

Chapter One

The Invasion of the Sects in Latin America

From the house across the street, the rhythmic blows of tambourines and the sound of hallelujahs. Shouts to the sky, the ecstasy of a new Pentecost. On the bus, an itinerant vendor of eternal truths. A fistful of incense or a pamphlet of revelations in exchange for some coins. Next to a handsome new temple, a gringo and his local colleague dressed in suits are in search of saints for the "latter days." At the door, two preachers with a copy of Watchtower and a chat if you have the time.

The radio in the hut high in the mountains, a Luis Palau crusade, conquering the countryside in Christ's name. Laminated roofs on the horizon, rural children with foreign godparents. Small airplanes landing in a North American stronghold in the middle of the Amazon Jungle. On the television, the seductive voices of Jimmy Swaggart or Pat Robertson, electronic messages of salvation for a lost modern world. Colorful tents, not of circuses but of evangelical campaigns. A meeting of the redeemed in the Model Stadium, the final showdown between Good and Evil.

The newspapers and magazines show signs of alarm: "invasion of the sects," "cultural penetration," "evangelical explosion," "religious contest in the nation," "new imperialist strategy." Worry. Confusion. What is happening?

Thomas Bamat, 1986¹

What if, after all the pain and hopelessness, there was a spiritual solution to Latin America's problems? Luis Palau, the Argentine evangelist, thought so. That was why he came to Guatemala in November 1982, to help evangelicals celebrate the hundredth anniversary of Protestantism there. The eyes of all Latin America were on Guatemala, he told the huge crowd at a parade ground in the capital. They could make it the first reformed nation in Latin America, a country where the word of God captivated so many military

officers and businessmen that it brought about a social and political transformation. The gospel could liberate Guatemalans from the chains of sin, Palau went on, and it could liberate them from the chains of poverty, misery, and oppression. Through the gospel of Jesus Christ, the evangelist promised, the new man could build a new Guatemala.

It was a sunny day, almost hot down on the crowded field, and the multitude cheered. The organizers had predicted that half a million people would show up. Afterward, they claimed that three quarters of a million did.² At the rear, soldiers in jungle fatigues lounged about the walls of a grim medieval-like structure, the old Polytechnic School for military officers, in the bowels of which “disappeared” political prisoners were said to be held in clandestine cells.³

But Luis Palau was not going to enter into debates about the current political situation: his message was spiritual. Besides, the president of the country was standing there beside him. “Here the one in charge is Jesus Christ,” declared Efraín Ríos Montt, an army general who had seized power eight months before. The tone of his voice was harsh, almost belligerent, but hallelujahs rose from the crowd below. “We defend ourselves not by the army or its swords,” he proclaimed, referring to the most successful counter-insurgency force in Central America, “but by the Holy Spirit.”⁴

What Latin America lacked, the two men felt, was evangelical Protestantism. Only a mass conversion along these lines, a moral transformation at the popular level, Palau and Ríos Montt believed, could save Latin America from poverty and chaos.

“Some offer volunteer services,” Palau was accustomed to state. “Others push Marxist revolutions. But the only way to truly change a nation for the better is to lead masses of people at the grass roots level to commit their lives to Jesus Christ.

“If we could eliminate infidelity and immorality in Latin America,” Palau reasoned, “we could cut poverty by half in one generation. . . . If a man gives up immorality with women, gives up getting drunk and all the waste . . . that goes with it, and stops gambling, right there he is salvaging a big chunk of his salary. . . .

“The vast middle class now emerging [in Latin American Protestantism] was converted poor and rose through industry, honesty

and justice to the educated, reasonable lifestyle that is commonly called the middle class. I think that's the biblical answer. . . .

"Consider the countries where you needn't fear secret police, where you can expect justice under the law, where the military is under the guidance of the people rather than oppressing them, where education is valued, where the press is relatively free," Palau said. "Almost all such nations have experienced spiritual awakenings touching society at the local level."⁵

Four months later, Pope John Paul II stood on the same spot and celebrated mass. He did not refer directly to the previous assembly, which his own organizers had vowed to surpass.⁶ The crowd was indeed somewhat larger. But when the pope called upon the people to hew to their faith, one reason was that the Roman Catholic Church was losing ground to evangelical Protestants on many fronts. It could no longer claim Latin America as its own. The traditional religious monopoly was giving way. Part of that reformation was occurring within Catholic churches dating to the Spanish Conquest, but much of it was taking place outside.

Typologies, Growth Rates, and Variation by Country

Dealing with Protestantism on the level of all Latin America is an undertaking that secular scholars generally have avoided. In breaking with this tradition, I should acknowledge various difficulties of classification and quantification before going further. When scholars take on Roman Catholicism, they have the convenience of beginning with "the Church," even if this turns out to be something of a fiction. There is a single administrative hierarchy, in any case. My subject is not a church, in contrast, and those who refer to it as such are projecting considerable optimism into a confusing panorama. Instead, evangelical Protestantism is best defined as a tradition distinguished by three beliefs, including (1) the complete reliability and final authority of the Bible, (2) the need to be saved through a personal relation with Jesus Christ, often experienced in terms of being "born again," and (3) the importance of spreading this message of salvation to every nation and person, a duty often referred to as the Great Commission.

