. Thus, the myth was used to explain the 'disappearances' of union leaders and political activists during the dictatorship. Isla has shown how the effect of this version of the myth was ambiguous. For, if on the one hand, it favoured a culture of terror that conspired against the collective organization of sugar cane workers (either in unions or parties), on the other hand, it also constituted a language in which the action of the military, the police or the private armies of the landowner (used to reprimand the workers) could be denounced. That is, people would not join unions or parties because of fear of '*El Familiar*'; but also the mythological language was a safe way to speak and denounce the action of the military in a context in which it was dangerous even to mention these activities. Other versions of the myth also existed. For

example, in some cases it was said that *El Familiar* took lazy workers or those marginal people that had no family.

In sum, what the previous examples show is how religious symbolism works when it is used by submerged sectors at the same time to adapt and contest the social order. It is important to draw attention to two things here. First, the role of symbols in this process: the devil, as a symbol, was used to interpret new kinds of social relations. As Taussig shows, what initially appears as unexplainable for people used to a traditional economy becomes comprehensible through the use of these traditional religious symbols. Second, the selection of the devil as a (evil) figure to symbolize capitalist economic relations is not casual; it is a 'strategic' selection used to symbolically condemn a social order felt to be exploitive.

The cases presented here were extracted mainly from rural contexts where manifest forms of violence were present (especially in the case of the Argentine northwest) and where peasants were submitted to very exploitive economic relations. Although in these cases there was a certain degree of adaptation to the social order, most of the attitude was confrontational, seeing the social order as intrinsically evil. Also, most of the past examples belonged to processes occurring during the 1960s and 1970s. The roles that religion has played more recently in urban contexts of the Southern Cone are somewhat different. As previously said, in these cases there is a less confrontational attitude, although a certain degree of contestation of the social order is still present. Also, it is clear to most analysts that these forms of partial contestation of the social order are functional to submerged sectors, and particularly serve to diminish domestic forms of violence. The best way to show this is to analyse the effects popular religions have among the poor in the Southern Cone.

Brazil

The best study describing the effects of religion among the poor is probably that of Cecilia Mariz (1994), who studied the effects of three types of popular religion (Pentecostalism, *Umbanda*, and Catholic Base Communities – CEBS) in the life of poor Brazilians. Although Mariz conducted a thorough exploration of the contrasts between these religions, we can only examine here their more general effects. An essential component of Mariz' analysis is her perception that poverty is not solely a material issue; economic deprivation has significant consequences in other aspects of life. What Mariz shows, in concrete terms, is how poor people's sensation of being socially worthless generates in them a low self esteem and a loss of personal dignity that is often conducive to

damaging behaviours: alcoholism, domestic violence and (although Mariz does not explicitly mention it) criminal activities are often the result of the state of psychological deprivation that poor people experience. Thus, we may conclude that certain forms of violence, like domestic violence or criminal violence, (that have become its prevailing forms after the dictatorships) are the result of these states of deprivation. According to Mariz, popular religions provide means to psychologically endure the damaging effects of poverty. The essential means religions provide are based on a symbolic contestation/adaptation to the social order that act to avoid the sense of worthlessness and senselessness that being poor in a consumer society produces. Mariz describes a series of mechanisms that operate in this direction.

One of the elements religions provide are the 'experiences of the supernatural'. Although not all popular religions permit these kind of experiences in the same manner, most of them allow for this in one way or the other. The effects of these experiences with the supernatural are clearly described by Mariz.

The possibility that ordinary people can be in touch with the supernatural world is a characteristic of almost all religions that are popular among the poor [...] The belief that any participant in a religious organization can deal directly with God fosters the development of small, autonomous groups. This belief also increases the self-esteem of the poor. (1994: 137).

A second mechanism by which religion contributes to improve poor people's conditions is by 'fostering experiences of human dignity'. Mariz shows how, among the religious communities she researched, she found constant efforts to maintain dignity that were, in part, effected by stressing a formal treatment that is not usual in every day life – eg. addressing other church members in formal ways: mister, miss, etc. In the case of Pentecostals, dressing in a very conservative manner was also used as a way to sustain a sense of dignity, having important effects in people's lives.

The appearance of decency and the conservative dress do in fact protect poor women from being treated like prostitutes and poor men from being considered thieves. As Gilkes shows, Pentecostal clothing also protects black women in the United States. Gilke's opinion is shared by many Brazilian Pentecostals. Sebastião says young Pentecostals woman's clothing serves as a form of protection. Neusa chose the word *armadura*, which means 'armour', to refer to the sober clothing of a believer. Therefore, the very much criticized repressive aspects of Pentecostal morality may play an instrumental role in

supporting respectful treatment of the poor and strengthening poor people's self esteem. (Mariz, 1994:142).

A third way in which popular religions may help the poor is by allowing them to overcome a certain sense of powerlessness common to their condition. The way in which religions help the poor overcome this is by creating the sensation that miraculous interventions in their life are possible, and therefore that any obstacle (health, material, family problems, etc.) may be defeated. Anthropological observation shows that people, contrary to what it is many times believed, do not remain passive awaiting for a miraculous solution, but instead they engage in a persistent struggle to overcome their problems, assured by the sensation that if they do enough to deserve God's assistance He will eventually intervene, helping them to succeed. Another constitutive element of the religious strategies to strive against poverty is given by what Mariz calls a 'sense of coherence', which is more present in Pentecostal doctrine than in other religions.

