Symbols that Speak: Christ and His Word in El Salvador

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In 2006–2007, I explored the religious terrain in El Salvador, comparing the experiences of Catholic and Evangelical men and women. Notions of manhood and womanhood change for religious converts, and I sought to understand how and why (Santos, 2012). This required learning religious practice and language, and coming to new understandings of religious symbols. References to Christ, his love, his power, and his very blood became everyday experiences for me. A variety of Christ symbols, with varying and sometimes opposed meanings, caught my attention, particularly since they correlated with distinct social goals. Equally apparent were the lingering causes and effects of the brutal Salvadoran civil war, which ranged from 1979 to 1992. These include crime, poverty, drastic inequality, a high rate of violent crime, and a society-wide sense of anomie.

As part of a Fulbright grant, a number of Central American scholars were taken on a retreat. We visited San Salvador and toured a number of culturally significant sites related to the war. Among these were the National Cathedral, the tomb of the martyred Archbishop Romero, and the University of Central America, where a staff member, her daughter, and six Jesuit priests were brutally assassinated by members of the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion.

A nearby chapel offered some solace from the Salvadoran heat. Growing up Catholic, trained in a Jesuit high-school, the small structure was initially familiar. I looked around- altar, candles, and pews. Then the familiar became unfamiliar. Many chapels and churches carry images of the Stations of the Cross, visual representations which retell the story of Jesus Christ's final hours, his trial and crucifixion. As I looked up at them, my heart quivered before the Salvadoran version of Christ's Passion. Instead of the familiar man and cross, rough black and white drawings of tortured bodies, naked, bound, and bloody, all loomed above. Images depicted massacres and crimes committed by government death squads during the war.

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S.L. Moeschberger and R.A.P. DeZalia (eds.), *Symbols that Bind, Symbols that Divide*, Peace Psychology Book Series, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-05464-3_5,

Bullet holes and bleeding lacerations had replaced scourge wounds and a crown of thorns. In one, three dead bodies lay on top of each other, a man and two women. The man's arms were draped outward in death, a Christ pose where the knees of the dead women served as his crossbeam. The universal images of the God-man had absorbed local idiom, yet continued to carry similar meanings. Suffering and death lead to transformation. Christ, through his life initially, and now through the Salvadoran war, continued to speak to his people.

I hadn't eaten well in some time, suffered from lack of sleep, and was exhausted from fieldwork. I had recently encountered two dead corpses, heard numerous gunfights, had seen the bruises and cuts on friends who had been beaten, heard of the rape of a close friend's sister, and witnessed a store front blasted to pieces by small machine gun fire. The chapel images affected me deeply. Quite honestly, I saw them and grew weak. I stumbled outside, shaking, and sat down on a rock. I struggled to compose myself, but my distress was obvious. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned to look up sheepishly. A young woman stood over me, and held out a bottle of water. Behind her, I saw the chapel, its cross, and everything it represented. I felt El Salvador's suffering and heard it clamoring for its namesake (*El Salvador*, literally translates to *The Savior*). I took the offered drink, thanked her, gathered my strength, and walked on.

The Salvadoran Christ Symbol

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz approached religion as a "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long lasting moods and motivations in men [sic] by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions in such an order of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz, 1973, p. 90). Note he ignores the Euro-American obsession distinguishing natural from supernatural. No reference to deities or unseen powers, ideas of right and wrong, or truth or falsehoods in religions are found. Rather, Geertz refers to sets of symbols which construct a sense of reality. This reality, in turn, affects humans' sensations (moods) and motivates them toward behavior. Symbols link to emotions, which lead to actions. Religion is a proclivity of the human animal, linked to our ability to manage symbols.

Often regarded as an epiphenomenon, symbols relate to concrete political economic processes. Modern El Salvador suffers structural instability, with high poverty and crime rates, and general anomie. This results from a history of inequality, wherein the majority of the population lived as poor, rural peasants working for a small oligarchy of families. Salvadorans were largely victimized, exploited and coerced, from the colonial period into the modern era. Many regard the Civil War as the logical outcome of this difficult history. Throughout this process, Christ dominates the symbolic landscape.

El Salvador's population can be evaluated as suffering from historical trauma (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins, & Altschul, 2011; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Olson, 2003;

Sotero, 2006). This concept, recently explored through Native American cultures, refers to "the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma" (Brave Heart et al., 2011). The trauma is: deliberately, systematically inflicted; linked to multiple events over an extended period of time; reverberates through the population; and derails the population from a more stable historical course (Sotero, 2006). In individuals, symptoms include PTSD, depression, self-destructive behaviors, severe anxiety, guilt, hostility, and chronic bereavement. At the social level, high rates of these may indicate the presence of historical trauma.

Historical trauma interferes with a culture's adaptations and functions. The ability to cope with distress is often hindered. The Native American case demonstrates how the systematic elimination of tradition, ritual, religion, belief, subsistence practices, and more becomes associated with difficult, culture-wide symptoms. Mourning is disrupted when funerary rituals are outlawed. Parenting is impaired when children are removed from homes and forbidden to communicate with their families in their native language. Responsibilities and adult roles become unclear when life-cycle rituals are removed. Further, if a culture is not permitted to reconstitute these cultural adaptations, the trauma persists and becomes generational. Salvadorans suffer such a legacy of cultural deprivations, with structural limits set by governing forces.

Research demonstrates that Native historical trauma can be ameliorated through renewed religious interest, ritual practice, and the reappropriation of spiritual symbols (Brave Heart, 2003; Brave Heart et al., 2011; Evans-Campbell, 2008; Olson, 2003). Similarly, an examination of Christ's symbolic significance throughout Salvadoran history can be correlated with the victimization of the Salvadoran people and their religious response as they reconstitute themselves culturally in the face of repeated social crises.