Another complication is that, although most of the vocabulary of Latin American Protestantism comes via the United States, it acquires different shades of meaning in its new home. Understanding the distinctions which have arisen is sufficiently important to be left to the third chapter. For now, let it suffice that, while in the United States “evangelical” connotes a theological conservative who emphasizes the Bible, personal salvation, and evangelism, in Latin America *evangélico* can refer to any non-Catholic Christian. The term includes the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses, whom most evangelicals regard as false sects, as well as Protestants whose exegesis is unsuitably liberal. In Latin American style, here “evangelical” will be an umbrella term referring to anyone who could conceivably be construed as such. In the same general way I will use the less common *protestante*, sometimes adding the qualifier “ecumenical” or “liberal” to refer to those Protestants, usually affiliated with the World Council of Churches, whose disinterest in saving souls places them outside the evangelical camp strictly defined.

“Fundamentalist,” in contrast, seems to have translated without a hitch. As a term of opprobrium, it connotes doctrinal rigidity and is employed, somewhat promiscuously, against any Protestant inclined to quote Scripture as his or her final authority. When used with more precision, it refers to conservative Protestants who show more concern for defending the purity of their churches (“the fundamentals”) than for enlarging them (“evangelizing,” after the original Greek for “bringing good news”). As we shall see in the third chapter, an agile Christian can manipulate the terms “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” to present different faces to different constituencies, but the two also express deep conflicts within the evangelical tradition. The term “pentecostal” is another important dividing line: it refers to ecstatic forms of Protestantism defined in terms of special gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit. Whereas only a minority of North American missionaries are pentecostal, most Latin American evangelicals are.

Typologies of the evangelical scene in Latin America carry agendas I would prefer to avoid. Perhaps the easiest to resort to, and also the most misleading, is by denomination. The well-known church traditions—Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Moravian—emerged during the Reformation in Europe, its aftermath, or on the North American frontier. Al-

though Protestants are still organized into denominations (or into sects resisting the slide into the established routines of denominational life), these entities have long since polarized along theological and political lines which crosscut their formal boundaries. Baptists tend to be stereotyped as fundamentalists, for example, but some of their churches have become quite liberal. Presbyterians have acquired a middle-of-the-road reputation, and some are flaming liberals; but it is less appreciated that much of the intellectual elite of fundamentalism has been Presbyterian.

Another way to characterize Latin American Protestantism is in terms of successive “waves” of arrival, including (1) the churches of European immigrants, such as German Lutherans in Brazil, (2) the “historical” or “mainline” denominations, (3) the fundamentalist “faith missions,” and (4) the pentecostals. While a useful distinction, this too can quickly lead to misleading inferences. The Latin America Mission arrived as part of the fundamentalist wave, for example, but has come to encourage a more open and socially responsible theology. The Presbyterian Church of Brazil is a “historical” denomination which, in the 1960s, reacted sharply against the kind of thinking the Latin America Mission was starting to promote.

As for crosscutting political tendencies, these are constantly evolving. In the early 1970s, the Argentine theologian José Miguez Bonino identified three, including (1) evangelicals professing to turn their back on politics, (2) “liberals” working for reform within the capitalist system, and (3) “revolutionaries” calling for radical transformation.⁷ Since then, parts of the “apolitical” camp have aligned with the North American religious right; many liberals have become distinctly less liberal; revolutionaries have lost most of whatever constituency they could claim; and a new current of theologically but not politically conservative evangelicals has emerged. Looking at Latin American Protestantism through a fifteen-year-old typology tends to inflate the importance of the left and minimize growing political differences among theological conservatives.

One of the most common terms used against evangelicals—sect—also has unsatisfactory implications. When journalists, politicians, and Catholic authorities issue warnings against the invasion of the sects, they tend to be accusing new groups of fanaticism, exonerating opponents from responsibility for the latest head-

bashing, and stigmatizing evangelicals across the board. Technically, according to the sociologist Bryan Wilson, sects are groups that conceive of themselves as an elect, apply rigorous standards to those seeking admission, and demand an overriding allegiance to a higher truth. Although sects offend traditional religious authorities and sometimes neighbors, their internal discipline often turns members into model citizens. Within a generation or two, as converts become outnumbered by children and grandchildren born into the sect, enthusiasm tends to cool, and the group takes on the attributes of an established church.⁸ Needless to say, Latin Americans who feel afflicted by a neighboring group of religious enthusiasts cannot be expected to take such a comfortable long-term view.

Even if a certain amount of classificatory imprecision can be forgiven, another inhibition to discussing Protestantism on the level of Latin America is the lack of reliable quantification. According to those who dare to make estimates, non-Catholic Christians have grown to 10 percent or more of the Latin American population in the 1980s, or upward of forty million people.⁹ This may not sound like an impressive percentage. But so many Latin Americans are Catholic in name only that, except where unusually loyal to their clergy, the majority of consistent churchgoers appear to be evangelicals. In Brazil, as long ago as 1973 the newspaper *Estado de São Paulo* argued that there were more “real” Protestants in the country (ten million) than “real” Catholics. The thirteen thousand Catholic priests in Brazil were said to be outnumbered by seventeen thousand ordained Protestant pastors and thirteen thousand nonordained ones.¹⁰

Most figures in circulation are the work of evangelical mission strategists known collectively as the “church-growth movement.” Although not to be dismissed, they calculate rates of increase and how to maximize them with the enthusiasm of investors pursuing compound interest. Their work is also hedged about with the usual uncertainties, of counting heads among ill-defined populations and specifying religious loyalties. Estimates of the Protestant percentage of the population for each country are included in Appendix 1: the sometimes wild differences between the three evangelical sources should be considered a function of different methodologies, not of growth from one year of data collection to the next.

