Introduction

Paradoxes in a Religious Arena

For over two decades, in what some have called the most revolutionary Catholic movement since the Reformation, priests throughout Latin America, inspired by liberation theology, have preached the Gospel as a call for social justice and the democratization of religious authority.[1] Their message springs from the same founts that have watered Christian radicalism for nearly two millennia. Liberation theologians argue that the prophesies of both the Old and New Testaments promise a Kingdom in which humanity will live in peace, equality, and justice, and, as foretold by the Apocalypse, that this Kingdom will be realized, not in Heaven, but on earth. Moreover, just as God used Moses to free His people, so too will He establish His Kingdom with the assistance of human agency. This is why, liberationists declare, it is up to humanity to struggle for the coming of the Kingdom.[2]

While liberation theology has familiar roots, its branches are new. One of those branches is the belief that in the struggle for the Kingdom, the poor are pivotal actors. It is "the poor, the little people, the anonymous ones," who are faithful "to the contract with God of equality and brotherhood"; it is they who are "the natural bearers of the utopia of God's Kingdom."[3] In place of the traditional Catholic vision of charity, in which the better-off receive religious merit by giving to the poor, liberation theologians substitute a new vision of social rights, in which the poor struggle to bring about the Kingdom by demanding their just deserts. In this struggle the poor confront institutionalized violence and

social injustice, which threaten to beat them into passivity, fatalism, and apathy. It is, therefore, up to the Church to help the poor overcome their fear, rediscover their spirit of community, and develop a critical understanding of the social nature of the violence they face. Such conscious Catholics will then fulfil their role in the battle for the Kingdom, by entering political and social movements for progressive societal change.[4]

The burden of realizing this vision falls to the Christian Base Communities, known throughout Latin America as "CEBs," the acronym for *comunidad(e) eclesial de base.* CEBs are Catholic congregations in which clergy and pastoral agents are engaged, in one way or another, in efforts to raise political and social awareness. The most distinctive aspect of the CEBs is the presence of small reflection groups, in which, with the help of liberationist study guides and pastoral agents, members read the Bible together, discuss its implications for their everyday lives, and are inspired by it to struggle for social justice.[5] "After centuries of silence," writes Leonardo Boff,

> the People of God are taking over the word; they are no longer simply a client of the parish, but are reinventing the Church in a concrete historical sense . . . the people, motivated by a faith illuminated in the Bible circles and lived in the CEBs, are organizing themselves, no longer accept to die before their time, and are struggling for better alternatives.[6]

Nowhere in Latin America have CEBs become as numerous or received more official support from the hierarchy of the Church than in Brazil.[7] In the 1950s, many Brazilian bishops began turning away from the urban, elitist model of the Church toward a vision of themselves as the "voice of the voiceless." With the repression of the late 1960s, many bishops became outspoken in their denunciation of human rights' abuses and in their calls for social justice. The bishops shielded priests who had come to see powerful connections between the material and spiritual lots of their flocks, and whose practice of establishing CEBs accelerated after receiving the stamp of approval, in 1968, of the episcopal conference at Medellín. By the early 1980s, the number of CEBs in Brazil was estimated at around 80,000.[8]

The Numerical Paradox

Brazil's *comunidades de base,* like those of Latin America in general, have often been represented in political, journalistic, and

scholarly discourse as a rapidly growing mass movement with the power to transform Brazilian politics and society.[9] The view that the People are naturally disposed to embrace the message of liberation as purveyed by the Church underlies both the argument that the Popular Church is a strategy engineered from above and that it is a response to demands from below.[10] In either case, many observers of the Brazilian progressive Church assume, with Della Cava, that "the receptivity of ordinary and long-suffering believers to this 'revolution within the church' [is] itself extraordinary."[11]

While there can be no doubt that Brazil's CEBs are a politically important movement, the extent of their penetration among "ordinary and long-suffering believers" may be questioned. Estimates of the number of CEB participants are notoriously difficult to pin down, partly because of the lack of definitional consensus about CEBs themselves.[12] For the purposes of this book, I am less concerned with the true number of CEB participants, than with what can be roughly known about their relative proportion to other major national religious movements.