Since the colonial era, Christ imagery has dominated hegemonic discourse in El Salvador. Traditionally, images of Christ as the suffering servant facilitated domination of the majority of the population by an agricultural oligarchy. By the twentieth century the symbols acquired new meanings. Initially through Liberation Theology, and then through the device of another symbol, the Martyr, Christ spoke of the need to reformulate an unjust society by dividing its resources equitably. During and following the Civil War, new believers emerged. Evangelical Christianity eschews physical symbols. Physical images (sculptures, pictures, even images on a candle) are forbidden. Use of Christ images by the Catholic Church is regarded as an abomination. Evangelicals de-legitimize the old symbols, and create narratives to formulate their authentic divinity. Christ now heals society one person at a time, as each converts, tells their story and spreads the word orally. In each of these three cases (traditional Catholic, progressive Catholic, and Evangelical), Christ represents (among other things) a social blueprint. The Christ symbol facilitates action through somatic response. Faith provides hope, motivating believers towards social behaviors that redress their historical trauma. Therefore, a historical overview provides the basis from which to evaluate the shifting meanings of Christ as they come to redress trauma.

Following a Geertzian approach, the term "Christ symbol" is used here to refer to the central referent in a series of symbolic sets, or religious idioms, found in Salvadoran history and present. The Christ symbol itself refers to something divine. Yet other symbols (such as crosses, or human suffering) refer back to the Christ symbol. The Christ symbol is the symbol within which all other symbols are given meaning. The term "Christ symbol" is *not* meant as a term of derision toward believers, or as a referent to Christ himself, or to lay claim that Christ is merely a symbol. The term refers to Christ as signifier, not Christ the signified.

Salvadoran History

Historically, Salvadorans have lived under constant threats to dignity and life, which find origin in concrete political economic forces that created a peasant, almost slave-like caste out of the majority of the population. Salvadoran resistance to structural and physical violence has taken many forms: open rebellion, political activism, religious renewal, and even combinations of these.

This social structure divided the population into poor and elites, the latter holding power over the former whilst coercing them into a pattern of economic dependence and offering little in return. El Salvador's case is one of a ruling oligarchy bolstered by a military apparatus that has historically allowed them to enforce an agricultural extraction economy over the populace. This unstable process resulted in a history of coups, rebellions, terror tactics, and ultimately, the civil war which raged through the 1980s (Acevedo, 1996; Lungo-Ucles, 1996; Wood, 2003). Causes of historical trauma in El Salvador go back to the colonial encounter. Yet the previous 200 years offer sufficient evidence of its presence.

Nineteenth Century

El Salvador gained independence from Spain, along with the rest of Central America, in 1821. Within 2 years, Salvador found itself invaded first by an army of Guatemalans, and later by Mexican armies on two separate occasions (Lindo-Fuentes, 1990, p. 37–38, 48). From its beginnings, only elites could access education and professional employment. Prior to independence, an 1807 economic report noted that only 5,891 persons in the then province of El Salvador were occupied in non-agricultural occupations. Educated professionals were rare, including only "four lawyers, four physicians, twelve surgeons, and seven druggists" (Lindo-Fuentes, 1990, p. 19). At independence, the young nation was bankrupt, lacking infrastructure and unity.

Traditions developed that remained consistent even into the 1980s. Men and older boys were conscripted by force (Lindo-Fuentes, 1990, p. 50–55). A large sector of

the population went into hiding to avoid war. As their descendants would more than a hundred years later, male Salvadorans avoided markets, festivals, and church to elude conscriptors. By 1842, El Salvador had seen 40 different battles, lost over 2,000 combatants, and had seen a succession of 23 different men holding executive power. Death and instability were the norm.

By 1838 (Schmidt, 1996, p. 9), the Central American Federation had collapsed, and each nation was left to its own devices. The weakness and poverty of the new Salvadoran state led its elites to agree on the need for progress. But how could they convert this agricultural state with a shamefully small number of educated people into a profitable and prosperous nation? The solution was the mega-plantation, or latifundia (Acevedo, 1996, p. 20–21). This required the progressive dissolution of small scale farms, or minifundia, and their absorption into latifundia. It meant the end of communally held lands, the traditional mainstay of the indigenous population. The period between 1879 and 1882 saw this abolition of collective land and the growing prominence of the "fourteen families" that would eventually control Salvador's politics and economy for the next hundred years (Schmidt, 1996, p. 10). Eventually, 40 % of the nation's land was devoted to agroexports (Acevedo, 1996, p. 20).

The plantation economy required an enormous labor force. "Vagrancy laws" fined the idle and those without proof of employment. Labor became a punishment for crime, so that one could avoid jail time in exchange for work. An 1852 mandate required 2 days of work for the state from every man (Lindo-Fuentes, 1990, p. 83–85). This oligarchic mindset was "Thomas Hobbes with a vengeance: classical liberalism that assigned to the government the sole responsibility of maintaining order so that the economic elite could pursue laissez-faire economic policies" (Montgomery in Ladutke, 2004, p. 19). Through all this, the state's focus on capital translated into a dearth of public services, such as schools. In 1888, only one in thirty-two Salvadorans had attended primary school. Workdays were 11 h long and food was considered wages. Workers received two rations a day, consisting of a handful of beans and two tortillas, women receiving smaller tortillas (Lindo-Fuentes, 1990, p. 77–100).

Between 1841 and 1890, the country saw no less than 10 wars and 13 coups d'etat. The economy developed between small intervals of peace. A primary goal protected capital and infrastructure. In 1848, the rural police force was formed, which would eventually become the National Guard in 1911 (Lindo-Fuentes, 1990, p. 62–64). This institution, along with the later *patrullas cantonales* (rural patrols of ex-military campesino conscripts), gave the military control over public security, allowing them to repress any challenge to the status quo. They also served as an intelligence agency, identifying and targeting outspoken campesinos (Ladutke, 2004, p. 19–20). The National Guard would eventually come to be associated with the atrocities it committed in the 1980s.

The Salvadoran postindependence economic system imposed strict cultural restrictions on the population. It eliminated self-sufficiency in cultural and political economic terms. Similarly, no capacity to develop culture outside an oppressive context developed. Political instability likewise translates into cultural instability.