The task of calculating evangelical growth, then comparing it

from country to country and period to period, is even more impressionistic. If calibrated against the volume of complaint, evangelical Protestantism is growing rapidly just about everywhere. A more varied picture is suggested by evangelical missionaries, a compendium of whose reports has been published by Patrick Johnstone of the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade.

Some of the lowest percentages of evangelical population continue to be in the Andean countries—Venezuela (in the 1 to 3 percent range), Colombia (1 to 4 percent), Ecuador (2 to 4 percent), Peru (3 to 5 percent), and Bolivia (2 to 8 percent)—where Protestantism had a slow and difficult start. But since 1960 evangelical churches have grown rapidly, at some of the highest rates in Latin America, and the pleasure of evangelical prognosticators is matched by the level of alarm from opponents, among the most vociferous in the region. Expectations are also high in another evangelical backwater, Paraguay (in the 2 to 4 percent range).

A suprisingly low percentage of evangelical population is in Mexico (in the 2 to 5 percent range), despite proximity to the United States or perhaps because of it. One possible explanation is ease of migration across the Rio Grande, as an alternative outlet for the energies directed into Protestantism; another is national feeling against North American influence. In any case, although evangelical growth has been dramatic in some parts of the country, such as the northern border, Tabasco, and Chiapas, there are also prominent bare spots including the capital, and the country as a whole is a bulwark of disinterest.

Argentina is another of the “big five” countries in terms of absolute Protestant population (see Appendix 2). Like Mexico, however, it is not a leader in terms of the percentage of total population. Despite many an impressive revival, evangelicals number only in the 3 to 7 percent range. Especially since the unfortunate Malvinas War with Britain, certain evangelists have reported huge successes. But historically, according to the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, mass conversions have not resulted in as much church growth as expected, owing to a high rate of backsliding. Uruguay (in the 2 to 5 percent range) is another country about which missionaries express dissatisfaction: here the problem is described as spiritual apathy.

The greatest embarrassment for evangelicals are former English

and Dutch colonies of the Caribbean—Jamaica, the Bahamas, Belize, Barbados, Suriname, and Guyana—where nineteenth- and early twentieth-century revivals produced large Protestant populations, even majorities. But spiritual fires have dimmed in the established churches, whose members' declining commitment wipes out the gains being made by newer, more sectarian groups. Cuba is another disappointment: following the exodus of many pastors and believers to Florida after the 1959 revolution, recovery has been slow. But Caribbean evangelicals are growing rapidly in the other traditionally Catholic countries—the Dominican Republic (in the 2 to 7 percent range), Haiti (15 to 20 percent), and Puerto Rico (7 to 30 percent).

On the Latin American mainland, the two most evangelical countries until recently were Brazil, where Protestants claim as much as 18 percent of the population, and Chile, where they claim as much as 25 percent. Judging from the figures in Appendix 2, Brazil's twenty-two million evangelicals account for three of every five evangelicals in Latin America and the Caribbean. Together with their brethren in Chile, they add up to two of every three. Because the two countries account for 40 percent of the Latin American population, the rapid growth of their Protestants weighs a great deal in the aggregate. In Chile the rate of increase has slackened, but in Brazil, according to the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, it is still "astonishing." From 1960 to 1970 evangelical growth was 77 percent; from 1970 to 1980 it was 155 percent.¹¹

What makes evangelical gains noteworthy is not a mere increase in absolute terms. High Latin American birthrates could, after all, double the number of Protestants every twenty years without changing the proportion in the larger population. What is astonishing is the increasing presence of evangelicals as a percentage of total population, from the smallest of beginnings early in the century. According to the above-cited compendium of the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade (see Appendix 3), since 1960 evangelicals have approximately doubled their proportion of the population in the Southern Cone countries of Chile and Paraguay, Venezuela, and the Caribbean countries of Panama and Haiti. According to the same source, evangelicals have approximately tripled their proportion of the population since 1960 in Argentina, Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic. In Brazil and Puerto Rico, the evangelical

proportion has almost quadrupled since 1960. In two Central American countries, El Salvador and Costa Rica, as well as in two Andean countries, Peru and Bolivia, the evangelical proportion during the same period supposedly has quintupled. In two other Andean countries, Ecuador and Colombia, as well as in Honduras, it is supposed to have sextupled. And in Guatemala, the evangelical proportion of the population from 1960 to 1985 is supposed to have increased nearly seven times. If for rhetorical purposes we extrapolate the same growth rates from 1960 to 1985 for another twenty-five years, to 2010, Brazil becomes 57 percent, Puerto Rico 75 percent, and Guatemala 127 percent evangelical.¹²

In view of such spectacular numbers, it bears repeating that church growth estimates have to be approached with great caution. But if anything like these gains is occurring, as observers from different perspectives seem increasingly inclined to agree, then they have the potential to turn the religious landscape inside out. That was how it looked in Central America, anyway. By 1984, according to a spokesman for the most venerable evangelical mission to the region, 3.3 of the 21.9 million people from Guatemala to Costa Rica, or 15 percent of the population, considered themselves evangelical. If they continued to grow at the estimated rate of 13.4 percent per year, according to the same source, the figure could double to nearly one-third of the population by the late 1980s. In El Salvador, so many Catholics were converting to Protestantism that evangelicals could be a majority by 1994. In Guatemala, evangelical leaders claimed to represent nearly one-quarter of the country and hoped to have one-half by 1990.¹³

Wherever it occurs, evangelical growth varies according to rural/urban, regional, ethnic, and class factors which it is not my purpose to explore systematically.¹⁴ What follows is not a synthesis of scholarship on the subject. It is not a sociology of Latin American Protestantism, a regional tour of church growth trends, or an attempt to sharpen up the numbers. Instead, I want to consider evangelical growth as given in order to put certain issues on the table.

