Religious Narratives and Political Protest
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Jesus sealed his sacrifice with his own blood. Monseñor Romero made a pact with God, that he'd be faithful to the gospel, that he wasn't lying to people that were suffering. Thus these things aren't of this world, but of God. . . . If Jesus Christ hadn't fulfilled his word, the Bible would have no meaning. . . . In the Bible, it says that whoever cares too much for life will lose it, and whoever doesn't value it too much will gain it.

—Elena

Now we're in the times of the Romans. . . . with the same spying [and] vigilance . . . it's the same now as in the early church.

. . . Monseñor Romero was like Jesus. The people who were with him told others about him. . . . We make them alive. If a community works in the name of them [the martyrs], they are alive. They are resurrected, they are converted from one person into another.

—Rosa

FOR ROSA AND ELENA, residents of a working-class barrio in San Salvador, the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection provides a lens through which to make sense of the times through which they have lived. The assassination of their archbishop, the violent deaths of loved ones, and their own sacrifices all acquire a redemptive meaning in the light of Jesus' passion. This meaning relies on a conviction that they are indeed liv-
ing "in the times of the Romans"—that their experiences echo and in fact re-enact the events of sacred history. Rosa, Elena, and many of their fellow believers place their own lives in the context of an encompassing narrative of faith, persecution, and ultimate reward, intertwining real and sacred history. The power of this type of narrative to interpret the world, motivate action, and explain the consequences is the subject of this essay.

In exploring this theme, I am responding to the concerns and claims of several groups. One consists of scholars, especially social scientists, who have begun to examine the dimension of narrative in social-political processes. They have focused in particular on the formation of class and other group identities and, to a lesser extent, on participation in social movements. Most social-scientific (and much philosophical) work on narrative ignores, or at best gives brief and token mention to, the role of religion in narratives implicated in identity- and community-formation and social mobilization. I argue that religion represents a major factor in many narratives, especially those involved in building collective identity, and must be taken seriously in ways that to date are not evident in most social-scientific approaches to class-formation in general and to narrative in particular.

In addition to social scientists, many scholars of religion have also "discovered" narrative. This theme took on special prominence in works on "narrative theology" in the 1970s and '80s (see Goldberg 1982 for a good overview). While highlighting the role of autobiography and parable in many religious traditions, studies in and of narrative theology have tended to focus on internal, individualized, and abstract issues, neglecting the question of how religious ideas and narratives enter into (and are entered by) politics. I hope in this essay to point towards a different subject for the study of religion and narrative: the ways that religious narratives shape people's interpretations of and responses to political events.

DEFINING TERMS

There are various types and understandings of narratives. Bypassing their obvious uses in fiction, the subject of a vast and complex critical literature, I focus on narratives that are not, at least in a narrow sense, literary. Outside of literature, narrative can, in the first place, be a tool for interpreting history, i.e., by imposing a plot on a series of events. This dimension of narrative is relevant to my discussion here, particularly insofar as it suggests a critical awareness of the scholar-observer's role in constructing (and not just "discovering") the plot or teleology of occurrences. Any narrative, in this view, represents the efforts of an author (who might be the inventor-author of fiction or the observer-author of an ethnography) to bring together the elements necessary for a coherent
story. Minimally, these elements include characters, plot, and an ending. The construction of a narrative involves a pool of resources (cultural tradition, previous stories, etc.) upon which an author draws to produce a story appropriate to her or his audience, circumstances, and goals. The socially-constructed nature of narrative highlights the fact that every story, no matter who is telling it, is told for a point.

What I explore here is a narrative constructed not by an inventor- or observer-author but by what Janet Hart (633–634) calls “participant-authors.” These are stories constructed and/or employed by ordinary people to make sense of their experiences, to articulate collective and personal identities, and to mobilize action. Narratives in this sense are not just a tool for scholars but a resource that provides ordinary people with a language, values, and patterns of thought and behavior. These stories, as David Carr puts it, are not simply told but are “told in being lived, and lived in being told” (126).

The narratives articulated by people “inside” the story always have multiple dimensions; I focus here on two. First, I am interested in narratives that address or reflect participants’ concerns with meaning, values, and related issues—what Hart calls their “ontological” dimension (634). In this perspective, narratives are not only descriptive but also prescriptive; not only heard but internalized. They are constructed and told not to only make sense of events but also to shape them, via ethical claims embedded in the narrative itself: a critique of certain actions, praise for others, a vision of how things ought to be and even how they might, in fact, come to be.