If we take "participant" to mean anyone who participates in one or more CEB activities (especially Bible circles) other than Mass, the limited available evidence suggests that, whether calculated nationally or locally, the number of CEB participants is rather less impressive than the number of pentecostals and practitioners of the Afro-Brazilian religion of *umbanda*, even in areas where the CEBs are highly active. Several studies suggest that at the regional and local levels, pentecostals may outnumber CEB participants on the order of three to one. In the strongly progressive archdiocese of Vitória, no more than 3 to 4 percent of local adults actively participated in the CEBs, percentages that paralleled those discovered in surveys of progressive parishes in Goiás, as well as in ethnographic studies in Pernambuco and São Paulo. In these same studies, pentecostals were found to make up between 8 and 10 percent of local populations.[13]

Although national figures are less reliable, they do tend to corroborate these relative percentages. Initially, the problem here is to estimate the number of participants in an "average" CEB. *Comunidades* obviously vary in size depending on the population of the neighborhood or town in which they are situated. This variation, however, tends to be limited by the Church's policy of founding new *comunidades* whenever established ones "grow too large," as one progressive priest put it. Thus, in a survey of CEBs in and near São Paulo, Hewitt found

that "membership ranged from 5 to 50, with an average of 22."[14] Comblin has observed: "In practice, the CEBs include only some of the baptized: groups of twenty to a hundred people, generally closer to twenty than to a hundred, in the middle of a population of 500, 1,000, even 10,000 baptized Catholics who do not belong to the CEB."[15] Frei Betto arrived at similar numbers.[16] If we generously assume a national average at the high end of this range, and if we increase the estimate of CEBs to a hundred thousand, this translates into five million participants, or a little more than 5 percent of Brazil's current population aged fifteen and over.[17]

Meanwhile, in the mid-1980s, the Assembly of God, Brazil's largest pentecostal church, claimed alone to have thirteen million baptized members in good standing.[18] Although this number is undoubtedly inflated, it is consistent with the best estimates that place Brazil's overall pentecostal population in the mid-1980s at between twelve and fifteen million.[19] The numbers are less clear for *umbanda,* but Diana Brown has mentioned the figure of twenty million regular participants, while other observers have claimed that over half of all Brazilians have consulted in an *umbanda* center at one time or another.[20] Thus, even if we accept the most conservative national figures, and hold them constant for the early 1990s, they still indicate that pentecostals and *umbandistas* outnumber active CEB participants on the order of at least two, and possibly as much as three or four to one.

This, then, is one of the main paradoxes of Brazil's People's Church. While that Church was conceived, in part, as a way to increase clerical influence among the masses, the masses continue to be more enthusiastic about the Church's major religious rivals. A growing number of observers in and outside of the Church have begun to recognize this. Daniel Levine has commented that, whatever the reasons for the scholarly interest in CEBs, "[s]urely it is not for the numbers they attract."[21] Comblin, one of the earliest theoreticians of the CEB movement, has recently acknowledged that "frequently the *comunidades* do not want to expand but even exclude expansion . . . The laity of the CEBs avoid contact with the mass of people," allowing them to be snapped up by other religions.[22] Or, as Brandão has observed in a report of findings from a survey of over thirteen thousand respondents in Goiás,

> It is quite evident that an intensive pastoral project of the progressive Catholic church, realized without any interruption of "line" or of its agents for more than fifteen years, has not resulted in a statistical advantage in its favor. . . . We are faced with a paradox. The Church that theologians and pastoral agents call

"a church that is being born of the people" is struggling with great difficulty to be accepted by the people itself.[23]

In this book, I will explore this paradox. Why is the People's Church less popular than its rivals? Why are the CEBs losing the battle for souls? What do pentecostalism and *umbanda* signify and offer to Brazil's masses that the People's Church does not?

The Political Paradox

Despite being demographically weaker than other religious movements, CEBs have made themselves felt in Brazil at the level of collective movements for social change. Indeed, some writers have claimed that liberationist discourse is inherently persuasive to *comunidade* participants and is therefore sweeping them all into political struggle. "The people," writes Macêdo,

> come to find in the discourse that emanates from the pulpit a representation of reality compatible with the one it already has. . . . There is a verisimilitude in the discourse of the priests, which produces identification of the people with that being presented. The poor of today are like the poor of yesterday. For them, Christ came. And they must respond to his call. They must struggle for the Kingdom . . .[24]

Although this is certainly an overstatement, there can be no doubt that over the last generation, CEBs have supplied an umbrella for a variety of struggles for social justice, encouraged the development of progressive political leaders, and, by instilling in at least some of their members the values of struggle and this-worldly liberation, helped motivate numerous poor Brazilians to become involved in neighborhood organizations, land reform movements, labor unions, and political parties.[25]