In the first place, I focus on the efforts of the religious right to turn evangelical missions into an instrument for militaristic U.S. policies. For those who believe that evangelicals have always been an instrument of Washington, this may seem an unnecessary exercise. But I will argue that the religious right does in fact represent

a departure, a new stage in the politicization of missionary work, which threatens not just Catholics and the godless but evangelicals themselves. Understanding that threat will underline the contradictory directions in which evangelicals are moving.

Second, I want to suggest that viewing liberation theology as the key to religious and social reformation in Latin America may be a mistake, that conversion to evangelical Protestantism may be the single most popular religious option in the region, and that continuation of this trend could fundamentally alter the religious landscape of Latin America. I further suggest the possibility, if only a dim one, that from this religious transformation could emerge a social vision with the potential to alter Latin America's cultural, moral, and political landscape as well.

Admittedly, this is a reckless argument. But in view of recent events, I think it should be laid out, if only to be refuted and laid to rest. The remainder of the first chapter is dedicated to a more modest task: to suggest how the polemics against evangelicals have obscured growing debates among them, over their future course.

Disaster Evangelism

Since the sixteenth century, Anglo Protestants and Latin Catholics have contended for political and cultural supremacy in the New World. To avoid perpetuating that struggle, in the early 1900s European Protestants refused to classify Latin America as a mission field. As a result, the North American contribution there has swelled to unusual proportions, to most of the Protestant mission force. With countries closing across Asia, more North American Protestant missionaries have located in Latin America—11,196 by 1985—than in any other part of the globe. One-third are concentrated among less than 10 percent of the world's population.¹⁵

Given such a preponderance, the wish of North American missionaries to transform Latin America can be hard to separate from the fact that their country dominates it. This is not the place to dwell upon the contemporary ruin: the debts to foreign banks driving entire countries into bankruptcy, the North American demand for cocaine keeping several economies afloat, the U.S.-trained militaries that dominate political life even under civilian administration. This is a Latin America without revolutions, at least economically successful ones, yet capitalism is changing it beyond rec-

ognition. The population streams into vast, dreary cities, where it burgeons with little hope of a better future. Behind those cities, in the hinterlands, brutal civil wars drag on year after year. Long lines of visa-seekers snake around U.S. embassies. Millions from all classes flee to the north, where so many destructive pressures on their countries originate.

When evangelists say that the secret of North American prosperity is its Protestant heritage, many Latin Americans are therefore willing to listen. The missions are well aware of the relation between social stress, the resources at their disposal to alleviate it, and interest in their religion. "We cannot fail to recognize the impact of this suffering," one missionary observed. "We pray that God will spare us from that kind of church growth strategy, but as the clouds gather on the horizon, we must prepare ourselves for a great harvest in times of acute suffering."¹⁶ "One possible conclusion," a Brethren in Christ missionary summed up reluctantly, surveying the wreckage of Sandinista Nicaragua, "if you want church growth, pray for economic and political devastation."¹⁷ "When there is any kind of trauma," an Overseas Crusades official stated, "that is when we need to rush resources in."¹⁸

Whether they like it or not, these groups are engaged in what can be called disaster evangelism. Drawn to wars and natural catastrophes, evangelists hand out food, set up medical clinics, help rebuild communities, and train leaders to start churches. The first occasion on which the *modus operandi* came to wide attention was the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala. When the earthquake tumbled the seemingly secure adobe walls of Mayan Indian towns, it took tens of thousands of lives and also shook the confidence of survivors in their old ways. Helping them pick their way out of the rubble was the now familiar legion of evangelists.

During that time, a graduate student named Sheldon Annis found himself traveling with a member of the Central American Mission. "In a remote, earthquake-ruined Guatemalan village," Annis wrote, "Edgardo Robinson [not his real name] is an imposing, even a commanding figure. He travels in a powerful new Bronco. He speaks robust and fluent Cakchiquel. He is eight or so inches taller than almost any village male. And he has the smouldering eyes—maybe the lunatic eyes—of a biblical prophet. In a land of earthquakes and violence, he is a man of the times.

"Politely but with no great interest, Edgardo listened to what I

proposed to investigate. . . . I was especially interested in the semiotics of handweaving, and with considerable curiosity, asked how he would pursue such questions.

“‘Look around you,’ he said irritably, dismissing the abstract with the rubble around us. ‘Do you want to talk to these people? Do you want to know how to get their attention? The way to get an Indian’s attention is not these things you’re asking, but to talk to him about God.’

“Edgardo knows how to talk to Indians about God. This is how he does it. First, he pulls into the marketplace, smiling at acquaintances and warmly greeting friends as he hops out of his vehicle. He strides to a spot—just the right spot—in front of the crumbled wreckage of the Catholic church. A circle gathers as he kneels in silent, personal prayer. . . .