In contrast with Afro-Brasilian Spiritism, Pentecostalism emphasizes the meaning of miracles and their relationship to God's will. Therefore, if a healing fails to occur, there must be some reason, a meaning to be ascribed. In Arnaldo's interpretation, the disease he suffered from was God's way of appealing to him to dedicate himself to religious work. Creuza interpreted her broken leg as an opportunity to witness God's power. Faith in a divine logic that guides and determines life offers a psychological advantage in the struggle for survival. An Israeli sociologist Aaron Antonovsky, identified what he called lawfulness, or a 'sense of coherence' as the principal psychological element that differentiated people who were able to survive concentration camps and establish a relatively healthy life from those who could never make this adjustment. (Mariz, 1994:147).

In sum, what the previous examples illustrate are a series of mechanisms that act to make people psychologically more resistant to their unfavourable situation. In this sense, these are adaptive mechanisms, since they help poor people to mentally adjust to their situation. However, there is a certain component of rebellion, because this 'adaptation' is accomplished by constructing a system of values that, to an extent, is alternative to those prevalent in society. For example, instead of gaining self esteem through a professional career – to which they usually have no access – they do it through a 'spiritual career' in which they many times feel above the more cultured and rich sectors of society. In this way the dominant value system is contested and poor people are able to feel superior in a way that they cannot experience outside

this alternative system. As Bobsin (1984:45) put it: strength may be gained by shifting emphasis from material richness to spiritual gifts.

All the foresaid mechanisms, that create a renewed self esteem, also curb damaging habits of the Brazilian poor. For example, the sense of lawfulness, the overcoming of powerlessness and the feeling of dignity act against alcoholism and domestic violence, which Mariz describes as one of the most frequent problems among the poor. These behaviours also affect household budgets and opportunities in the work-market. Because of this, those experiencing the beneficial effects of religious conversion are many times in a good position, if not to overcome poverty altogether, at least to relatively improve their condition.

Mariz' concluding remarks are, in this sense, extremely eloquent as to how the subjective experiences induced by popular religions help the poor endure their situation.

All religions practiced by poor people offer subjective experiences that overcome the *anomie* created by misery and, as a result, serve to support the poor in enduring material deprivation. In analysing the subjective experiences shared by Pentecostals and CEB members, however, it appears that religious experiences in these two groups may also foster a modern consciousness that is advantageous in the struggle for material survival and improvement in present day Brazilian society. Therefore, of all the religions analysed, Pentecostalism seems to offer more motivations that help the poor Brazilian individual to survive. In addition to the subjective experiences mentioned, it helps the poor endure poverty through its emphasis on the family and its fight against alcoholism. (1994:151).

Argentina

It is striking to see how the effects Mariz mentions for Brazil are re-encountered in Argentina (in Chile similar processes happened as well, but this will be presented later). Therefore, in conceptual terms there is not much to add to Mariz' analysis, but since I conducted a direct study in Argentina I am able to introduce more detailed evidence through the exposition of actual Pentecostal discourse and the life stories of converts. An initial element that should be introduced before relating the life stories, is that there are important contrasts between Argentina and Brazil in the social and religious contexts. With respect to the religious field, Argentina has probably had a more restrictive atmosphere than Brazil since religious minorities have been object of discriminatory laws

through all of Argentina's modern history. Although this has, to an extent, also been the case in Brazil, the enforcement of these laws has probably been greater in Argentina. Also, as shown in a previous section, the collusion between the Catholic Church and the National State has also been more permanent and flawless in Argentina than in Brazil (or Chile), which also explains the lesser degrees of freedom in the former case. With respect to social structure differences, until the second half of the 1970s Argentina had small social contrasts (differences between rich and poor) as compared to other Latin American countries; and, although there was poverty, most of the population, including the poor, perceived this as a transitional state. That is, there was a well-founded expectation of upward social mobility which meant an increasing reduction of poverty. When Pentecostalism and other religious minorities expanded in Argentina these tendencies of the religious and social fields were reversed. In the religious arena, the former monopoly of the Catholic Church was challenged by an unprecedented expansion of Pentecostal churches and other religious minorities. Parallel to this, the economic recession of the 1980s and the policies applied as a solution to it, initially stopped the expectations of upward mobility and then fractured the social structure by increasing the gap between rich and poor to levels never experienced before in Argentina. This fractured social structure has increased the levels of marginality and its social consequences: high and persistent unemployment and an increase to intolerable levels in Argentine society of crime rates and domestic violence.

In sum, the context in which the life stories took place was pervaded by two novel processes: impoverishment of the population and religious pluralization. The following stories are eloquent in themselves as to how these two tendencies affected the lives of poor and lower middle class Argentines and the adaptive role religion (mainly Pentecostalism) played in it. In order to fully understand how Pentecostalism produces the effects described by Mariz, we need to analyse its discourse and impact in people's lives.

Pentecostal Discourse

Even if there are doctrinal and ritual differences between different Pentecostal churches that will not be treated in this chapter, what is known as 'Spiritual Warfare' theology was prominent among Pentecostals during the 1980s, and is still important now. Spiritual Warfare theology is quite complex, therefore I will concentrate mainly on three topics: health, family life and economic prosperity. In Spiritual Warfare theology it is proposed that all misfortunes in peoples' lives are caused by evil spiritual forces (the devil or one of his angels). Therefore,

poverty, sickness, family conflicts and so on are attributed to the action of these evil forces in the actual life of a person. The solution to any of the previous problems comes from the intervention of spiritual forces of a benign character that counter the evil ones (that is God, Jesus, the Holy Ghost, that stops the evil spiritual forces from interfering in peoples' lives). The intervention of these benign spiritual forces is achieved through fervent prayer during worship. These prayers – which are usually done collectively with a pastor having the leading voice and the laity murmuring their own personal prayers – describe a battle between the benign and malignant forces, and ask the good spirits to liberate people from the shackles (poverty, sickness, etc.) with which the evil spirits have tied them.