Second, I am interested in collective narratives, those constructed, maintained, and/or diffused by participants in a shared social process (historical events, social movements, etc.). These “social narratives,” in George Steinmetz’s words, order past events, providing a “collective memory” or framework with which to interpret both individual and collective experiences. While social narratives often end in the present, not infrequently they project events into an anticipated future (Steinmetz: 491).

When brought together, the social and ontological dimensions of narratives can provide a powerful model for action. By placing individual experience into a collective and historical context, successful narratives suggest that contemporary individuals, facing situations similar to those described in the narrative, might respond in analogous ways (Hart: 635–636). The social and ontological dimensions of narrative come together not uniquely, but probably most commonly and perhaps most powerfully, in religious narratives. What distinguishes religious narratives, for my purposes, is that they include the sacred: forces, ideas, and events with meaning, location, and/or value beyond (but not necessarily opposed
to) the human. Like any narrative, religious narratives tell a story, but one in which "real" history is linked in some way to sacred history. This link may be allegorical (if secular events are "like" sacred ones) or more direct (if divine forces or figures irrupt into secular events and/or human figures participate in events with transcendent significance). Some religious narratives may apply primarily to individual believers. I concentrate on the collective dimension or what I will call social-religious narratives.

Social-ontological or religious narratives can contribute to political and social change in three principal ways: through the formation of collective identity; by motivating different forms of action; and by providing a utopian horizon. The role of narratives in the formation of class or other collective identity has received the most scholarly attention. Generally the primary focus is on the ways that coherent narratives, reproduced in a variety of ways, help generate and strengthen a shared identity in a particular social group. Members understand themselves as part of a group with a history (and a future); that history makes sense of and resonates with their individual histories or biographies in important ways. Carr argues, in fact, that a collective story is itself what constitutes a "community": "A community in this sense exists by virtue of a story which is articulated and accepted, which typically concerns the group's origins and its destiny, and which interprets what is happening now in the light of those two temporal poles" (128). In this light, a social class or any other type of community exists only when there is "a narrative account . . . of a we" (130).

In addition to shaping group identity, social narratives can help motivate deliberate, often risky action in pursuit of political change. These narratives often retell histories of heroic action and momentous victories, encouraging contemporary hearers to repeat the deeds of past heroes. Sometimes the narrative spurs action by invoking loyalty to the heroes of past stories (or even of earlier chapters in the present story). This dimension of narrative has not been fully examined, although some recent studies have begun to explore it. Reynaldo Ileto (1979) explores the ways a particular religious narrative (the payon, or stations of the cross) contributed to Filipino protest movements; Hart (1992) suggests the ways that nationalist narratives (often cast as "morality plays") motivated activism in the Greek resistance; and Roger Lancaster (1988) and Eric Selbin (1993) both hint at the ways that stories articulate a "collective memory" of past rebellions, thus helping spark and shape protest in modern Latin America.

Perhaps the least-studied "mobilizational" dimension of narratives is their ability to present an alternative vision of the future. I argue that, despite this lack of scholarly attention, the "utopian" dimension of narrative may be the most powerful. Narratives often motivate activism not primarily because of their vision of the past but rather because people
find a projected future appealing. To be compelling, of course, a vision of the future must be coherent with people's understanding of the past. It must, further, seem possible—a utopia that is truly "no place" cannot motivate people, at least not many, to struggle for its realization.¹ A story that builds on the past, accurately assesses the possibilities of the present, and presents an appealing future, however, also enlarges people's views of their possibilities (Carr: 131). It can thus motivate them to remake the "narrative" in which they are living so that it resembles more closely the narrative they want to live.

The idea of a utopia raises the question of whether narratives represent merely an imaginary solution or order imposed upon "real" problems and chaos. This critique echoes both Marx's attack on religion as an "opiate" that directs attention away from actual suffering and the post-structuralist claim that human history lacks an overarching order. For example, Hayden White writes that:

[The] value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary. The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries. Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see 'the end' in every beginning? (24).