“Slowly, then more visibly, the prophet’s body starts to tremble. Clutching a worn bible, his hand raises skyward. His body struggles with itself. . . . He is on his feet, beginning to preach. His voice grows louder, the Bible slicing the air. ‘Look at this earthquake, your lives, your sin; look at the destruction,’ he cries. He rolls on and on, preaching of Christ’s love and the war with Satan. Sweat rolls down his forehead. Finally, as his hoarse voice begins to calm, he leads the circle in song and prayer. Then he goes off to discuss the reconstruction of the two toppled evangelical churches.”¹⁹

The Guatemalan quake seemed to confirm the advantages of relief and development work. Evangelical growth increased from 8 percent a year before the catastrophe to 14 percent after it.²⁰ Because relief work is so prominent in disaster evangelism, Latin Americans often complain that evangelicals are “buying” converts. When material benefits open a heart to the gospel, it stands to reason that they figure in the convert’s motives. Ironically, no one is more displeased by the resulting beggar mentality than missionaries, who are soon agonizing over how to outwit it.

Even if North American money has been important at certain junctures, it is far from the complete explanation. If evangelical churches were really built on handouts, as opponents suggest, then they would be spiritless patronage structures, not the vital expressions that so many of them are. Where evangelical churches are successful, they proliferate far beyond the buying power of mission

subsidies. With little or no training and without financial backing, people equipped with little more than Bibles are starting their own churches, beginning with their families and neighbors, then proselytizing vigorously for enough followers to make a living.

The two best known sociologists of Protestantism in Latin America, Christian Lalive d'Epinay and Emilio Willems, discovered that interest in evangelical Protestantism was related to how uprooted the population was. Recent migrants to cities and colonizers of frontier areas were the most receptive. The least receptive were those living under the old hacienda regime.²¹ For people whose lives have been wrenched apart by war, capitalism, or ecological failure—those struggling to survive in the face of bureaucratic indifference, regrouping in shanty towns on the edge of cities, or colonizing marginal land—evangelical religion provides a new kind of social group.

Once understood what such groups can do for the poor, the appropriate question seems, not why many people convert, but why more do not. One of the most common effects of conversion is to put households on a more stable basis, by overcoming male addiction to alcohol, reining in male sexual license, and establishing church authorities as a sort of appellate court for aggrieved women.²² For evangelicals moving from the countryside to the city, church networks serve as referral agencies and safety nets.²³ But born-again religion is not just a utilitarian exercise in which the disadvantaged adapt to capitalist development by organizing themselves into benefit societies. Evangelical churches are a new form of social organization with a powerful logic of their own. Something of that power is suggested by the prominence of a seemingly irrational and fruitless exercise—faith healing—as a path to conversion in Latin America. By appealing to the deepest needs of people, evangelical churches help them redefine themselves, reorganize their lives, and move in dramatic new directions.

So Close to God and the United States

Judging from the large numbers converting to evangelical churches, these were popular movements. Some of their leaders spoke of leading a reformation. But evangelicals were greeted with

metaphors of infiltration and conquest.* Much of the money, planning, and organization behind their growth came from the behemoth to the north: even groups from other parts of the world, such as the Unification Church, the Hare Krishna, and Bahai, usually came by way of the United States.²⁴ Inevitably, the question arose of whether North American missionaries were serving their country rather than Christ.

In 1975, investigations by the U.S. Congress confirmed the Central Intelligence Agency's use of missionaries. During the early days of Overseas Crusades Ministries when it worked mainly in the Far East, a spokesman acknowledged, virtually all its personnel were debriefed by the CIA on returning home.²⁵ In Latin America, Catholic and Protestant missionaries also served as information sources, some wittingly and others not. In Chile a Belgian Jesuit named Roger Vekemans became a conduit for millions of dollars from the CIA, which also subsidized Catholic radio broadcasts to peasants in Colombia. By 1975, some evangelical missions already had rules against cooperating with intelligence agencies; others followed suit. But as the evangelical biweekly *Christianity Today* reported, restraining individual missionaries who felt a duty to serve their country was much harder.²⁶

One U.S.-based religious group which definitely had a conspiratorial agenda was the Unification Church of Reverend Sun Myung Moon. Moon's disciples won a certain number of converts in Latin

* Having an outsize impact on public perceptions were a few extremely authoritarian movements that differed sharply from evangelical norms and were best described as cults. For some time, the most flagrant case was the Children of God. The group's founder and prophet, David Brandt Berg alias Moses David, had broken away from the Christian and Missionary Alliance, for which he worked as an evangelist, to minister to hippies and drug addicts in Huntington Beach, California. From that emerged his Children of God or Family of Love, which practiced "flirty fishing" or evangelism by sex, prompting indictments in various Latin America capitals for prostitution and corrupting minors (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano 1982:236-37; Silletta 1987:75-93; Albán Estrada and Muñoz 1987:134-41). Then there was the 1978 murder/suicide of the Reverend Jim Jones and nine hundred followers in Jonestown, Guyana. Jonestown was a North American expatriate community, not a mission, and had little to do with Latin American evangelicals. But it prompted numerous demands for expelling churches that had become Latin American in membership (e.g., *El Espectador* [Bogotá] November 30 to December 2, 1978; and *El Tiempo* [Bogotá] November 26-27 and December 3-5 and 10, 1978).