At the same time, a growing number of observers have noted that other, less socially activist tendencies are often present in the *comunidades,* even in those with long histories of influence by progressive clergy and pastoral agents. In Vitória, for example, a diocese that has benefited from over twenty years of progressive pastoral work, a survey of 70,000 active CEB members revealed that a majority remained uninterested in social movements or other political matters. Instead, they emphasized "the liturgy and the sacraments, the greater participation of the laity in the Church, and the rapprochement with the Bible."[26] Even

among *comunidades* in São Paulo, usually celebrated for their high level of politicization, Hewitt has reported that "given the choice between initiating bible study or charity circles, or reflection and political discussion groups, the former has won out."[27] Ireland's report of a nun's complaint about a CEB in the Northeast is suggestive: "the fishing folk had not, over the years of her work, been formed into a grassroots community of the kind that fulfilled her ideals and the ideals of her church."[28] Most generally, Comblin has suggested that "frequently there is an unconscious and more or less latent antagonism between what the pastoral agents expect from their CEBs and their concrete accomplishments. The CEBs adopt the language of the pastoral agents, but passively resist their calls to action."[29] In a more polemical tone, Dom Angélico, longtime progressive in São Paulo, recently complained that the CEBs had "betrayed" the progressive clergy.[30]

This, then, is our second paradox: While theologians conceive of the CEBs as a means to instill in the People a politically activist message of liberation, it has become increasingly clear that many, if not most, CEB participants understand and respond to the message in other ways. What are some of these understandings? Who understands what and why? How and why do some CEB participants come to connect the discourse of liberation with the practice of social movements while others do not?

In contrast to the CEBs, pentecostalism has been portrayed in both the scholarly literature and the popular press as an inherently conservative force that teaches acceptance of the existing class order, inculcates submission to authority, erodes collective identity, and undercuts justifications for social action. In this view, the *crentes*' occasional forays into collective movements for social justice can only be regarded as temporary ruptures from their usual resignation to the status quo.[31] These observers, not surprisingly, conclude that CEBs present a "better means to collaborate in the acceleration of the processes of social change" than do the *crentes*.[32] One writer has argued that Brazil's political fate hinges on which side triumphs in the struggle between the CEBs and the "sects."[33]

Yet here, too, recent observers have begun to complicate the conventional picture, by pointing out that the self-valorization brought about by evangelical conversion often paves the way for a strong sense of natural rights and citizenship.[34] Regina Novaes, for instance, has argued that pentecostals who participated in a rural union in the Brazilian Northeast tended "to have greater conviction about their rights" than did non-pentecostals.[35] Clearly, the image of pentecostals as being

hopelessly apathetic fails to do justice to such complexity. What then are the linkages between pentecostal identity and a range of political tendencies, and what are the conditions under which any given tendency prevails?

Elucidating the Paradoxes: Theorizing Religious Arenas

Because the questions I have raised with regard to "the two paradoxes" are all implicitly comparative, traditional single-religion ethnography is not an appropriate model to follow.[36] In the context of Brazil's urban periphery, where religious migration is the norm, not the exception, where people adhere to different religious groups in succession and at the same time, the traditional model is especially ill-suited. The following case is not atypical: Maria was born a Catholic, and remained exclusively loyal to the Church for the first decades of her life; in her thirties she began to frequent an *umbanda* center, eventually becoming a medium; later she converted to pentecostalism; and by her fifties had grown so disillusioned with the latter that she returned once again to the Catholic fold, now in the form of a CEB. If our aim is to explore the patterns at work in such experiences, the single-religion model clearly will not do.

The single-group focus also too easily slips into the assumption that a religion's social composition reveals the extent and nature of its appeal. In the polyreligious field of Brazil's urban periphery, people with similar social characteristics attend or adhere to different religious groups. One cannot simply report that because a certain percentage of a given group's members are black, or female, or old, or poor, that the group in question has a special attraction for this cluster of people. One must, rather, consider how the percentages of such clusters, as well as their absolute numbers, vary from religion to religion. Single-religion studies of CEBs, for example, often point out that they are made up predominantly of women, concluding that the People's Church has a special affinity for women.[37] If, however, such studies were to compare CEBs with pentecostal churches in the same towns, they would most likely find anywhere from three to five times as many local female *crentes* as *comunidade* participants. Focusing on this discrepancy would force into the open the

need to investigate what the pentecostal church offered local women that the CEB did not.