White's answer, of course, is "no." The issue for me is not whether the "world" is this way but rather whether people see the world that way and what the consequences are of that way of seeing the world. If people not only change their stories to accommodate events but also, in David Carr's words, "change the events, by acting, to accommodate the story" (126), then narratives, and particularly narrativized visions of a better future, clearly serve not to anesthetize but rather to activate.

**NARRATIVES OF HEROES AND MARTYRS IN EL SALVADOR**

El Salvador, the smallest and one of the poorest countries in Latin America, has a violent political history, characterized both by recurring protests against political closure and the concentration of land and wealth and by official repression. Particularly important periods of protest

¹ To say that this vision must seem possible does not, of course, mean that it must reflect people's real lives. As Selbin (139) notes, ideals can "remain powerful and compelling in a world where many people's daily lives" do not reflect them.
included the Nonualco indigenous rebellion of 1833 and, especially, the uprising of 1932, during and after which the military government killed from 10,000 to 30,000 people in what became known as simply “la matanza,” the massacre.

Although these rebellions failed to win lasting political power, they contributed to a collective memory of protest, preserved via social narratives. These stories inculcated fear of repression, but they also passed on admiration of and loyalty to the doomed rebels and, perhaps most importantly, the sense that rebellion is in fact possible. In this sense, as Reynaldo Ileto notes (quoting a Filipina political organizer), “no uprising fails” (7).

After the matanza, the next great wave of protest in El Salvador began in the 1960s, when political organizing among different social sectors grew rapidly. Especially important was the peasant movement, which had strong roots in and links to progressive movements within the Catholic Church, especially base Christian communities (comunidades eclesiales de base or CEBs) and the cursillo movement. The cursillos, primarily a rural phenomenon, prepared thousands of peasants as catechists, lay preachers (“delegates of the word”), and community leaders more generally. CEBs, which existed in both rural and urban areas, concentrated on building group solidarity and awakening critical consciousness, especially through reflexión, or communal discussion of biblical passages in the light of contemporary experiences. Many times CEB members also organized around local issues such as access to land or public services.

As in the past, the Salvadoran government responded with political repression against its opponents, including religious groups. In the late 1970s, mass killings by the military-led government and rightist paramilitary “death squads” pushed most civilian opposition movements underground. A 1981 guerrilla offensive marked the start of a civil war that lasted eleven years and killed around 80,000 people. Among the victims were thousands of Catholic lay activists, catechists, and delegates of the word, as well as more than a dozen priests and nuns and the Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero.

The repression of religious activists highlights the centrality of progressive Catholicism in the Salvadoran popular movements of the 1970s and '80s. Discussions of religion’s role in Salvadoran politics have concentrated on Romero and, at the grassroots level, on the organizational
and leadership contributions of CEBs and cursillos (see Brockman 1989; Berryman 1984, 1986; and Cáceres Prendes 1989). I contend that religious narratives provided a less tangible but no less important aspect of Catholicism's contribution to opposition identity, ideology, and mobilization. An examination of these narratives can shed light not only on the role of religion in the Salvadoran conflict but also on the importance of narratives in political mobilization more generally.

A variety of religious narratives helped shape popular attitudes about politics in El Salvador, including ideas about justice and injustice and the requirements of individual moral behavior, as well as visions of a better future. I concentrate here on the ways religion helped people understand and respond to political persecution and violence. This response, I argue, took the shape of stories about martyrdom and heroic sacrifice. These narratives drew on religious and secular sources, incorporating accounts of early Christian martyrs, contemporary church figures such as Romero, political heroes such as Farabundo Martí and Ché Guevara, and, not least, "domestic" martyrs—family, neighbors, and local activists.

What held these various sources together and gave popular martyr narratives their unique explanatory and mobilizing power, I argue, was their perceived parallel to Jesus' suffering and death. In other words, Christians understood contemporary sacrifices not just as evidence of faith in Jesus, but as emulations of Jesus' own actions. As a paradigmatic story (or "master narrative"), the passion grounded ideas about the necessity of sacrifice, the fruits of sacrifice, and resurrection, which in turn served as the foundation for a coherent and powerful understanding of repression, martyrdom, and rebirth. These ideas helped people make sense of both personal experiences and national events and spurred a wide range of opposition activities.