Twentieth Century, Prior to Civil War

The Great Depression aggravated the already precarious Salvadoran economy and resulted in further unrest among agricultural workers (Schmidt, 1996, p. 10). A large scale revolt was planned by the Communist Party in early 1932. Before it occurred, the government conducted a mass slaughter of the lower classes. Indigenous groups in particular were targeted. Some 17,000 Salvadorans died (Ladutke, 2004, p. 20 quotes a death toll of up to 30,000; Wood, 2003, p. 21). Many survivors abandoned their indigenous culture to avoid further persecution as "communists." This culture loss persists today (Ladutke, 2004, p. 21).

While the 1932 *Matanza* (literally—"the killing") was by far the most famous rebellion, it was not the only one. Peasant uprisings in coffee regions had occurred in 1872, 1875, 1880, 1885, and 1898 (Acevedo, 1996, p. 20). The severity of the *Matanza*, however, meant such resistance could no longer be expressed without fear of death. Revolution may have never left the minds of the Salvadoran peasant, but its public expression remained quelled for several decades. The *Matanza* uprising, while a strategic failure, served to justify increased militarism and abolishment of freedom by the oligarchy and army, as they banned all political organizations other than the National Party (Ladutke, 2004, p. 21).

Hernandez Martinez, the military General responsible for the slaughter of 1932, became president and remained in office until 1944 (Schmidt, 1996, p. 11). He focused on expanding the authority of the state through a policy of "reactionary despotism" which translated into a totalitarianism focused on preserving the economic dominance of the landowning elite through the power of the armed forces. Coups erupted in 1944, 1948, 1960, 1961, and 1972 (Schmidt, 1996, p. 12). Instability and violence intensified in the 1970s. In 1975, some 37 students were massacred at a protest of government spending on the Miss Universe pageant. In 1977, fraudulent elections transferred power to General Romero, and government forces killed 48 people in ensuing protests (Ladutke, 2004, p. 25).

The Civil War

The Civil War that raged through the 1980s is probably the most significant set of events in all of modern Salvadoran history. A number of revolutionary groups existed before the war, but they finally came together in May of 1980 to form the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), named after the founder of the communist party and leader in the 1932 uprising, Farabundo Marti. They planned their first, and what they believed would be their "final" offensive for January of 1981. In truth, the war would last until 1992. At least 75,000 Salvadorans, approximately 1.5 % of the population of 5 million, would die. The majority were civilians. By 1983, 400,000 Salvadorans were internally displaced and 700,000 had fled the country. Over three dozen journalists were assassinated during the war as part of the government's strategy against freedom of expression (Ladutke, 2004, p. 29).

In the three decades after World War II, the GDP multiplied by a factor of six. Cotton, sugar, and beef were introduced, diversifying the coffee economy. In the period between 1960 and 1979, industry grew at a rate of better than six percent per year (Schmidt, 1996, p. 13). Rapid economic growth and low inflation did not halt the onset of war (Acevedo, 1996, p. 19). Rather, a look at other economic indicators demonstrates why civil war occurred. "By 1974 the poorest 20 % of the population was receiving only 2.8 % of total income, while the share of the richest 20 % had risen to 66.4" (Acevedo, 1996, p. 27).

El Salvador's role in the world system of the Cold War also played an essential part. The USA determined that all communist or socialist movements in Central America should fail. The Reagan Administration sent millions of dollars in aid to the Salvadoran military and sharply denied their human rights violations. All the while, US-trained Salvadoran military groups, like the infamous Atlacatl Battalion, committed heinous atrocities. The USA had a direct role in forming and supporting death squads; ignored and tolerated human rights violations; and sent well over 2 billion dollars in military and economic aid to assist the Salvadoran government (Arnesen, 1986; Barry & Preusch, 1987; Diskin, 1996).

Small rural villages, like El Mozote, Morazan, became the sites of massacres. One thousand civilians were murdered there in a single day. Prior to the murders, the Atlacatl Battalion separated a group of young women who were taken to the hillsides and repeatedly raped (Binford, 1996, p. 23). Both the Salvadoran military and the US government would refute the incident until the evidence became undeniable.

The peace accords were signed on January 16, 1992 in Chapultepec Palace in Mexico City (Binford, 1996, p. 79). The FMLN agreed to lay down its arms in exchange for recognition of its legitimacy and is now a political party. The military dissolved the National Guard and the Treasury Police, both notorious for human rights abuses. The army itself was reduced to half its original size (Schmidt, 1996, p. 27–28). Nonetheless, a survey from this period indicates that 73.9 % of Salvadorans were afraid to express themselves in public (Ladutke, 2004, p. 44).

No great socialist revolution resulted. Ultimately, a great deal of the social inequality that led to the war persisted (Diskin, 1996; Walter & Williams, 1993; Wood, 1996). Since the end of the war, difficulties persist (Santos, 2012). The crime rate has escalated dramatically. Most troubling has been the rise of organized criminal gangs, which often serve as social regulators, going as far as imposing taxes on citizens and ruling neighborhoods through terror. Monetary instability led the country to switch to the dollar in the early 2000s.

From History to Trauma

From the period of independence forward, the Salvadoran population has been exposed to historical trauma in five principle ways. First, political and economic instability, such as the constant succession of coups and oscillations in style of

government, remove any sense of constancy and stability. Second, exploitation by the oligarchy, violence under the military, and social inequality lead to a sense of victimization and general fear. Third, without a responsible government or enlightened leaders, Salvadorans historically have had no official system of redress, no one in government to rely on for help or to render justice. This leads, for many, to a sense of fatalism and hopelessness. Fourth, placed at the bottom of a rigid social stratification, the majority of the population remains uneducated, without the possibility of social mobility, yet dependent on the system. This segment of the population has accustomed itself to subjugation. Enculturation under the rigid class structure leads to a lack of self esteem, as most Salvadorans are devalued under the status quo. Fifth, the Salvadoran has historically had limited rights to expression, under penalty of harassment, violence, and death. No independent cultural identity can exist. Cultural formation and social development are thus infringed, as any cultural evolution is repressed.