Rather than examine a single CEB in isolation, then, I will explore the field of religious options of which the CEB is a part. The models for studying polyreligious arenas are scarce.[38] To find a model sufficiently fluid to analyze religion in the Brazilian urban periphery, we must turn to the field of medical anthropology. Building on Kleinman's model of a field of healing options,[39] we may regard competitive, polyreligious arenas as contexts in which people do not simply belong to one of several neat theologico-organizational wholes, but rather encounter a complex set of partly overlapping discourses and practices. In such encounters, people may move over time through the entire religious gamut, circulating through the field as loyal members and affiliates, frequenters, or simply as religious-service users.

Although an improvement, the medical model still has limitations: above all, it runs the risk of slipping into a facile market view of choice and identity. In this view, the presenting complaint remains unanalyzed, and the main criteria of choice between healing alternatives are reduced to such matters as availability, cost, and location.[40] The model thus runs the risk of allowing us to come to the most unenlightening of conclusions: that trajectories through the religious arena are purely opportunistic efforts to solve concrete problems. Indeed, some sociologists of Brazil conclude by depicting religious mobility in precisely this way, as purely idiosyncratic and unpatterned.[41] Macêdo puts the position clearly:

> The potential adepts believe they have the right to go from agency to agency, and choose to "consume" the "products" that best meet their necessities. . . . Belief moves from one place to another, from one object to another, from one ideology to another. There is no necessary connection between belief and its object. People believe in their momentary ideas, in what they have heard most recently, without any further concern.[42]

Teixeira adds:

> For the people . . . there are no dramas of conscience, but rather anxieties and necessities. But these anxieties are not about meaning, theodicy or anthropodicy. There is only the search for solutions to concrete problems, of partial explanations and answers to partial questions.[43]

There are several problems with this view. First, it fails to account for the widespread phenomenon that Brazilians, regardless of their "concrete problems," often refuse to consult with certain religious specialists, or resist affiliating with specific religious groups; second, it fails to pose

the question of whether some religious options work more often for some kinds of people than for others, and if so, why?

A partial corrective to the free market view is suggested by those medical anthropologists who insist that coping with problems, however concrete, is constrained by prior belief, identity, and social networks.[44] I would add that "concrete problems" tend to be symptomatic of bundles of social experience. The intense headache a woman brings to be prayed over in an *umbanda* center is often the result of domestic strife; a young person's fainting spells may point to intergenerational conflict; a *negro*'s spirit possession may be connected to ambivalence about race identity. We would, therefore, be well-advised to seek different religions' abilities to solve surface problems by looking at how they address them at a deeper level. We will soon discover that not all religious options deal as effectively with domestic strife, or intergenerational conflict, or race ambivalence—it becomes clear that not any religion will "do." Indeed, at this level religious choice begins to look less like opportunism and precisely more like ongoing "dramas of conscience," "searches for theodicy," and the complex construction of religious identity—and identity in general.

For our model of the religious arena to do justice to both fluidity and constraint, I suggest that our analytic point of departure should be clusters of people as they enter into and interact with the whole panoply of religious discourses, practices, and specialists. By "clusters," I mean people who share constructed identities, such as being a *negro,* or important experiential commonalities discoverable through ethnography, such as domestic conflict. The empirical task then becomes to explore how these clusters of people cope, through available religious acts and language, with their experiential predicaments. By examining how people in such clusters understand and move between the options in the religious arena, we may begin to grasp the reasons for the rise or fall of a particular religion within it. Furthermore, by investigating how different clusters of people within a religion understand and appropriate its discourse and practice, we can better grasp the religion's internal political tendencies and contradictions.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VARIATION

Central to this model is the view that religious discourses and practices are seized upon and understood in different ways by different audiences. This view may be distinguished from recent work in

the anthropology of religion, inspired by Turner and Bourdieu, that insists on the power of religious ritual to produce relatively uniform subjectivities, habits of thought, and ideological commitments.[45] Even granting Bourdieu's point that many practices are not accessible to conscious reflection, it remains possible that the same practice may generate in different audiences different habits of thought. The principal way to test this possibility, however, is to pay attention to the voices of the people exposed to the practices.[46]