As ideas about martyrdom drew from diverse sources, so they appeared in a wide range of places. The influence of the martyr narrative was evident and was reproduced in opposition radio and print media and the rhetoric of opposition leaders; in popular songs, both religious and secular; in posters and graffiti commemorating dead heroes; and in everyday reflection and conversation. It was expanded and diffused in particularly elaborate form in grassroots projects of progressive Catholicism, including pastoral materials, cursillos, sermons, and base community reflexión, as well as in the meetings and literature of popular organizations "of Christian inspiration." The agents of these narratives were, first and foremost, progressive Catholics, including particularly members of CEBs, participants in cursillos, and residents of parishes where such grassroots initiatives had an influence. Members of other popular organizations, especially peasant movements, and even people who happened to live
near, work with, or be related to activists also generated, heard, and circulated (often in altered form) stories and ideas about martyrdom as well.³

While martyr-stories varied according to their tellers, audiences, and subjects, they are linked by important common themes. I will discuss these themes only briefly, since my purpose here is not to detail the content of martyr narratives but rather to examine the purpose they served. First, narratives are concerned with the identity of the martyrs: in other words, who can be a martyr? What must s/he do or not do in order to qualify as a martyr in the popular imagination (whose requirements, of course, differed substantially from those of the official church)? Some of the issues involved here include the subject's relationship to the church, consciousness of running a risk in pursuit of a cause, and use of violence. Popular opinion split on these issues, with some Salvadorans defining as martyrs only religiously-motivated people who consciously and non-violently sacrificed themselves for a religiously-understood goal. This image, of course, most closely resembled Jesus, the original martyr. Many people broadened this definition substantially, accepting as martyrs secular activists, “innocent” (i.e., unaware) victims, and even people who used violence.

Popular discussions of martyrdom also addressed the agents and the purpose of persecution. On the first point, interest generally focused not on the physical but on the intellectual or moral authors of killings. Thus, for example, people often held responsible not individual soldiers but rather the military regime or the economic elite. Again, this parallels popular interpretations of the crucifixion, which identify the religious and political leaders of Jesus' day as the real culprits. This assertion helps shape and sustain the collective identity of contemporary religious activists, in similarity to Jesus and his disciples and in opposition to their perceived enemies. By positing a polarized relationship between the two forces, in other words, narratives about repression and martyrdom help people telling the story define themselves as members of a particular (and virtuous) group.

Popular theology claims that the powerful kill opponents, including both Jesus and contemporary activists, primarily for their prophetic denunciation of evil and falsehood. “Telling the truth,” rather than more partisan political activism, leads to the martyrs' death. This theme, which

³Lancaster claims that progressive Catholicism “had an appeal far beyond the border of the base communities proper. Because it grew out of widespread Christian symbols of sin and redemption, liberation theology provided both a powerful language for talking about social injustice and a moral paradigm for those who acted as revolutionaries” (1993: 4). This holds true for El Salvador as for Nicaragua.
is evident in interpretations of repression at all levels of Salvadoran society, highlights the moral-religious issues at stake. Popular narratives about martyrs are not simply political rhetoric or rationales; they are, rather, attempts to make sense of and respond to extreme conditions from a theological and ethical perspective. Thus people often understand political killings not as the result of partisan activism but as the consequence of the prophetic act of “telling the truth” about Salvadoran society.

This understanding of the reasons for martyrdom is closely linked to ideas about its necessity or inevitability. In popular terms, sacrifice is required in order to bring forth the fruit promised by Jesus’ incarnation and resurrection. In this view, which believers base on such gospel passages as John 12:24 (“Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”), a few (or perhaps many) believers must die in order to achieve an end that will benefit all. These deaths are “necessary” not because God demands blood, but because faith in God requires forms of action which, in unjust conditions, lead to persecution and killing. This interpretation draws both on pragmatic evaluations of political reality and on biblical stories about Jesus’ own sacrifice. In Jesus’ time and in their own, Salvadoran Catholics believe, fidelity to God’s will demands dangerous acts. Again, the biblical parallels strengthen the mobilizational power of narratives about martyrdom. The stories compel people to act in certain ways not only because of the appeal of their plots and characters but also because they reflect timeless and superhuman values.