For most of the population, the ability to develop a stable culture has been impaired by Salvadoran history. These issues have resounded across generations, have been deliberately inflicted, have affected the entire population, and have derailed it from a more stable historical course, constituting a dramatic historical trauma (Brave Heart et al., 2011; Sotero, 2006).

Anomie has historically been the norm in Salvadoran history. Yet, as that very history reveals, it has been punctuated by a large number of attempts at resistance. Further, every culture must reconstitute itself in the face of trauma if it shall survive. As in the Native American case, many Salvadorans have sought this renewal in religious and spiritual terms. The central element for their religious renewal has been the Christ symbol.

The Christ Symbol in Salvadoran History

The same historical inequalities that led so many Salvadorans to arms correlate with shifting meanings of the Christ symbol. The Christ symbol has been used to justify, reject, and redress Salvadoran trauma. The symbol provides cultural adaptations to the Salvadoran context.

Traditional Catholicism

The Catholic Church dominated Latin America for 500 years. It has historically been a powerful political actor and the source of many aspects of Latin American culture, ranging from annual cultural festivals as well as the physical layout of cities around a central cathedral plaza. “The Church’s central role in society resulted in political systems and political cultures that were hierarchical and authoritarian” (Patterson, 2005, p. 14). Catholicism was the one true faith, for both rich and poor.

Social forms were religiously legitimized. “The church provided a rationale for the system and its organization was foundational to society, intertwined with government, education, and even family relations” (Patterson, 2005, p.14).

The Christ symbol that persists from this era can be seen in religious icons found in Salvadoran Catholic churches of the colonial style. Statues, sculptures, carvings, and more, often depict a suffering Christ. Popular Christ symbols are of the passion and crucifixion, beaten and bloodied. Such images are generally placed just out of reach of the faithful and are certainly regarded as off-limits. That is, the symbol is not intended for direct contact, so that the populace may see, but not touch, Christ. Further, the emphasis is on suffering and duty, how Christ willingly accepted hardship in exchange for fulfillment of cosmic destiny. Only through torture and crucifixion could Jesus take his place with God.

Thus, a number of people have argued that, historically, the Catholic Church fostered a form of spiritual fatalism that taught the poor to resign themselves to a life of poverty and misery (Wood, 2003, p.14). Suffering in the human realm would be rewarded postmortem in the heavenly afterlife. The traditional clergy has often been depicted as a willing collaborator with the oligarchy, enforcing an ideology that would make peasants docile, teaching them to fear authority and to shy away from protest.

Anthropological fieldwork (Binford, 2004) in northern Morazan, El Salvador, depicts traditionally minded priests in the 1970s. Father Argueta was the only priest in an area of some 200 mountainous square miles, with some 35,000 inhabitants, some of the poorest peasants in the country:

> [He] represented a traditionalist current of Catholicism that emphasized spirituality and subordination before the will of God. His liturgies focused on the self sacrifice of the saints. He interpreted poverty, disease, and infant death as trials mandated by God, for which those who bore them with dignity would be rewarded in the hereafter (Binford, 2004, p. 108).

Like other priests, Argueta held a higher standard of living than that of his flock, some of which can be attributed to their reverence for him. He received payments for conducting baptisms, weddings, funerals, and special masses dedicated to patron saints. Since associating with him was seen as an honor, he was often given presents and free meals. Few dared to approach him directly however, intimidated by his status. He had to be approached through an intermediary, another person of status such as a landowner, judge, or church official. Argueta shamelessly used the pulpit to encourage his congregation to vote for the National Conciliation Party (Binford, 2004, p. 109). He represents the traditional Christ symbol in El Salvador—a pacifier of the poor, a partner to the oligarchy and military, supporting hegemonic power.

This correlates with a focus on adherence to traditions (such as the sacraments), celebration of the mass, a leadership composed of celibate priests, belief in official church doctrines, and the chain of command within the church hierarchy. Ultimately, these stances reflect the persisting view that the Catholic devotee’s relationship to Christ ideally flows through priests and the Church. A new wave of traditionalist evangelism began in the 1990s, and incorporates “a visible role for the laity and an effort to relate theological and pastoral concerns to believers’ life conditions. However… [it] also includes more conservative elements, notably a paternalistic style

of leadership, and insistence on obedience to authority, and an emphasis on moral and personal concerns over political ones" (Williams & Peterson, 1996, p. 882).

The Christ symbol here is distant, far-off, and beyond the reach of the lay person. It lies, roped, off in church corners, above altars that could not be reached without a ladder. It is a Christ symbol seen, not touched. This reflects a social blueprint of consolidated power, restricted access, where a fortunate few have access.

Progressive Catholicism

Yet Catholic study groups often evolved into activist cells and other groups supporting insurgent action. Leading up to the civil war, many joined social movements because they had become convinced that "social justice was God's will" (Binford, 2004, p. 17–18). The following quotes, from an agricultural cooperative leader and a *campesina* (rural inhabitant) are quite illustrative:

> Let's see why the war emerged. Perhaps… because the Catholic Church gave a certain orientation. Perhaps because the words of the Bible connected with a very deep injustice-[the elites] treated us like animals, it was slavery (Binford, 2004, p. 87).
>
> The organizing began in 1976… It was Biblical study that made people conscious, a process that eventually took another form. By means of the Bible it all began (Binford, 2004, p. 89).