America, but their main vehicle was a free-spending political lobby named the Confederation of Associations for the Unification of American Societies (CAUSA). The acronym was the Spanish word for "cause": that of fighting communism in the Americas, to which end the group labored to improve the foreign image of military dictatorships and airlifted supplies to the Nicaraguan contras. CAUSA's head, David Woellner, was a retired U.S. Air Force general.^{27*}

The Moon organization illustrated a recurring fear among Latin Americans forced to deal with the growing number of religious groups from the United States. What if, despite all the denials, North Americans persuaded converts to transfer their loyalties from their own country to the United States? "Invariably, a strong bond of mutual love and respect is built up between the missionaries and the convert," a Mormon social scientist among Mexican peasants in Puebla claimed. "Any hostile feelings which the [convert] may have harbored internally toward Americans are eliminated or at least reduced. . . . The [convert's] worldview is dramatically expanded as he comes to see himself as an important member of a growing, worldwide organization. His previous suspicion and distrust of outsiders is ameliorated for he now believes that at least some of them are genuinely concerned about him. This is just the start of the almost total transformation of his viewpoints, activities, and aspirations."²⁸

Some of the sharpest trepidation over North American intentions was aroused by the evangelism of indigenous peoples, in Mex-

*In Uruguay Moon's disciples acquired one of the country's largest financial institutions, one of its largest newspapers, and a luxury hotel in the capital. The Moon organization also sold the government weapons from its armaments factory in Korea. In Bolivia it reportedly helped finance General García Meza's overthrow of an elected government in 1980—remembered as the "cocaine coup" for its other backers. After several years of courting the dictatorships of Brazil and the Southern Cone, the Moon organization turned to Central America. As in Bolivia, the rapid downfall of the generals so befriended did not suggest divine approval. In 1983, Moon's representative Colonel Bo Hi Pak, a retired South Korean army officer, helped organize a businessmen's group, the Association for the Development of Honduras, to support the ill-fated strongman General Gustavo Álvarez. That same year, Moon's people organized a conference in Guatemala City to improve the image of the soon-deposed President Ríos Montt (Jean François Boyer and Alejandro Alem, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, February 24, 1985, pp. 12–13, and March 3, 1985, pp. 12, 14; Mariano Sotelo, *Latinamerica Press* September 29, 1983, pp. 5–6. For a list of Moon organizations, see Bromley 1985).

ico, Central America, the Andes, and the Amazon Jungle. Although the number of converts involved was often small, the conflicts over them dramatize how evangelism leads to competition with other religious and political groups.

Evangelical missionaries have long concentrated on American Indians: in Brazil not so long ago, 36.5 percent of the faith missions were to be found among the 0.5 percent of the population which was indigenous.²⁹ The concentration could be explained in ideological terms: these were the "last unreached peoples," presumed to be living in the deepest darkness, and so forth. But Latin Americans found it hard to distinguish between foreigners in search of adventure, natural resources, drugs, and souls. With their pervasive missions to Indians, moreover, evangelicals were occupying an especially sensitive position in Latin American affairs. It was not just that the majority of indigenous people lived in poorly integrated hinterlands rife with land grabbing and drug trafficking, gridded off into corporate concessions, and contested by troops and guerrillas; native people were not "national" in the integrationist, hispanicizing sense desired by their governments.

"Tribal peoples represent the most politically delicate of all mission fields," *Mission Frontiers* of Pasadena, California, explained. "They are virtually imprisoned in their own countries in most cases. National governments, run by majority peoples, at best are embarrassed or indifferent and at worst are even hostile to them. How can outsiders get past those officials who do not want anyone drawing attention to their tribal peoples? It is a wonder missions have been able to do it at all!"³⁰

They did it by serving official plans to integrate native people, often with unfortunate results. But even if evangelical missions were problematic, they tended to treat native people with more respect than did national governments and fellow citizens. In effect, North American evangelicals were setting themselves up as mediators between native groups and the Latin societies that had colonized them. By serving both constituencies, the North Americans came to play a pivotal role in Indian affairs.

This was the crux of the periodic furors over evangelical missions to native people. Latin American nationalists feared that, by winning the loyalty of ethnic minorities, North Americans were setting up archipelagoes of influence. To illustrate the dangers of ethnic

separatism, they needed only point to the mainly Protestant Miskito Indians of Nicaragua, whom the United States encouraged to revolt against the Sandinista government.

One of the two largest evangelical missions to native people was the New Tribes Mission (NTM). With 2,300 members in some two hundred language groups around the world, the fundamentalist NTM was accused of destroying the cultures of the still resisting nomadic bands in which it specialized. The other was the more flexible Wycliffe Bible Translators, whose 6,000 members had entered 1,100 language groups around the world. To avoid Catholic and anticlerical opposition, Wycliffe went to the field under the name of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). By claiming to be primarily a scientific research organization, it was able to obtain official contracts and cultivate government authorities, whose support usually protected it from expulsion, but also guaranteed a new controversy within a few years.