A final set of issues concerns the results of martyrdom. Popular narratives almost never end with the death of the martyr. Rather, they continue on to what might be their most important point: the effects of deaths upon survivors or on the cause more generally. Given that martyrdom is inevitable, popular understandings contend, so are its expected consequences. For the individual martyr the consequence is rebirth (generally understood as an ongoing spiritual presence in the community of believers). For the larger community or movement the effect is that of taking a step closer to the ultimate goal of a more just society, which will approximate (if not actually achieve) the reign of God. Thus the martyr narratives arrive at a powerful conclusion: sacrifice is required of individual believers, who must follow Christ’s example; when they do so, they contribute to the completion of Christ’s work on earth. In this sense Salvadoran stories about martyrs reflect the utopian dimension important to religious narratives more generally. By envisioning a desirable—and promised—future, the narratives provide a goal that helps unite and motivate activists challenging less than ideal conditions in the present.
Central themes of Salvadoran martyr narratives come together in interpretations of Archbishop Romero, the “model martyr” for many Salvadoran Catholics. As a public figure committed to both nonviolence and the church, Romero exemplifies key claims of popular martyr narratives. The enduring hold of his words and image upon the popular imagination lends weight, further, to the contention that he has been reborn in the community of believers. While Romero's death may embody and strengthen popular ideas about martyrdom, however, he is not, by any means, the only person to whom these ideas are applied.

Salvadorans use narratives about martyrdom, grounded in the Christian passion story, to make sense not only of momentous political events—such as Romero’s assassination—but also of death and suffering closer to home. The master-narrative of passion and martyrdom provides a way for people to understand why killings happen, indeed why they had to happen; how survivors must respond; and what will, ultimately, result. A framework of this type is vital to give some meaning to the massive pain and disruption caused by political violence on the scale of the Salvadoran civil war.

Narratives of martyrdom and resurrection make not only political but also moral and religious sense of apparently senseless events. Providing a coherent interpretation of this type helps people not only understand but also come to terms with, and respond productively to, their losses. This interpretation is constructed not upon abstract ideas and norms but rather in and through a story that provides not only a way of seeing and judging the world but also context and continuity.

To illustrate the ways that Salvadorans have employed martyr narratives, I will look, briefly, at the testimonies of three activists, all of whom employ stories about martyrdom to provide integration and meaning to their experiences.* I begin with a young woman, Mirtala López, who highlights the particular understanding of Christianity underlying the martyr narrative. López, who lost eight siblings and her father to political violence, grounds her activism on a definition of what it means to be a Christian and especially of the way that suffering is central to authentic faith. She insists that Jesus requires Christians not merely “to stay inside the church, asking God for peace,” but also “to do something,” even at the highest cost.

Since Christ gave his life, we have to also. . . . This makes us lose fear for our lives. If Jesus gave his life, we’ll follow his example. If Monseñor

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*All interviews were conducted in March and April 1990 in San Salvador.
Romero gave his life for the poor, we'll give it also. We're not the only ones in the world.

López recognizes that hers is not the only side justifying its actions in religious terms.

The government uses images and symbols of Jesus Christ, since it knows that all the people here are religious, it uses this means to infuse its message in the people. It tries to attract people with the Bible. . . . They also say that they'll do what Christ did, give his life for the people. They use his words to mislead the people that it's a Christian government.

Underlying different definitions of martyrdom are contrasting views of Christian faith. López believes that the government and the right are manipulating Christianity, presenting what she sees as a false version of the faith. She grounds her rejection of this version on her interpretation of the passion story: “We think that [the ones] following the life of Christ are those who give their lives for the poorest, most needy.” She finds in those who emulate Jesus’ sacrifice models for authentic faith. Stories of these martyrs as well as the original passion narrative hold together the demands of faith and the reasons for suffering. López reveals the way that religious narratives can contribute to identity-formation, insofar as she defines herself, her community, and her cause in relation to a particular view of Christianity and particularly of Jesus’ mission and death. This identification, articulated and passed on in narratives about martyrdom, plays a crucial role in the self-definition of many opposition activists in El Salvador.

The passion narrative provides an explicit framework within which “Amelia,” a base community activist from the San Salvador suburb of Santa Tecla, understands the murder of a priest with whom she worked. “When I saw the priest’s body,” she recalls,

I was without fear. I thought, what would the priest do if it were a member of the CEB [killed]? And I remembered that the Bible says that the words of God come to one. I said it was Good Friday in Santa Tecla, and a Jesus had been killed. And Catholics had left him alone, and were guilty. I accused the National Guard [of his death] when they came, and I accused the [conservative] priests of being the intellectual authors of the crime.