Teachings within some elements of the Catholic Church had shifted. They no longer conspired in the oppression of the masses, but laid a foundation for independent thought. A key catalyst in this transformation of perspective was Liberation Theology. Its early roots can be found in the changes resulting from the Vatican II council in the 1960s. While contentious, Liberation Theology became famous during a meeting of Latin American bishops in Medellin in 1968. Its foundation is the notion of a "preferential option for the poor" (Binford, 2004, p. 90). The Christ symbol roots itself in the poor and their suffering, and persons are morally obligated to alleviate this suffering, including the poor themselves. The power of the Christ symbol does not belong to the few, nor is it out of reach. In many ways, Liberation Theology simply asked "What would Jesus do?" in contexts like El Salvador. The answer was that he would side with the oppressed. Subjugation and tolerance of misery were no longer the will of God. "This very fact, however, would make the church a subversive influence within a social order that was founded upon injustice, exploitation, and oppression exercised against the many by the few" (Martin-Baro, 1985, p. 4).

The Martyr

Religiously motivated zeal and political advocacy met with brutal repression. From 1970 onward, more than two dozen nuns and priests were murdered (Peterson,

1997, p. 103). Much of Salvadoran progressive Catholic thought and action (and even its success) can thus be attributed to the central symbolic role of the martyr (Recinos, 1997). Martyrdom gives death a specific meaning. The deaths of martyrs are not defeats, but proof of the nobility of their cause. "For many, a reinterpretation of martyrdom… helped make political killings more comprehensible by placing them in the light of God's perceived plan for humankind" (Peterson, 1997, p. 19). In this context, religion was no longer other-worldly, but political, concerned with the realities of the social environment.

> El Salvador's martyrly Christianity relates belief in a God who sides with the poor and those classified as "social martyrs" in the struggle to end human rights violations, while achieving the democratization of the state, the demilitarization of society, and the achievement of economic justice (Recinos, 1997, p. 97).

The most famous Salvadoran martyrs include the Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Jesuit priests at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), and Rutilio Grande. Father Rutilio Grande was the first of these to die, in 1977. In 1972, he arrived in the town of Aguilares, some 35 km north of the capital of San Salvador, along with three other Jesuits. They conducted a survey to learn the needs of groups within the area, then established 37 Christian Base Communities, CEBs (Montgomery, 1982, p. 105). In the 1970s, Catholic clergy and lay leaders had begun forming such CEBs. Small groups of people would meet weekly to discuss current events and reflect on biblical passages (Wood, 2003, p. 91). The goal oriented believers towards critical thinking skills through social awareness. Eight months after his arrival, workers at a nearby sugar mill organized a strike over a promised wage increase they had not received. He was assassinated in 1977 as he drove to celebrate mass (Montgomery, 1982, p. 109).

Archbishop Oscar Romero is by far the most well known Salvadoran martyr. Romero forged a public link between Catholicism and the liberation of oppressed Salvadorans (Peterson, 1997, p. 99). He eagerly supported the tenets of Medellin, and the need for transformation of structures that marginalized the people. While publicly denouncing the actions of the government and military, he ultimately deplored all violence. Romero did not support armed rebellion, but progressive thought and social justice. Before his death, his Sunday morning sermon was the most popular radio program in the nation, and his weekly interview was third most popular (Peterson, 1997, 111). Romero was assassinated on March 24th, 1980 while saying mass (Montgomery, 1982, p. 115).

Six Jesuits and two women, Elba and Celina Ramos (their cook and her daughter), were assassinated in November of 1989 at the Universidad Centroamericana in San Salvador. While they did not regularly work in parishes, the Jesuits had become well known for their criticism of the war and the government.

> They constantly affirmed that Christ is the God of life who cares especially for the poor, they publicly denounced the prevailing political and economic order, they eloquently documented the sufferings of the poor, they systematically taught that the problems of El Salvador demand profound structural transformation that require the participation of the poor majority, they openly challenged the democratic credentials attributed to recent Salvadoran governments, and they insistently advocated a negotiated settlement to the war (Hassett & Lacey, 1991, p. 1).

Through their deaths, Romero, Rutilio Grande, and the Jesuits became part of a Salvadoran social movement that focused on the symbol of martyrs to encourage further determination in the face of the very real threat of death. They proposed an active religious faith that served as social critique, rather than as a religion that justifies the status quo. This represents a clash between Christ symbols, mutually exclusive meanings that divided the very meaning of Catholicism in El Salvador. One Jesuit martyr addressed the dilemma:

> One type expresses a vertical, other worldly, and individualistic religion, which is allied with the dominant social sectors and sympathetic to conservative regimes. The other expresses a horizontal, this-worldly, communitarian religion, which is embodied among the oppressed social sectors and sympathetic to progressive regimes. The first will be called law and order religion and the second subversive religion (Martin-Baro, 1991, p. 348).

The progressive Christ symbol was pursued through development of an independent culture of resistance, embodied in the efforts of martyrs. This new culture provided essential infrastructural elements, such as education, solidarity, organization, and esteem. CEBs formed and directly opposed law and order religion in three ways: a historical conception of salvation (that Christ and his Kingdom can be realized in the here and now); a commitment to transform the social order; and a communitarian religious life (Martin-Baro, 1991, p. 363). CEBs were functioning democracies, so that group members came to uphold democracy and pursue it as the ideal for the country as a whole (Peterson, 1997, p. 51–52). They also produced a sense of collective identity, uniting people that may have otherwise hesitated to come together for purely political reasons. CEBs often ventured into community building projects, literacy classes, and the formation of cooperatives. “Later, some members moved to clearly political issues, starting with cost of living and neighborhood problems and sometimes arriving at conflicts over the nation’s economic structure and political system or sympathy with revolutionary political groups” (Peterson, 1997, p. 52). A number of peasant training centers, *centros de formacion campesina*, were formed in rural regions, training some 15,000 leaders between 1970 and 1976 (Binford, 2004, p. 106). A new class of peasant intellectuals took shape.

These changes confronted historical trauma head on. Due to a combination of their treatment by the higher classes and their humble origins, most Salvadoran peasants suffered from a lack of education, a fear of speaking publicly and asserting opinions, a complete deference to authority, and generally a low self image (Binford, 2004, p. 113–115). The training centers focused, therefore, not simply on the dissemination of Liberation Theology, but on giving leaders the proper social tools to effect desired change. They were taught public speaking, were tutored in their reading and writing skills, and debated with their teachers. They also gave workshops on agricultural techniques and agricultural cooperative administration (Binford, 2004, p. 116).