Although at first sight one may suspect that this kind of prayer is alienating in that it assigns spiritual causes to social problems by proposing that poverty or familial conflicts are caused by the action of evil spirits, this is not exactly so. In fact preachers frequently merge spiritual and social factors when exteriorising the causes beyond these phenomena. In this way the dimension of adaptation and symbolic confrontation of the social order are brought together. The following extract from one of the prayers I heard while doing fieldwork among Pentecostals nicely illustrates the point I am making here:

Lord, we keep on praying, we keep asking for these lives, for these families, for these people that have come here today. We want to ask for the prosperity of these households, for these persons, for those that are jobless, God help them in their needs. *We rebuke the spirit of poverty, the spirit of avarice of those that have more and that is a burden to the life of these people. We rebuke the spirit of avarice that affects those in government.* God, bless your people and make them prosper. God, look at these families, at these men, help them face their needs, help them feed their children, help those who need to finish their homes, those that are building their houses.

It is clear in this extract how a spiritual language is used to denounce social injustice: although poverty and unemployment is attributed to the action of the 'spirit of avarice', it is clear for these poor Pentecostal pastors that this spirit acts through rich people and the government. Therefore, they are not innocent of the social causes that explain their situation. So we may see how – as in the examples presented by Isla and Taussig – here too a spiritual language may be used as a means of symbolic confrontation of the social order. What makes this spiritual language extremely attractive for the poor is that, in addition to denunciation, it also incorporates adaptive mechanisms (already mentioned by Mariz) that help them cope with their immediate situation. The basic

mechanisms are those that help deprived people to recover their self esteem and sense of dignity. Pentecostal doctrine fosters this by providing elements that permit people to find new meanings in life important for those who have lost many of the incentives for living. Those that become Pentecostals are called the 'children of God', they are told that God has a plan for their lives and they are commended with the, by any means modest, purpose of spreading God's message and saving humanity. This religious or spiritual project becomes then a substitute for professional careers or expectations of upward social mobility, that in the Argentine case had to be abandoned or postponed due to the economic processes described above. To understand better the effects Pentecostal theology may have on those facing critical times let us consider the emotional impact that the following message given by a pastor may have.

You are the children of God, all of you who are here now have been called by God to serve him. God has a personal plan for each of you, that's why you are here now. *That's why you should not fear, like the Bible says: not even in the valley of shadows, in the worst moments of life, fear.* God knows what he is doing, God knows why you are going through that. You should never forget that there is a salvation plan for you, you must respect God and obey him and the main mandate you have from him is to spread the good news of salvation, go out and evangelise, call those that have not yet heard the message so that there is not even one person in world who does not know what God has prepared for him.

If we follow Mariz' interpretation, it becomes clear how this message may induce two kinds of perceptions. One is a sense of mission: believers have a life-project, which is to act as God's representatives on earth. This fosters a sense of dignity and self esteem since they feel part of a transcendental plan, superior to any worldly undertaking that dominant social institutions may propose. Another is the 'sense of coherence'. Since every possible problem in life (the 'valley of shadows') may be interpreted as part of this transcendental plan, there is always a purpose in everything, and thus hope may be sustained in the face of misfortune. As in the case of Warfare Theology, here too criticisms of the social order may be cast in spiritual terms. Consider the following extract from a sermon preached in a Pentecostal church:

I know here we are all [blue collar] workers, nobody can make a check and say: 'here pastor, there you go' we all have to give with sacrifice. *But not only those that have money can do things; we, the workers, also can do things for the glory of God.*

Thus, the previous extract shows how the idea of a godly plan where anybody may find a role is used to create a sense of dignity and self esteem among blue collar workers. Using this symbolic resources, those that are considered outcasts and worthless by main-stream institutions regain a sense of dignity by stating that in God's plan they have a paramount role and are thus worthwhile.

Although more things could be said in relation to Pentecostal theology and its impact on poor people's lives, enough has been advanced to see its more evident repercussions. The following life-stories will show how the effects of Pentecostal conversion in lower class Argentines actually occurs, also illustrating further what Mariz described for the Brazilian context. Before I introduce these stories, it is important to bear in mind that the cases presented here have not been selected as 'special' cases particularly well suited for our purposes. Instead, they constitute illustrations of the more recurrent stories of conversion. In this sense they share common elements with 73,2 per cent of the 65 life stories I collected during fieldwork. These common traits are that in all cases converts come from a non-practising Catholic background, they convert between 1980 and 1989 in a context of personal and family crises, associated with economic hardship and health problems, and that they belong somewhere between the lower middle and poor classes.

Julio and Marta

Julio was one of my first informants during fieldwork. He had converted to Pentecostalism during a moment of crisis in his family. Conflicts came about in 1986 or 1987 because his car shop had gone bankrupt; to compensate for the losses, Julio's wife (Marta) had found a job sewing jackets in a shop where she worked for almost ten hours a day. The long working shift, plus the stressed economic situation in the family, sickened Marta who fell into depression for long periods of time. Julio did not tolerate Marta's attitude, and became violent to his children and wife. Julio also recurrently abandoned the house for long periods of time, giving in to alcoholism. After tolerating Julio's conduct for some time, Marta herself decided to leave the house, only occasionally meeting Julio and her children. In this context of family disunion Marta's and Julio's children abandoned school, adding a new problem to the already tense situation.