The passion narrative, highlighted by references to Good Friday, provides a context within which Amelia can not only understand the reasons for the death but also identify the “Judas” and the “Pharisees” whom she holds responsible. The priest’s death thus becomes not an isolated instance of terror but part of a larger story, a repetition of events with sacred significance.
Amelia believes that these events are, in a sense, beyond human control. After the priest's death, Amelia remembers, Romero told her to leave the country with her family, because he had received information that she was in danger and was meant to have been killed with the priest. Amelia stayed, knowing, she claims, "I wasn't worthy [digna] of martyrdom. Martyrdom isn't for just anyone. It's like a gift of God, not for just anyone." The parallel to Jesus and the idea that martyrdom serves a divine purpose enable her to view political repression not simply as an everyday threat but as a divinely-willed step towards a larger goal.

This interpretation enables her to make loss (including the death of her only son) meaningful. The deaths of loved ones, she asserts, are precisely what has giving meaning to my work [quehacer] as a Christian and in popular organizations. . . . The example of the closest people is encouragement [aliento]. To stop would mean that their blood had been shed in vain. We have to continue as long as God lets us live.

Thus the narrative of martyrdom not only makes death meaningful, but also provides motivation for continued activism. Amelia explains that "Martyrs leave a commitment for the CEBs. The community meets around their memory. . . . Seeing how valuable people have fallen gives us motivation to continue our faith and our hope." She concludes that the martyrs leave a clear message: "to be an authentic Christian follower of Jesus, there's no option. You must go as far as possible."

The experiences of a third activist also highlight the mobilizational dimension of the martyr narrative. Guadalupe Mejía is the widow of Justo Mejía, a peasant leader in the 1970s. In 1977 the National Guard captured and tortured him, breaking his arms, and gouging his eyes out. They then dragged him through the area, asking people along the way if they knew him. Finally the Guard decapitated Mejía and left his body in the mountains. However, his widow explains, "people love people like him, and after five days they started to look for him, and after seven days they found him."

Guadalupe Mejía understands her husband's death as part of a history of martyrdom, recalling that "Monseñor Romero said [Justo] had suffered the same as the passion of Christ." Justo Mejía, however, was not the only one to suffer. "After his great martyrdom and sacrifice, he left me with nine children to support. . . . The children suffered hunger because they lost their father. Thousands of mothers and wives have suffered the same thing." The story of sacrifice for a cause encompasses not only the martyrs, but their survivors. And it is a collective story: extreme as Guadalupe Mejía's experience is, she knows it is not unique, and, in fact, it provides a lens to understand her nation's experiences and to encourage continued activism.
Everything is done in the name of the fallen... In their memory we have to continue... My husband said, “We're just going to open this road, and you all will have to continue it.”... They died for a just cause, for the liberation of a people from misery and injustice, so we have to continue their memory... They're all martyrs because they've died for a just cause. And for us they haven't died, because the ideas that they left, we follow... With our suffering, if we've lost our loved ones, there are so many thousands who have suffered, we can't stay with our arms crossed, but we have to struggle, for the peace that we Salvadorans want so much... And some fruits that we've achieved have been because of them. For us they're still alive and will be until the total liberation.

Thus the third key dimension of religious narratives' political role, the presentation of a desired future, figures prominently in Mejía's account. She envisions her own sacrifices and the suffering of others on her side as necessary to reach a particular type of future society. This vision of the future draws not only from popular readings of the Bible but also from the culture of the Salvadoran left and post-conciliar Catholic teaching about human rights and social justice. These different elements blend together most accessibly and powerfully in the narrativized march towards “total liberation.”

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This concluding section will raise some central theoretical issues concerning religious narratives and social change, and address them in the context of the case study. An initial question concerns the origins of social-ontological (including religious) narratives. More precisely, who constructs the narratives and what resources do they draw on in the process? No narrative is written on a blank slate, as if emerging fully from the mind(s) of its apparent creator(s). In the building of any narrative, the individuals and/or groups involved have access to and (consciously or unconsciously) draw on a pool of already-existing story lines, values, images, and other elements of a collective memory. These resources exist in oral and written stories, songs, art, theater, and also in perhaps unexpected forms such as posters, graffiti, gossip, and other “underground” sources. In the formation of narratives different individuals and groups select, reject, and reshape these resources, often adding those of the imagination and longings for the future.