The progressive Catholic perspective allowed a semiotic reorientation. Oppression and poverty became referents to a divine struggle. The religious system of symbols vacated the churches and robes of the clergy and became transferred to everyday structural violence. The Salvadoran’s part in this divine struggle was to strive for a new social order. The key to progressive Catholicism was the

transformation of the symbolic set. Salvadorans needed a conversion, through Christ. The martyred Jesuit Ignacio Martin-Baro offered this conception of conversion:

> It is not just a matter of changing values and religious practices; in many cases the convert is led to change his or her "world" significantly, that is, to change categories fundamental to his or her interpretation and evaluation of reality, and is thus led to important changes in attitudes, habits, and forms of action (Martin-Baro, 1991, p. 369).

As exemplified by the deaths of the martyrs, the state responded with a wave of violence directed at Catholics sympathetic to Liberation Theology and social change. Indeed, many came to identify "Catholic" with "subversive." The result was that being a public, vocal Catholic was potentially dangerous. This linked the martyrs to the Christ symbol irrevocably, as they literally gave their lives in the divine struggle.

Religious Shifts

The persecution of progressive Catholics related to the growth of a number of Evangelical churches during the same period. Unlike progressive Catholics, "evangelical [sic] churches reject secular solutions to the problems afflicting Salvadoran society and focus on assisting individuals in finding personal salvation… Unlike CEBs, most evangelical [sic] churches do not stress social commitment beyond the church community, and many discourage involvement in national politics" (Williams & Peterson, 1996, p. 890). For a number of people, conversion to Evangelicalism thus presented the opportunity to become part of a social group with a stated political neutrality. Indeed, many believe that a number of people within the El Mozote community converted to Evangelicalism in an attempt to publicly aver their own neutrality and perhaps save their lives (Binford, 1996, p. 94). Evangelical churches were also appealing in that they tended to family's personal needs and problems, such as drug or alcohol addiction, domestic violence, physical illness, and material needs (Williams & Peterson, 1996, p. 890). During the period of war, there was pronounced growth among Evangelical churches. Here was a new response to historical trauma, a new social blueprint that espoused a distinct set of referents to Christ.

Evangelicalism

In El Salvador, Catholic Church data from the period between 1956 and 1970 suggest that 93–95 % of the nation's population was Catholic, at least in name (Stein, 1999, p. 123). By 1980, the number of Protestants remained at less than 5 %. Though the 1992 census did not include data on religious affiliation, public opinion surveys suggest that up to 23.8 % of the population was Evangelical by 1997 (Stein, 1999, p. 124). By 2000, Peterson Vasquez, and William (2001, p. 6) contend that Evangelicals were between 15 and 20 % of the population.

Many theories have been proposed to explain this rapid, regional shift in religious forms. These explanations are often overlapping, and by no means mutually exclusive. (Gill, 1999; Gomez, 2001; Martin, 1989; Miguez-Bonino, 1997; Moreno, 1999; Patterson, 2005; Peterson et al., 2001; Stoll, 1993; Vasquez, 1999). Some see the spread of Evangelicalism as a form of cultural imperialism. Others maintain that Protestantism has grown in response to a set of socioeconomic and political conditions, or in response to modernization. Conversion to Evangelicalism has also been characterized as the natural outcome of a population in crisis seeking solace in faith. Like Catholic conversion, a spiritual transformation must occur. The difference is that Evangelical conversion implies a rejection of Catholicism.

In the Salvadoran conflict, many focus on Evangelicalism's ability to reconstitute shattered cultural elements (Gomez, 2001; Peterson, 2001; Santos, 2012). The postwar environment compromised social infrastructure, separated families, interrupted childhood development, and normalized violence and death. Evangelicalism focuses greatly on creating networks of support between believers, requiring none of the infrastructure that Catholic churches require (priests, altars, chalices, etc). This fluid model means all that is needed to build community are a few interested believers, who can meet in a house, room, or plaza.

Defining Evangelicalism can be problematic. Millions of people, belonging to dozens of denominations identify as Evangelical. Perhaps the most defining feature of Evangelicalism is its insistence on a literal interpretation of the Bible. It contains the explicit word of God and mere possession of it symbolizes Christian identity. It outlines the guidelines for Christian living, the past and future, and the ultimate end of all things. Conversion to Evangelicalism is also essential.

Once a person converts, behavioral and attitudinal changes should result. Worldview and practice are combined to produce an Evangelical lifestyle that shows great similarity both within and outside Latin America. Essential elements of this worldview include: a close link with Christ, a rejection of the "world" and a resulting elevation of all things Evangelical; an ecstatic form of worship and prayer; belief that the family unit is divinely ordained; and belief in the transformation of self resulting from conversion. As the term is used here, "Evangelical" refers to groups that fit these characteristics.

The Evangelical symbolic set divides all things into two basic categories: the world (*el mundo*), and the body of Christ (the Christian churches and individuals within them; Santos, 2012). For the Evangelical, the world is inherently profane. It is filled with sin. The world is destined for the fires of hell. It is the place of regular people, the unsaved, those who have not accepted Christ. The result is that all negative things are referred to as the "world," or as "worldly." Others distinguish between social realities such as globalization, economic distress, political instability, high crime rates, culture change, social prejudice, and the like. The Evangelical symbolic set subsumes all these in the concept of "the world."

One might mistakenly assume that the Evangelical has a pessimistic view of life. The world is everywhere, and thus the Christian is constantly surrounded by its negative influence, its decadence, and its capacity to harm. It is a very real threat.

However, one's link to Christ is a link with the most powerful force in the universe. This connection provides great comfort and esteem. Christ can never be defeated, so the world cannot win against the Evangelical ethos.