By the 1980s in Colombia, after successfully resisting several official recommendations to wind down its activities, the Summer Institute was said to receive almost daily threats against its members. One member was kidnapped and, when SIL refused to leave the country, executed in 1981. Five years later, another was knifed to death by a former employee from the poverty-stricken town next to the group's comfortable base.³¹ That same month, SIL property in the capital was bombed along with the offices of other North American organizations.³² Despite claims that SIL members were standing firm, a colleague in the Interamerican Mission reported that half left the country in the two years following the 1981 killing. As for the Interamerican Mission's own no-ransom policy, it was now spelled out on members' identification cards.^{33*} Although vio-

*Just how complicated missionary life could get—and just how hard it could be to distinguish missionaries from other kinds of North Americans—was suggested by the saga of Russell Stendal, a young bush pilot on the Colombian frontier. The son of former Summer Institute translators, Stendal was admittedly something of a black sheep in the mission fraternity. A typically versatile missionary child, at age nineteen he was entrusted with starting a ranch in the eastern badlands. The profits were to support Colombian literacy workers and help local settlers improve their agriculture. But the young missionary was soon disillusioned by the ranch's Christian employees, who accused each other of smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol, were lazy, and ended up suing Stendal for back

lence against North Americans received the most publicity, local evangelicals suffered the most. According to the president of the Colombian Evangelical Confederation, seven rural pastors were murdered in one year.³⁴

In Mexico, a next-door neighbor became what U.S. mission planners regarded as a restricted field. There, as in Colombia, a major source of controversy was the Summer Institute, which for years had obfuscated its evangelical goals by claiming to be concentrating on linguistic research, then continued to move into new languages even after losing its government contract. Accusations against evangelicals as U.S. spies, legal restrictions, and expulsion of missionaries entering the country on tourist visas became regular occurrences. When the government banned religious broadcasting as a violation of the country's anticlerical constitution, evangelicals set up their stations on the U.S. side of the border.

In 1984, four Jehovah's Witnesses from the United States were kidnapped in Guadalajara while evangelizing door to door; they vanished without a trace. In the countryside, churches were occasionally burned and pastors killed. "We practice the Roman Catholic religion," signs in windows declared. "Evangelicals are not welcome here."³⁵ In Chihuahua, extremists naming themselves after

wages. Nearby pastors seemed to be interested chiefly in milking their congregations for money in order to imitate the living standard enjoyed by missionaries.

After several years of entrepreneurial heartbreak, Stendal decided to provide employment for local men, and also promote economic development by starting a fishing industry. That required taking out loans to build infrastructure, buy outboard motors for local men, and acquire a more expensive airplane for himself. Soon Stendal's fishermen turned to a more lucrative occupation—growing marijuana for smugglers to the United States—and forgot about paying back the money they owed him. Like everyone else in the area, the young evangelist found himself trapped in overlapping extortion rackets by drug traffickers, guerrillas, and the authorities.

Up to his ears in debt, to keep up the payments on his airplane and gather information for a strangely uninterested Drug Enforcement Agency at the U.S. embassy, Stendal agreed to do a flight for the drug runners himself. It was a fiasco. When the mafia found out about his contact with the embassy through their own people there, they threatened to kill him. Being kidnapped by guerrillas, in August 1983, was therefore not the worst predicament in which Stendal had found himself. At the start of his 142-day sojourn with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), he happened to be armed with a concealed .38 revolver with which he tried to shoot himself free, seriously injuring a guard with dum-dum bullets. Despite all, Stendal succeeded in turning his actions into a book-length testimony to his evangelical faith (Stendal 1984).

the Knights Templar were demanding that the Catholic hierarchy expel Protestants, to the point of painting slogans on church walls such as "Cursed Huguenots, out of Chihuahua!"³⁶

The Struggle within Protestantism

Latin Americans protesting against the invasion of the sects usually had little idea of the differentiation within Latin American Protestantism. They failed to discern the internal struggles emerging over how to respond to the world. Admittedly, such debates could be difficult to detect owing to the political conservatism of most evangelical leadership.

In contrast to liberal Protestants and much of the Catholic Church, prominent figures such as Luis Palau advised Latin Americans to concentrate on improving themselves rather than working for structural change. Such leaders claimed to be apolitical, but they customarily supported any regime in power. For a minority facing hostility from the Catholic Church in an unstable political milieu, aligning with a dictatorship might seem the only way to safeguard freedom of worship.³⁷ Then there was the belief, based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Romans 13:1, that any anti-communist government was divinely ordained. When much of the Catholic clergy turned against military regimes in the 1970s, evangelical leaders usually did not. Some energetically preached submission to dictatorships and defended the status quo as if it were God's handiwork.³⁸

In exchange for freedom to evangelize, such evangelicals were allowing themselves to be used as a "parallel church," an alternate source of blessing for a regime which had alienated the traditional religious authorities.³⁹ When fearful that revolutionaries were about to take power, they could turn into apologists for inhuman policies. At a time when other Christians were challenging structures of oppression, they seemed to be propping the same structures up.

The conservatism of Latin American evangelicals was mainly passive, a policy of noninvolvement reinforced by experience as a minority religion. They might abstain from movements for social change, for fear of being manipulated by more powerful groups, but they also displayed a certain resistance to identification with the state. Except when polarized to the right by fear of revolution-

ary expropriations, evangelical support for the status quo was cautious. That attitude was encouraged by many of their missionaries, who were repelled by Latin American political culture.

These might seem like unimportant caveats. But in the 1980s they began to look significant with the increasing visibility of a new, more militant wave of evangelists from the religious right. Such evangelists were so politicized that previous conservatives looked moderate in comparison. Although some older evangelical missions were backing away from neocolonial postures, these soul winners were vowing, not only to win Latin America to Christ but also to save it from revolution. Soon their collisions with liberation theology were producing a new kind of holy war.