In El Salvador, progressive Catholics drew on a wide range of sources. Most important, I argue, were the Christian symbols and stories, particularly the Bible, which post-Medellín reforms such as the practice of reflexión made more accessible to ordinary people. Episodes from Salvadoran
and Latin American political history, including the *matanza* and other rebellions, also provided material that resonated in a popular imagination. In addition, people drew on local and familial traditions, tales of heroic loved ones, often passed on orally, in stories and songs.\(^5\)

Closely related to the origins of narratives is the question of how stories are maintained, reproduced, and diffused. Once formed, a narrative, to be effective, has to circulate. This means that people must find it compelling enough to retell. In the process of diffusion narratives are almost always changed; even if a leader (usually charismatic) formulates a narrative that others find compelling enough to pass (and perhaps act) on, the story that they retell is rarely identical to the one they heard. Thus we must investigate the ways and reasons mutations occur: the process by which hearers select and reject different elements of the narrative so that it resonates with, makes sense of, and/or provides comfort or hope to their own lives.

Perhaps more important here than the question of how individual narratives are altered are the reasons and ways the general themes of narratives shift over time. Shifting political conditions often generate changes in the kinds of stories people tell to and about themselves. In El Salvador in the early 1970s popular opposition narratives seemed to focus on political closure and censorship rather than violence. The high point and perhaps the end of this type of narrative came in February 1977, when Salvadoran Jesuit Rutilio Grande gave a well-known speech responding to the government's expulsion of Colombian priest Mario Bernal. "I'm afraid," proclaimed Grande,

that if Jesus of Nazareth came back, coming down from Galilee to Judea, that is from Chalatenango to San Salvador, I daresay he would not get as far as Apopa, with his preaching and actions. They would stop him in Guazapa and jail him there.

... They would accuse him of being a rabble-rouser, a foreign Jew, one confusing people with strange and exotic ideas, against democracy, that is, against the minority. Ideas against God, because they are a clan of Cains. They would undoubtedly crucify him again... (Berryman 1984: 120–21).

Grande is clearly making a political point by reference to the story of Jesus' life. This narrative differs, however, from the later stories of mar-

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\(^5\) Popular songs about martyrs provide an especially rich primary source; most slain priests, for example, are the subjects of at least one song written by parishioners. Often song lyrics are not written down (often their authors cannot write) but are preserved orally and performed at community celebrations.
tyrdom. In Grande’s speech the theme of crucifixion emerges, but in a mainly speculative way. His main concern is with the freedom to criticize, to organize, to “tell the truth.” Grande’s killing in March 1977 marked the beginning of the predominance of a narrative focused, very concretely, on the passion and resurrection of contemporary martyrs. This change stemmed largely from the dramatic increase in political killings in the late 1970s, the radicalization of both secular and religious activists, and from the growing convergence of these two sectors.

This brings us to the crucial matter of the relationship between collective and individual narratives. Steinmetz (491–492) highlights the difficulties that arise when individual and collective narratives do not mesh. Sometimes social narratives formulated by a leader or a group fail to mirror, or at least to resonate with, the lives of the individuals to whom they want to appeal. At other times individuals or collectives fail to “narrativize” their lives or, more precisely, to understand them as echoing the terms of the narrative being offered. In such cases the narrative at stake rarely achieves significant explanatory or mobilizational power. This does not mean that in such cases people see their lives in entirely non-narrativized form but rather that the narrative in question has failed and other stories will emerge and perhaps achieve greater resonance.