The whole notion of "separation" from the rest of the world is an intrinsic article of faith (Miguez-Bonino, 1997, p. 39). Believers are necessarily a discreet entity formed in opposition to the rest of the world. The Christ symbol divides the universe and social world into two distinct elements, those with Christ and those without him—an inherent comparison of worth between the two distinct elements results. Evangelicals, through conversion, abandon the profane world and link themselves to the sacred, becoming something, not just different, but better. Evangelicals state, assuredly, that they are greater (*somos mas*) than persons still confined to the world (Peterson et al., 2001, p. viii).

Another essential element of the Evangelical worldview and its social project is its obsession with the family. The nuclear family is seen as a divinely inspired unit, and persons are very much defined by their roles within that unit. Evangelicals emphasize the domestic sphere above the public (Brusco, 1993). Family harmony becomes crucial, a way of judging the level of Christian commitment of its members. "Discipline, order, and piety in the family, as in the individual, serve precisely to distinguish believers from… the worldly things, which will pass away" (Peterson et al., 2001, p. 11). Thus, women's submission to men and their completion of household duties simultaneously become a form of worship and evidence of being a good Christian. Submission is easier to accept because it is not simply submission to a husband's whims, but submission to the will of God. Destructive male behavior is interpreted in spiritual terms, as the "powers of darkness and sin" are responsible (Peterson, 2001, p. 36). The appropriate female response, therefore, is not to abandon the family, but to combat the darkness through Christian action, be it through prayer or the execution of her divine duty as wife.

Fatherhood is likewise seen as a divinely commissioned responsibility and authority. The father is to the family what the pastor is to the congregation, what Christ is to the church of believers (Ephesians 5:23). The Evangelical Christ symbol promotes a return to male authority, only provided that such authority is exercised in a loving manner that promotes Evangelical goals. Like women, men do not discharge their fatherly duties just to serve themselves. Rather, they dominate to please God (Peterson, 2001, p. 36). In the context of broken families, "churches often present appealing solutions: a place for each member of the family in an orderly, hierarchical, and stable structure… sharply opposed to the corrupt outside world" (Peterson et al., 2001, p. 11). Participants are encouraged to reform their families, remaking them in the model relationship of Christ and Church. Church members are thus under considerable pressure to convert their family members, seeking to both please God and receive the blessings of happiness and harmony that derive from being part of a Christian family. In fact, recruitment of family members has consistently been one of Evangelicalism's most effective strategies toward growth (Gill, 1999, p. 82).

The Evangelical social model is a domestic-centered one, seeking social change one soul, one conversion at a time. It literally seeks to spread Christ from person to

person. I once spoke with a pastor concerning the high crime and poverty rates in El Salvador. He lamented them, and said, "If only more people would convert, these problems would disappear." (Personal Communication, 2006)

The Verbal Christ Symbol

Though it too connotes a social project, the Evangelical Christ symbol differs drastically from both the Traditional and Progressive Catholic. First, it cannot be objectified. A literal interpretation of the second commandment (Exodus 20: 4–5) strictly forbids creating any image or worshipping an image. Were a Christ symbol to take physical form, it would violate the referent and reveal itself as an inauthentic symbol. Therefore, the Catholic Christ symbols are false Christs. Icons, statues, paintings—all visual symbols—are Satanic. Yet the Christ symbol is seen, heard, and felt everywhere. The Evangelical Christ symbol simultaneously divides Salvadoran society (believers versus idolators), yet surrounds and comforts the Evangelical. The Christ symbol cannot be engraved nor painted, but can be spoken of endlessly. Christ is thus most often found in narrative form.

In 2006 and 2007, I worked with Evangelical churches in El Salvador and elicited interviews, life histories, surveys, and a network analysis (Santos, 2012). I discovered the Christ symbol "speaks" constantly through certain acts, circumstances, and people, and through what nonbelievers might call coincidence. The Evangelical Christ symbol intervenes and resolves issues and problems. Many converts reported struggling with addiction, relationship problems, psychological and physical difficulties, economics, and more. Christ specifically triggers healing transformations, addressing Salvadoran social maladies through action. He intervenes in believers' lives, and that intervention is the Evangelical Christ symbol.

> I felt, for my part, that I had to receive Christ as my only and sufficient Savior… I heard a voice, a voice that told me, "You must receive Christ." Then I felt an anguish to move up front and accept Christ. I felt that there was my answer. There was the solution to my problem.
>
> *Miguel, 22 years old, after three years of drug use, homelessness, and on the run from gang troubles* (Santos, 2012, p. 61).
>
> I spent two years going to church… I would go to church… just thinking- Why? Why? Why?… On June 11th, 1984. It was a Saturday. I told the Lord [begins to weep]- I can't take it anymore. I told him… I want you to free me.
>
> *Emilio, 66 years old, after two years of a crippling stomach illness* (Santos, 2012, p. 61).
>
> I remember one time—I'll never forget this, either. I was drunk, falling asleep. I was trying to get back to my house. I was lying down. And I got up. And I looked and saw myself in a mirror. I looked at myself and saw my eyes all red. And I started thinking to myself—What am I doing with my life, you know? I don't know. I started thinking like—Why [sic]am I doing this for? Like—What do I gain from this? You know, like… so many things going through my head… I guess it was like, spiritually speaking, it was the Lord already talking to me."
>
> *Martin, 26 years old, a few months prior to conversion, on a binge* (Santos, 2012, p. 61).

> In the first place, it [converting to Christ] wasn't so that God would get me out of [prison]. And it wasn't out of fear, either. Because I wasn't afraid of anybody. On the inside in those first months, I carried around a knife like that, next to my ribs… There was a need in my heart. I felt alone… I felt alone and desperate… anguished, an anguish, and I felt something like fear. And I said, if these people feel joy here in prison because they are Christians, and I am suffering in my anguish and afflictions, I will try and see if it is true they are happy of heart. And just like I tried drugs out of curiosity, I tried Christ also to see what he was like. And when I tried him… I saw that it was not a passing happiness, but that it was permanent.
>
> *Pedro, 24 years old, in answer to why he converted in prison* (Santos, 2012, p. 61).