One such confrontation occurred in Guatemala, under Latin America's first evangelical dictator. Every Sunday on television, General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982–1983) preached to his countrymen on the importance of morality and good citizenship. Meanwhile, according to human rights groups, his army was putting down a communist insurgency by butchering thousands of Mayan Indians. Yet evangelicals in the United States leaped to Ríos Montt's defense, heaped him with praise, and offered to send large amounts of aid. One role his evangelical advisers played was denying that the Guatemalan army was committing massacres in its anti-guerrilla drives; another was serving as a humanitarian buffer for survivors, especially evangelicals, by recruiting them into the army's pacification effort.

Not long after Ríos Montt's fall, another confrontation between the religious right and liberation theology emerged, over the Reagan administration's war on the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. From the start, the religious right vouched for the operation as a defense of religious freedom. Then, after the U.S. Congress cut off aid to the Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries in 1984, the religious right joined the campaign to come to their rescue. As the Iran/Contra scandal soon demonstrated, this supposedly private effort was coordinated by the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, and Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North from the basement of the White House. In fulfillment of many an anti-imperialist prophecy, evangelicals claiming to do missionary work were joining a CIA front.

Looming large in the demonology of right-wing missionaries was

liberation theology, understood as a Moscow-inspired tactic to deceive the church into destroying itself. Usually we think of liberation theology as a Catholic phenomenon: ecumenical Protestants might have a part in it, but they were few in Latin America. As for the evangelical Protestants multiplying at such a rapid rate, the whole idea seemed antithetical: they scarcely seemed interested in revolutionizing faith and society. Virtually all evangelicals said they rejected liberation theology. Yet witch-hunts against suspected sympathizers in evangelical churches indicated that it was not just an external threat. Conservative leaders were alarmed that it was infiltrating their own churches. They feared a potential following, not least because most of their followers were poor and oppressed.

Evangelicals have usually made one or another form of the “prosperity gospel” part of their message. Believe on the Lord, evangelists promise, and he will reward you in this life as well as the next. Surveying the rise of many early converts into the middle class, mission theorists refer to such blessings as “redemption and lift.”⁴⁰ But when the debt crisis hit Latin America in the 1980s and difficult times turned worse, evangelicals who had managed to improve their lot in earlier years found themselves getting poorer along with everyone else. What would happen if “redemption and lift” stopped working and evangelicals became open to new ideas about changing the social order?

“They’re upset by liberation theology because it upsets their scheme totally,” an evangelical theologian said of conservatives. “But their attacks have promoted it, because many people in the pews don’t know what it is.”⁴¹ Liberation theology disturbed conservatives because, among other things, it raised issues they had ignored, issues they were now forced to confront even as they groped for different answers.

“I lived among poor people and saw what was going on around me,” a staunch anticommunist missionary volunteered, “but it never got through to me. It’s possible to isolate yourself from these things . . . to live in your own little world and never think about people around you who are dying of starvation. . . . I have had to come before the Lord in recent years and say I’m sorry. And the thing that has affected me is . . . liberation theology.”⁴²

Conservatives clearly had the upper hand in evangelical leadership, and most signs suggested that they would retain it. But im-

pressed by the dedication of Christians practicing liberation theology, some evangelicals were trying to work out their own "biblical" equivalent. What might seem like minor differences among evangelicals, mere shadings of a common right-wing stance, were producing rather different positions. Leery of dramatic stands, the innovators concentrated on long-term tasks such as pastoral training. Under different conditions, their pupils could become a new, more socially responsive leadership.

Out in churches with dirt floors, where the congregation wailed away into the wee hours of the morning, waiting for the Holy Spirit to descend, it could be hard to tell exactly what was going on. Whatever religious professionals debated in their seminaries and publications, no matter how bitterly theological and political factions contended for supremacy, the believers in poverty-stricken barrios and provinces could not be counted upon to follow the total program of any rival tendency. Even the identity of the various factions could blur out there, with Catholics turning charismatic and then declaring themselves evangelicals, or evangelicals whose churches professed no interest in the things of this world suddenly joining peasant leagues. It was important to keep this kind of ambiguity in mind because Protestantism in Latin America continued to be a channel for dissent as well as North American influence.

Whatever is happening, scholars have been reluctant to call it a religious reformation. One reason is that the term evokes the Protestant Reformation in Europe, raising problems of comparison which will not be dealt with in this work. It also implies that religious change will have a profound impact on the social order. But I think the comparison is already being made. Implicitly, liberation theology is equated with the Protestant Reformation, while evangelical Protestantism is assigned the reactionary Catholic role of Counter-Reformation. This is an interesting inversion of European history, perhaps an appropriate one, but not one I will assume true in the pages that follow.

Instead, I will refer to the evangelical ferment in Latin America as an "awakening," even if this term can be used only in the most loose, suggestive, and perhaps misleading sense. In the United States, awakenings are the successive periods of evangelical revival which, since the 1700s, have changed the way North Americans understand themselves and their society. Looking backward, suc-

cessive awakenings can be associated with the independence movement from Britain, the emergence of participatory democracy, and social reform. According to William McLoughlin, each North American awakening has redefined a millenarian core of beliefs that freedom and the Judeo-Christian ethic can perfect individuals, the nation, and the world.⁴³

This is a far cry from how Latin Americans understand their history, let alone the pessimistic, otherworldly style of millennialism prevalent among evangelicals today. But if an awakening is understood as a period of religious ferment, in which masses of people arrive at a new sense of themselves and their society, then at least we pose a question for the future. As for reformation, it suggests that liberation theology and evangelical Protestantism are competing wings of a religious transformation that is broader than either and whose implications are far from clear.