Because of this persistent state of crisis, Marta and Julio begun to consult leaders of different religious groups and organisations. They went to visit faith healers, *Mães de Santo* (from *Umbanda*) and they finally attended a Pentecostal church which they came to know first through television and then by personally visiting one of the churches in the neighbourhood. Marta's first visit to a

Pentecostal church was, however, without clearly knowing what was actually going to happen: 'we were driving near the church, and I said to Julio: stop! if God exists I want him to show it to me.' According to Marta's account, when she entered the church the pastor was praying for families facing the same problems they had, so she walked to where the pastor was praying, joining the rest of the congregation who were already at the front, there she felt touched and fell to the floor. This 'experience' made her trust the pastors and want to know more about the 'new' religion. Marta recalls some of the advice that was important for her at that moment:

He [the pastor] said that we should preserve our family, and that we should not turn desperate in bad times because God took care of all his children, and that God has a plan for all of us, a personal plan for each human being. He stressed that if we remained faithful we would be finally led to a life full of blessings. And this gave us hope, and also because we had a fellowship in the community where everybody supported each other. That made me feel stronger and I didn't have that depression any more, I had hope, I was happy because I knew we would get over our problems and have a happy family and a happy life.

The effects of this message were, if not immediate, significant in the development of Marta's family. Let us see what Julio has to say:

At first I was not convinced. He [the pastor] came and I listened but just not to be disrespectful, and because Marta wanted me to. But slowly I began to calm down and I understood that God had something for me, so I did not change overnight, but slowly I began to see that there was hope for us, not everything was lost.

In addition to this emotional support, members of the congregation began to look for a new job for Julio. The process took some time – six months – in which Julio many times doubted the church, but Marta with the help of the pastor talked him into waiting some more: 'I prayed and tried to keep my faith because, to tell you the truth, sometimes, while I was waiting, I felt like leaving everything and going back to my old life. But Marta talked to me and told me: no, let's pray, you need to have hope.' After this period the congregation finally found a job for Julio, something that at the same time stabilised his faith and family:

We are okay now, we are not rich or anything, we get through day by day, but we are far better than before. Besides, we learned in church that we are all children of God and that to be rich is not really important. What is really

important is to be a good Christian. Before, may be, I could feel less important than other people that had more than I, and that made me bitter because it was partly for that reason that I came back home angry and sour. Now I know that there is no reason for that.

The previous account shows how, among other things, Pentecostal theology and practise helps to overcome domestic violence and economic crises. However, as has been stated, another way in which popular religions serves the purpose of softening violent behaviour is by becoming a deterrent to criminal conducts. How this happens can also be observed in the story of Juan.

Juan

When I met Juan he was 23, had reconstructed his family, had a stable but low paid job and was going to a Pentecostal church. Three years before that, when he was 20, he had entered a rehabilitation program sponsored by a Pentecostal church. His decision to enter the program was the result of a long and appalling criminal career. At the age of 20 Juan had been jailed several times, for robbery, armed assault and drug trafficking. He had also been heavily addicted to drugs. Juan's body was impressively scared, he had been wounded in shootings with the police and other gangs and also had had knife fights while in jail. Many times during his criminal career, that begun when he was 14, he had tried to leave his life as a transgressor but had not succeeded. In his interpretation, this had happened because he had chosen the wrong rehabilitation programs.

I went to several programs, but the only thing they give you are pills. The make you swallow those pills that make you drowsy and you walk around like an idiot, like a mummy. It's like they substitute a legal drug for an illegal drug, but you are still a junky. There are the therapists, psychologists, I don't know. But they are too cold, you don't feel a bond with them, so you really don't trust them, you actually don't really hear what they say. You see them as part of those that are giving you the pills; so, even if they mean well, which I am not sure, you don't care for what they say.

In Juan's perception, Pentecostals had been able to rehabilitate him because he had really felt God's call while among them. The elements that had created this feeling are quite familiar to us at this stage.

When I first entered the program I didn't understand anything, I thought: 'these people are crazy'. But I was comfortable, I ate every day, I had a warm place to sleep, the police wouldn't bother me there so I stayed. Then I begun to notice

that this place was different from other rehab programs. The director was not a distant person, but he was like a father, or better a big brother, well we even call each other that: brothers, so with him we could make some jokes, and talk about our feelings and problems and he would really hear us. And also I begun to understand here that I am a creature of God, and that he has a plan for me, there is a purpose for me, and that he would even forgive me for all the bad things I had been doing before. So, all this had an impact on me. When I first realised this I begun to cry, I spent like two or three days crying, I couldn't stop. That was because God had showed me all the bad things I had done, and I had to repent. Then I begun to have a new life, I went back to my wife, I got a job and begun to really take care of my child.

More details and stories could be brought in to show how Pentecostal theology and practise has pacifying effects in troubled families and violent people, and how, in this manner, it curbs domestic violence and criminal behaviour. It should be understood, in any case, that the previously described effects of popular religions in general and Pentecostalism in particular cannot be taken out of proportion. One could not trust that these forms of religiosity will solve by themselves the increasing problems of poverty and domestic and criminal violence that some regions of the Southern Cone are facing. These forms of religiosity may vicariously act as deterrents, but they are not definitive solutions to these profound social difficulties.