Evangelicals eschew physical symbols. Sensory input, affect, and experience therefore become the Christ symbol for many Evangelicals. Note that suffering itself connotes a symbolic call from God. The Christ symbol lives and speaks in the stories Evangelicals tell each other, as well as non-converts. He clearly acts within their stories. The plot demonstrates how he has saved them. However, he can also work through the telling of the story, to convert the listener. Evangelicals give "testimony" of Christ in their lives. This manifestation of the Christ symbol is intended to convert others.

> I fell deeper into drugs. I stopped working. Bit by bit, I took money out of the bank and used it up. My sister would say, "Don't waste that money," and I'd say "Stop bothering."
>
> But maybe that was all important, I say, so that I could see that, on my own, I couldn't do anything. I needed to see that there is a savior, and that is Christ, and he is the one who saved me from all that… I came to the gospel when nobody cared about me… Thanks to the mercy of God, he knows very well which ones of us are his. The word says no one will separate us. Those that belong to God, no matter where they are, he will save them. He saved me. He basically raised me from the dust, from the street…
>
> I came to accept through a person that spoke to me of the word. A brother from the church here. Just like I can sit here and tell you Christ loves you, he's the only one who can save you. He was someone I knew from before, a friend… It was a fast change, because God already had chosen me. The word says, "Come to me as you are, weary and burdened and I will make you rest."
>
> God sent that friend to save me. He told me how he had been worse off than me, but that Christ had changed him. And I saw testimony from other people, people on drugs, stuck in their sin, so I came to understand there is no other path… I accepted July 15 last year… The path of the world, the path without Christ, it yields nothing. If we've come to talk of this it's because I try for you and for friends in the world who don't know the path. Because the truth is there is a hell and there is paradise…
>
> The Church is Christ, his body. It's important to humble yourself before him. If I had not come to the Church, I would not be alive. This is something important I give you, so that you see there is only the path of Christ.
>
> *Marco, 42 year old Evangelical male* (Santos, 2012, p. 40).

This story is typical of Evangelical narratives. The Christ symbol is declared to be present before the person in the story realizes it. Marco was suffering, unaware of Christ. Now, however, he sees the suffering was a necessary prelude to conversion. Nothing can separate the believer from Christ, even their ignorance of him. Further, the Christ symbol is transferred through human action, or at least uses humans to transfer itself. Marco came to Christ when another Evangelical related their own narrative. The narrative Christ symbol led to Marco's conversion.

Finally, Marco repeated the process by relating the story to me. His life story becomes a referent to the Christ symbol, who now (ideally), enters the listener.

The narrative can therefore act as an invitation to join with the Christ symbol. Because the Christ symbol largely represents a social model (dividing the universe between the world/the body of Christ), its acceptance or rejection is largely a social statement. By accepting Christ, one becomes part of the larger Evangelical social group. In my case, repeated rejections of the invitation led to disappointment among my Evangelical associates. Many lamented my status as depraved and sinful. Out of real concern, they would appeal to me. They suffered to know I was destined for the fires of hell. Since I could not construct a Christ symbol (narrative), the proof of salvation, my soul remained in danger.

The Divided Use of Christ

Because of differences in attitude towards symbolic sets, Evangelicals and Catholics divide Salvadoran society. Some do not take this as representative of a diverse society, but as a moral separation. I fell into this social divide often. Once, I had run from an Evangelical church to a Catholic one. After mass, I identified myself as an anthropologist and asked the priest for an interview. Seeing an Evangelical bible in my hand, he promptly kicked me out of the Church. My explanations that I was neither Catholic nor Evangelical were pointless. The Christ symbol, the printed word, said it all. On a separate occasion, I bade farewell to an Evangelical church at the conclusion of a service. The Pastor, knowing I had worked with Catholics, took the opportunity to inquire about them publicly. Do they not bow before idols? Do they not spend extravagantly on feast days and robes for priests? Do they not act one way in church, then sin as soon as they leave? My very knowledge of the social Other served as a rhetorical device to emphasize the social divide.

Christ means different things to different Salvadorans. Traditional Catholics, Progressive Catholics, and Evangelicals use different sets of meanings to make sense of their Christ symbol. Interestingly, despite their differences, none of these groups rejects the symbol. Rather, they reject the meanings and groups associated with other Christ symbols. To the Progressive Catholic, the sermons telling the oppressed to sit quietly are a false Christ. To the Traditionalist, the agitator and revolutionary mislead the followers of Christ. To the Evangelical, the images of the Catholic Church violate the true Christ.

In all its disparate uses, however, the Salvadoran Christ symbol relates to the social suffering of the population. He represents social blueprints, models for redressing conflict and trauma within Salvadoran society. Historical trauma disrupts social functioning, preventing cultural evolution and causing anomie. El Salvador's history clearly crafted this situation, and the shifting Christ symbol intertwines with this process. The traditionalist Christ accompanied the trauma as a justification. While it provided solace, giving the poor a reason for their suffering, it justified the traumatic social order rather than redress it. Eventually, progressive Catholicism

heard Christ speak different words, espousing resistance and a new social order. Trauma was redressed through an attempt at nation-wide social change beginning with community building at the local level, as found in CEBs. Martyrs embodied this struggle, so that political action and social change, healing the traumas of inequality, became a divine mandate. Death itself, while tragic, symbolized the legitimacy of the struggle. Evangelicalism, too, heals the wounds of cultural disruption. The basic social unit, the family, disintegrates under historical trauma. Evangelicalism glorifies the domestic unit. Establishing family units, playing out proper roles within them, and connecting them through faith are the divine mandate. Further, the Evangelical emphasis on symbols is necessarily narrative. They reject the iconography of Catholicism, leading to a social rejection of other religions. Yet the narrative emphasis allows Christ symbols to intervene directly in the actions of daily life, transforming believers and giving them a device to convert others and save society one person at a time. All three traditions persist in modern El Salvador, dividing the nation through conflicting meanings of *Savior*.

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