In the case presented above we can ask whether the meta-narrative about martyrdom echoed individuals’ experiences and whether people understood their lives in light of this story. I argue that, as repression affected huge numbers of Salvadorans, thousands found clear echoes of the martyr narratives in their personal lives, as well as on the national political stage. As they found narratives about persecution mirroring their own experiences, they “narrativized” those experiences, understanding them, as the interviews quoted above demonstrate, within the framework provided by the passion story. For many, this narrative provided not only a way of making sense of their lives but the truth about the courses of those lives. Not infrequently this motivated continued activism in the face of personal loss and extreme danger.6

This activism points us to further questions about the connections between religious narratives and politics. First we might ask about the interests that a narrative serves, or more specifically, whether people will adhere to a narrative that appears not to serve their (“objective”) interests. In El Salvador thousands of people undertook high-risk, even “suicidal” activism. Traditional social-scientific explanations for social movements (about class

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6 Another political consequence of martyr narratives, in addition to motivating activism, was their public relations value for the opposition, legitimating it as the victim of relentless cruelty.
interest, rational choice, and resource mobilization) cannot make sense of much of this behavior. In such cases, analysis of narratives (as well as religious conceptions of the reign of God, of justice, etc.) can reveal motivations for activism that other theories can neither detect nor understand.

The narratives that encourage opposition activism directly challenge the narratives created by and for dominant groups. In El Salvador the military regime and rightist groups articulated and circulated their own version of the political conflicts of the 1970s and '80s. In this version, as Mirtala López noted, the government sought to cast its dead heroes as martyrs. With unceasing energy, the regime also characterized progressive/left activists (including many church officials) as “subversives,” “delinquents,” and “communist terrorists.” Newspapers, television, and official rhetoric hammered home an image of activists as those who incited violence and chaos against the law and order represented by the status quo.

In such circumstances how do counter-narratives emerge and survive in the face of an apparently hegemonic collective narrative? In El Salvador a turning point occurred with Romero's characterization of activists: “It was an extraordinary thing,” recalls a priest, “for the poor to go to Mass at the Cathedral and hear the archbishop say, ‘We have martyrs in this country’... Until Archbishop Romero spoke out, the Salvadoran people did not believe that hearing the truth was possible” (Woodward: 47). This public acknowledgement, however, did not start the popular identification of activists as martyrs; a largely oral and underground tradition identified them as martyrs before any public figures did. This tradition (or collective memory) endured especially in stories and songs about murdered activists and crushed uprisings, seen not as mere failures but as “latent forms of empowerment, waiting to be animated either by the population themselves or by leaders” (Selbin: 2).

These stories help shape people's perceptions not only of the past (i.e., whether a dead activist is a bandit or a hero) but also of their options for the future (i.e., what they can do and whether it will matter). Counter-narratives can help convince people that defiance is feasible, even required, and that it can help lead to a vision of a better future. In El Salvador ideas about the possibility of protest rested especially on religious notions of sacrifice as a requirement of authentic faith and a necessary step towards the reign of God, or at least an approximation thereof. These conceptions helped instill a willingness to take risks, as did the conviction that martyrdom would bring fruits, not only (ultimately) a better society but also the martyr's own rebirth in the community of believers. This conviction stems from a reading of Jesus' resurrection as a precedent for the resurrection of all subsequent martyrs upon the ultimate victory of God's cause.
The importance of resurrection and of God's triumphant reign highlights the distinctive nature of social-religious narratives in contrast to other types of narratives. Uniquely compelling visions of the future are part of what makes religious narratives distinctive. Other important elements often include reference to an original prophet, as seen, for example, in the parallels to Jesus' passion in Salvadoran narratives of martyrdom. The passion provides the "model martyrdom," the original master-narrative, without which (in the highly Catholic-Christian popular culture of El Salvador's poor) interpretations of contemporary political killings might have fallen flat. The link to the passion, and more generally to ideas about God's will and God's reign and other religious symbols and values, gave political killings a transcendent meaning—and perhaps even more crucially, provided transcendent justification for political opposition. Protest became a sacred struggle; abandoning the cause meant abandoning one's faith; holding firm in the face of danger guaranteed divine rewards.

The case of martyr stories in Salvadoran popular Catholicism illustrates the uniquely compelling power of religious narratives to influence the ways people understand their experience, respond to it, and envision alternative futures. Not only in El Salvador, but in many other cases, social-religious narratives have played a distinctive and crucial role in struggles for political change. The content of the narratives varies, of course, according to religious and cultural traditions, political histories, economic circumstances, and individual imagination and leadership. However, with the right plot, among other factors, religious narratives play a vital role in integrating experiences and granting those experiences meaning and motivational force, particularly to those who find themselves with few powerful allies except, in their view, the most powerful of all.

REFERENCES


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