We are only left with one remaining task before we may go on to the next section and see another form of symbolic confrontation: confrontation between popular religions. The remaining task is to show how what happens in Brazil and Argentina takes place also in Chile.

Chile

Enough has been said already about the effects of popular religions, especially Pentecostalism, in poor people's lives. As the classical study of d'Epinay (1968) shows, and the more recent work of Canales *et al.* (1991) confirms, the effects of these religions in Chile have not been too different, in general terms, to what has taken place in Brazil and Argentina. Consequently, only a few remarks concentrating on certain unique elements will be introduced here.

The original experience I want to include shows what happens when Pentecostals become involved in programs of social assistance. Similar things have occurred elsewhere (Brazil and Argentina), but Chile is probably where Pentecostals have become more actively involved in this kind of activity. This

strategy is different from the previously mentioned cases in that the way in which Pentecostals contribute to improve poor peoples' situation is not an implicit strategy contained in their symbolic perception of reality; instead it is an explicit program to fight poverty through material aid. Although there have been several Pentecostal experiences in this respect, I want to analyse here just one case which has been documented in several texts (Canales *et al.*, 1991; Kamsteeg, 1995). According to the organizing agency (Evangelical Service for Development – ESD), the undertaking originally consisted of 'an emergency program to satisfy certain basic needs. Priority was given to children's alimentation through soup kitchens for small children sponsored by ESD and run by the communities [neighbourhood associations] themselves.'

In a second phase, the program broadened its scope: 'given that the precarious situation persisted, the same community organizations promoted the joint acquisition of some of the basic food products that compose the *canasta familiar* [literally 'family basket' – the basic set of products necessary to feed a family]. In that way, a new form of organization, the *Centros Populares de Abastecimiento* (Popular Centres of Supplies – CPA) were formed. Each CPA opens up to all the poor families of its community, through a selection process based on the needs of each family. In this way the expenses in each family are reduced, by diminishing the costs of each product (retail discounts) and of transportation.'

An interesting issue is that not all Pentecostals were happy with the Church's open involvement in social assistance programs. Those that were not satisfied saw this as too worldly; they perceived that this practice was too similar to what political parties or the Catholic Church did, and because of this they tended to reject the direct involvement of their Church in such programs as the CPA. A telling example of how the conflict developed was given by one of the CPA leaders when talking about the reaction of more traditional Pentecostals:

They said that the Church was going to become too worldly... that we were worrying only about material things... but I said no, to me the most important things are still spiritual... (in Canales *et al.*: 154).

The answer of those in favour of the CPA program was that giving material help to the poor was part of the Christian mandate, and thus it was not a 'worldly' behaviour but an integral part of their identity as 'true Christians'. In this vein a CPS leader, referring to the accusations of being too worldly, said:

The Bible many times talks about poverty... God loves the poor... I know that God loves me as a poor person. (in Canales *et al.*:155).

In sum, what this last Chilean case shows, in addition to what happened in Brazil and Argentina, is that charismatic religions that stress the spiritual dimension do not constitute an insurmountable obstacle to direct forms of assistance. The ESD/CPA case shows how even churches with a very otherworldly orientation may eventually create NGOs suitable to administer programs of social assistance. However, we also see that in these contexts conflicts may arise. The reasons behind the conflicts are interesting to surmise. Those against the CPA program did not feel that poor people did not deserve assistance, or that helping in itself was a bad thing. What bothered them was that by doing that they became too worldly; meaning, essentially, that they were doing similar things to the Catholic Church or political parties. Thus, what actually annoyed them was that their feeling of being special or chosen was, in their perception, threatened if they became too similar to other religions or secular organizations. It is important to bear in mind here that, according to Mariz and several of the Argentine examples, it was exactly this feeling of being special that helped Pentecostals cope with poverty (recover their feelings of dignity and self esteem), therefore it is no wonder that, even if unconsciously, they defended this feeling. The way that those who defend the CPA program do it is also very telling of the social dynamics that take place in this type of religious groups. Their strategy is to show how what they are doing is not worldly, because it is part of the mandates Christians find in the Bible; so assisting the poor is also part of being obedient servants of the Lord. In this way, they can sustain social action and still feel 'chosen'.

The latter issues show us a form of symbolic confrontation (Pentecostals discussing the *meaning* of a certain activity), but this time is not the social order that is confronted; it is a conflict that develops between members of the same religious community. As it is clear from our former analysis, what sparks this conflict are different interpretations among Chilean Pentecostals of what constitutes a *true* Christian attitude. The case also shows how difficult it is for religious people to accept the coexistence of alternative views or 'truths' within a community. Why this is so and how the conflicts that this generates develop is something we are going to tackle in the next section.

Symbolic Confrontation as a Search for Religious Truth

The fact that religion sometimes helps to promote peace and tolerance and other times is the origin of violent confrontation and hatred has been

extensively documented, and may also be inferred from many of the examples given in this text so far. The reasons why this is so are quite transparent also. Many religions assert an ultimate and transcendental truth, that in order to remain so admits no challenge by an opposing or alternative view of things. To put it simply, a true Christian believer cannot easily tolerate an atheist, since if the Christian accepted, even for a moment, that the latter may be right, his or her perception of reality and purpose in life would be in jeopardy. So, Christians must in some way negate the truth claims of atheists and vice versa. For many believers these are not merely philosophical matters (as they may be perceived by many cultured middle class intellectuals), for some people believing has very palpable effects in their everyday life: Think for example of the outcomes that conversion had in the cases Mariz mentions, or the case studies of Argentineans presented before; for them to stop believing, even for a moment, could have very damaging consequences, like falling again into alcoholism, domestic violence or criminal behaviour. This shows why religion has these ambivalent consequences: what makes religion a formidable asset in some people's lives (ie. that it provides an ultimate truth and thus a sense and purpose in life), is also what produces a certain degree of intolerance.

The question here is, evidently, can we have the best of both worlds, the good side of religion without its bad consequences. The hypothesis I hold, at least in the case of the Southern Cone, is that a certain degree of conflict is unavoidable whenever there is religious diversity, but that the levels of confrontation can remain low and tolerable under certain circumstances. In that way we may have the resourceful side of religion expanded to a maximum and restrict to a minimum its conflictive side. To show how this may happen I will bring in a few examples extracted from the Southern Cone countries.

The ESD/CPA experience presented before is a good starting point to make our case. As we have seen, one of the things that bothered traditional Pentecostals about the CPA experience was that they were acting in a way similar to Catholics. As argued, this preoccupation was inspired by the need to feel different, to perceive that Pentecostals were the ones walking the true path, and therefore that Catholics were wrong. Behaving in the same way jeopardised this perception, since it created the sensation in certain Pentecostal sectors that Catholics could also share part of the truth, and thus Pentecostals would not be the only true bearers of the Christian message. This situation already exemplifies our previous claim that what constitutes the resourceful side of religion may also be what produces conflict. But confrontation was not only undertaken by those Pentecostals that opposed CPA; supporters of the program also expressed themselves in competitive terms:

Look... I did it, more than anything to make Evangelicals stand out... to make them stand out over Catholics... [to show] that Evangelicals have [spiritual] power. (in Canales *et al.*: 134).

So, we may see here that the need to feel exclusive and superior is widespread, at least among Pentecostals. However, this confrontational attitude was sometimes abandoned by some of the Pentecostals that supported the CPA. In contrast to our previous quotation, another leader stated:

Right now there is not that tension... that distance with Catholics [...] Now Catholics can see that Evangelicals are not bad, that Evangelicals help [...] So now things have changed a lot, we are respected, they support us... we are not any more the *Canutos* [a deprecatory term] we are now called the Evangelicals... I have been surprised by that. (in Canales *et al.*: 146).

The previous citation introduces two new elements. First, that competition is not a Pentecostal exclusivity, since it speaks of a time in which Catholics stigmatised Pentecostals calling them *Canutos*, and portraying them as bad ('religious fanatics' according to d'Epinay, 1968). Second, that the confrontational spirit present in contexts of religious diversity can be, to an extent, overcome; but at a price. It is clear in this last quotation that by adopting similar practises to Catholics, Pentecostals become more easily accepted; but it is also clear, if we look at the former quotes, that the price to pay is to lose part of the sense of being the only 'chosen people'. The contrasts between the different interview extracts show how different people tolerate to different degrees this loss. Probably, the varying degrees of tolerance respond to different situations; it is easier to accept relativity when it is just a philosophical matter than when it has very direct and palpable consequences in one's life.

Another way in which the same means that help people to reinforce their self esteem sometimes produce tension between followers of different religions has been given by Mariz. As may be recalled, Pentecostals' perception of being a 'good person' and tendency to dress in a very conservative manner were forms of expressing their understanding that they are not from this world. This perception tends to create the sensation that they are, in some sense, superior to other people. According to Mariz, this creates resentment:

Pentecostals perceive themselves as different and desire a feeling of distinctiveness and superiority. This attempt at differentiation is criticised by

non-Pentecostals, who accuse Pentecostals of thinking of themselves as better than others. These were criticisms made by Afro-Brazilian Spiritists, such as João and Graças. (Mariz, 1994:141).

The two cases shown before, one in Chile and one in Brazil, involve Pentecostals. This may create the illusion that they are the exclusive source of religious confrontation, but this would be a false perception. Although they have a marked tendency to think of other religions as heretic, they are far from being the exclusive source of conflict. The following case shows how Catholics and Afro-Brazilian Spiritists also have confrontations. A first eloquent sign of conflict that I perceived when doing fieldwork in a poor neighbourhood of Buenos Aires city was that in contrast with Catholics and Pentecostals, none of the Afro-Brazilian *Terreros* (where their rituals take place – equivalent to Christian churches) had signs allowing their public identification. As it was explained to me by a *Mãe de Santo* (leader of the *Umbanda* cult) this was because:

if they know, they make fun of you, or they even put crosses made with sticks in front of my house or in the sidewalk, because I made my *Terreiro* in my house's garage. This is because they are ignorant, the people, that are mostly Catholics, don't know anything about our religion here in Argentina. In Brazil they do know more, and people don't do this. And people who do this here they are Catholics, because the Evangelicals, I know they don't like us, they think we are the devil, they are also ignorant in that respect, but they are educated in that they just more or less ignore us, or they talk about us in church and criticise us, but no more than that.

The previous cases show that confrontation among popular religions is widespread, and that the logic that lays beyond this conflict is the need to preserve one's religious truth in the face of competing alternatives.

We could end this section on a pessimistic tone, stating that conflict is unavoidable, but this is not necessarily so. Even if the previous material shows persistent conflict, it speaks of a conflict that has not turned into physical violence or in successful efforts to restrict the expressive liberty of others. The conflicts have been limited to a symbolic confrontation, debating about the meanings of certain practices through discourse and ritual – as when traditional Pentecostals speak of the worldly behaviour of other Pentecostals and Catholics, or when Afro-Brazilian Spiritists criticise the pretended superiority of Pentecostals, or Catholics exorcise *Umbandists* laying crosses in front of *Terreiros*. In all these cases, symbols have been used to criticise others and in

that way preserve what people believe is their own sacred truth. The positive side of this form of confrontation is that none of the alternatives is objectively eliminated, thus the wealth of religious symbols and meanings remain open for anybody, and may hence be appropriated to create meanings and purposes in life, or (as shown) contest the unjust components of the prevalent social order. In these contexts people may move in relative liberty searching for the option that they feel is better (even going from *Umbanda* to Pentecostalism or the other way around) or sometimes, as Droogers and Rostas (1993:3) have shown, creating their own alternatives by merging elements of several religions.

All the aforementioned elements have profound consequences for policy making. They show how varied and complex the contexts are (even if we have only considered three countries over a short period of two or three decades) and, consequently, how difficult it is to foresee the results of any intervention – since they may vary according to different places, periods and can even be dissimilar for different people that may, yet, be part of the same church or congregation. Even if these are unavoidable difficulties, and simplification would really be the worst possible recommendation, we are not in a completely barren territory. There are lessons to be learned, and suggestions that can still be made in spite of this complexity.

Symbolic Confrontation and Policy Making: Lessons to be Learned

We are reaching here the end of our journey through a variety of situations and forms of violence and conflicts. It is time to try to find out what does this say to those policy makers who have to conceive specific strategies in these complex territories. In order to organize this reflection I will follow the topics that constitute the spinal cord of this book. Therefore, I will initially reflect on the constructive and destructive sides of religion, see how the constructive side of religion may help to pacify society and how it may enhance a culture of human rights. In a subsequent and last section I will expose what seems the more plausible context for peace in the Southern Cone.

I) If one lesson must certainly be learned from the material presented heretofore it is that religions have changing roles; that different religions play different roles; and, moreover, that the same religion may play different roles in different contexts. Therefore, when engaged in policy making, and in order to make a serious analysis of the destructive and constructive sides of religion, a thorough and realistic analysis of context and role must be made in order to foresee the possible effects of any undertaking. In the particular case of the Southern Cone during the last two decades, at least two different situations

(with changing roles for different religions) must be considered: i) the context of dictatorial regimes and the roles played by different religions within them, and ii) the democratic period and the effects of religious pluralization.

i) The dictatorial regimes in the Southern Cone were characterized by a very explicit and widespread use of physical violence. Although, in some countries (Argentina) this form of violence was used more frequently and extensively than in others (Brazil), in the whole region torture, murder and disappearances were the trademark of the repressive methods used by the military dictators. This use of violence had an additional common characteristic, it was institutional violence, in the sense that it was the National States themselves that exerted violence over certain sectors of the populace. This was, of course, a flagrant violation of human rights as well. As we have extensively shown, religions played ambivalent roles in this context. Some religions, as Brazilian and Chilean Catholicism, played a very clear and significant role in defending human rights and making efforts for peace, while other groups as, Pentecostals, had a less transparent and ambivalent performance. Paradoxically, the horrendous situation of the dictatorships permits a simple assessment for policy makers trying to promote peace and human rights. Things appear in black and white, it is relatively easy to discern which religious groups are promoters of peace and human rights, and which are not acting in this sense; which religions are playing a constructive role, and which a less constructive or destructive one. Two things complicate somewhat the picture. First, the dividing lines between constructive and destructive religious groups are not necessarily denominational (eg., Catholics favoured human rights in Brazil and Chile, but not in Argentina; some Pentecostals supported Pinochet in Chile, but others joined the Catholic efforts to promote human rights). Thus, policy makers must be careful to detect what roles each of these groups are playing in order to channel support (denominational differences are not a guarantee of the roles played). Second, this 'transparent' situation, which divides, more or less, between 'good' and 'bad' religious groups, forces intervening agencies to take 'partisan' stands; to support some religious groups and ignore others. In this extreme situation this kind of option seems unavoidable, but efforts should be made to control the damage this may cause. For example, in several contexts (Argentina, Chile) those Pentecostals that played an ambiguous role during the dictatorship were heavily stigmatised. This created great tension between different Evangelical groups, and huge efforts had to be done afterwards to try to overcome the resentments and distrust between them. Probably certain degrees of stigmatisation and conflict could have been avoided with a more open attitude.

ii) With the return of democracy political violence diminished in most of the Southern Cone countries, instead violence acquired a more surreptitious and, thus, less visible form. It is not anymore the open violence of the National States against the populace; now violence erupts in the social relations established within civil society itself. Thus, the main forms of violence are domestic violence or criminal violence, and increasingly (and this still speaks of forms of state violence) the violence present in police abuses over marginalised sectors of society. Statistics show that those on the lower levels of the social ladder are the more frequent victims of crime, that it is mainly in poor households that domestic violence takes place, and that most of the policemen that commit the abuses belong themselves to the poorest sectors of society. Hence, it is violence that arises out of deprivation, victimises the deprived and, thus, increases deprivation. It is violence exerted by the poor over the poor; that, in this way, raises the levels of social injustice by adding a new burden to already difficult life situations. This speaks of a new form in which human rights are being violated. There is no more a flagrant violation of civil rights as in the dictatorships, instead social rights are now being ignored since basic needs (as proper schooling, alimentation, housing, etc.) are not met for significant percentages of the population in the Southern Cone states. There are, of course, variations between the three countries considered. Brazil has had this kind of problem for most of its modern history, the Chilean population was severely affected by the economic policies applied in the 1980s, and in Argentina the economic policies applied since the 1970s and deepened during the 1990s pauperised to an unprecedented level a significant percentage of its population.

Many religious groups have played a constructive role in this situation. Religions provide a wealth of symbolic and institutional means through which deprived sectors may, in some way, find a language to protest the social order, and also to make advantageous adaptations to it. This, among other things, helps to curb domestic and criminal violence; in that way it improves the situation of the more deprived sectors contributing to a more peaceful and happy existence. In this manner (which is many times the product of implicit and symbolic strategy), religion helps to diminish the levels of violence in society and to increase, at least partially, the levels of social justice.

Associated with this constructive role, religions are also playing a destructive one in the democratic context. This destructive role has to do with the competition and intolerance that takes place between different religions. Because each religion proposes an alternative perception of the transcendent they tend to confront each other, and thus renew the basis for societal tension,

creating contexts in which conflict may arise. The paradox is that the same religions that play a constructive role helping to curb violence also play a destructive one. This is because the same element that creates a resourceful side in religion generates a confrontational attitude. Religions provide an ultimate truth that reinforces feelings of dignity and self esteem, but ultimate truths are also exclusive truths. Therefore they tend not to admit competing alternatives.

An obvious question for policy makers is how to enhance the constructive side of religion and reduce the more destructive aspect. An answer to this question is possible, but necessarily complex. One of the things that may be noted in our previous accounts, is that some religious groups are more tolerant than others. The situation that makes this more transparent is the Chilean ESD/CPA case. There we saw that in the Pentecostal/Catholic relationship, some Pentecostals were more tolerant and others less so. Also, it could be inferred from some of the interview extracts cited that some Catholics became more tolerant to Pentecostals and stopped calling them *Canutos* (a deprecatory term). Thus, one could think that a simple solution is to enhance the more tolerant sectors. The problem with this strategy in the Southern Cone context is that usually the more tolerant and ecumenically opened churches, or sectors within a church, are frequently those with a less numerous constituency. For example, the Pentecostal church sponsoring the ESD/CPA program, which has a very open ecumenical attitude, is one of the less numerous Pentecostal churches in Chile. Or, the Methodist church in Argentina, that also has a very open ecumenical attitude, is a very small church, far less numerous than its more closed Pentecostal counterparts. Another case, the Universal Church for the Kingdom of God of Brazil, a very numerous and powerful Pentecostal ministry, has a very harsh attitude towards any other denomination, especially Catholics and *Umbandists*. Therefore, if as a policy maker one takes a partisan attitude in this context, favouring the more open and tolerant churches one runs the risk of leaving out the more numerous (which are also the ones that more frequently provide the symbolic means for contestation/adaptation described before). The question then remains: what to do?

One thing that should not skip the eye of a policy maker is the complementary character of these different churches, something that may be quite productive if wisely used. Usually, the more tolerant groups have more or less fluid relations with some of their less tolerant counterparts – for example, Methodists in Argentina have quite fluid relations with some Pentecostal churches and also with Catholic sectors. Because of this, the more tolerant groups could be used to control the potential conflict between the more

intolerant ones. Efforts should not be directed towards totally avoiding conflict since this would probably alienate the less tolerant sectors (eg. if you ask Pentecostals to accept *Umbandists* as brothers, in their view you are asking them to accept the devil, something which of course they cannot do, and will alienate them from any further contact). Therefore, control should be directed not towards eliminating conflict, but to maintain conflict within certain boundaries. That is, to avoid attempts to institutionally or physically restrict the liberty of others; but to allow a symbolic condemnation using ritual and discourse. Sustaining a certain equilibrium between the more tolerant and intolerant groups can thus be instrumental in promoting a culture of human rights, since the more tolerant groups are functional in promoting civil rights such as religious freedom; while more intolerant groups tend to be more efficacious (even if through implicit strategies) in promoting social rights and feelings of dignity among the submerged sectors of society.

II) The premises introduced above already make obvious what is a possible *vision for peace*. Efforts towards peace and justice in the Southern Cone should now be directed towards diminishing the high levels of social contrasts between rich and poor. During the last decades almost all Latin American societies have suffered from a widening of the gap between the richest and poorest sectors, even in countries like Argentina where this difference used to be relatively small as compared with other semi-developed countries. As said, these differences are creating all sorts of problems, from increasing levels of deprivation of the less well off sectors, to new levels and forms of violence emerging in civil society.

Different religions have played and continue to play important pacifying roles in this context, by helping people to endure and stay emotionally and psychologically healthy through hard times. With this positive role, religions create potential new bases for societal tension since they tend to compete among each other. Thus they also play a negative role that may eventually obliterate their contribution to a peaceful society. In order to avoid this risk, it seems that a certain equilibrium must be met, where more tolerant religions should play the role of mediating between more intolerant ones, that however tend to provide more suitable solutions for the less well off in society. This mediation should not be aimed at a total avoidance of conflict, since this is possibly an unobtainable goal and the mediating capacities of the more tolerant religions may even be lost if this utopian situation is desired. A more realistic and productive aim is a 'control' of the levels and forms of conflict, retaining them within symbolic boundaries. This admittedly is a complex state of equilibrium, but it is, finally, the kind of situation actually taking place in the

Southern Cone nations for the last ten years. Thus, the main task seems to be to sustain and deepen this situation of controlled conflict, religious diversity and freedom.

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