Yet in ethnographies of religion, all too often the verbal exegesis of informants is employed to illustrate uniformity, not difference. Comaroff's brilliant analysis of the Tshidi Zionists, for example, points out that adepts wear yarn cords "evocative" of nineteenth-century initiation rites.[47] No doubt the cords evoke these rites for some adepts; but is it possible that for some Zionists the cords evoke something else, perhaps nothing at all? Comaroff also reports that male Zionists bearing ritual staffs signify a superiority to which "women serve, by and large, as submissive foils."[48] But how do Zionist women perceive the staffs? Is it possible that some of them reject or reinterpret the masculine version? We do not know, because we do not hear the Zionists, as an internally differentiated group, speaking their minds and telling their personal stories. Rooting multivoicedness in specific clusters of people would, in contrast, reveal a political economy of polyphony.[49]

Life stories are a crucial resource for building this kind of polyphony, for exploring the different meanings religion has for different clusters of adepts. It is difficult in the course of fieldwork to witness many key events in informants' lives, episodes in which the connection between religious discourse and lived experience comes dramatically into relief. It is through life stories that a conceptual-historical bridge may be built "between the private and the public, the individual and the communal."[50] By eliciting both exegeses and life stories, then, we reveal the range of meanings a given signifying practice can have on subjectivity, and come closer to understanding the degree to which participants in religious groups place into their own foregrounds those meanings that resonate with their particular life experiences.

São Jorge: A Town in Rio's Urban Periphery

São Jorge is a settlement of about eight thousand people, wedged in a valley in the foothills of the Serra dos Marcondes, at the

northern rim of the great, flat drainage basin known as the Baixada Fluminense, twenty miles north of metropolitan Rio de Janeiro. It is classified as a *bairro,* a town, within the semirural fourth district of the municipality of Duque de Caxias. At about a million inhabitants, Duque de Caxias is currently the largest suburb of Rio de Janeiro.

For centuries the São Jorge valley was home only to thick mangrove forest. It was not until the 1930s, when Rio de Janeiro's industrial expansion was already well underway, that land-hungry migrants began cutting down the mangrove to supply the city's demand for fuel and construction materials.[51] Then in 1941, in an effort to coax Brazil away from a wartime alliance with Italy, the United States financed the construction of the National Motor Factory (FNM), the first airplane engine plant in Latin America, located a kilometer southwest of the São Jorge valley.[52] In the late 1940s, a private company partitioned the valley among speculators who, in turn, drove the first wave of squatters into the hills and sold parcels to newly-arriving workers.[53] Most of these were men from Minas Gerais.

By the late 1950s, the initial stream of migrants to the valley had slowed, and the local population had stabilized at about three hundred families. Then, between 1958 and 1968, in response to the demand for labor to build and run the massive Petrobrás refinery, located almost twelve kilometers south of São Jorge, the average yearly arrival of people tripled.[54] Before and after the military coup of 1964, FNM and Petrobrás (the state-run petrochemical industry) sought to lower labor costs by farming out production to subcontractors that could avoid labor legislation, pay a lower wage than the state, and undermine labor unity by hiring fresh rounds of workers for each contract. Since wages paid by a subcontractor were not sufficient to support a family, workers had to supplement their income by odd-jobbing in the informal sector.

Between 1968 and 1973, during the Brazilian "miracle," the military government turned Duque de Caxias into an industrial pole, doubling the number of its textile, glass, chemical, pharmaceutical, food processing, and metallurgical plants, and mercilessly cutting the wage bill.[55] This explosive growth started yet another flood of workers to the São Jorge valley, this time from the Northeast, Espirito Santo, and the *favelas* of Rio.[56] The touted miracle began to slow and its true price to be felt after 1973, the first year of tangible inflation. Low wages, limited advancement, and rampant price increases forced an ever-growing proportion of São Jorge's men in the 1970s to supplement their wages by

biscate (odd-jobbing), and of women to enter the wage labor market in manufacturing.[57]

In 1981, after several years of decline, the FNM plant shut down. Some assembly-line workers entered other capital-intensive industries in the region at comparable wages, but most were forced to turn to lower-paid menial work, stevedoring, and subcontracted labor. Hundreds of men were forced to work further away from town, the informal construction market grew rapidly, and a growing percentage of wives had to become part-time domestic servants. For a very few the plant closing proved a blessing: the company paid three months advance wages as indemnity, a major windfall for workers with little or no savings; a few of the best-paid workers parlayed this money into small mercantile enterprises such as grocery bars.

Today, fully a third of local men work in the civil construction trades, one quarter combine social security and odd jobs, about a fifth work in factories in the industrial pole, one tenth work in supervisory and white collar jobs, and smaller percentages are truckers and merchants. Among the women, two-thirds work only at home, 14 percent work as domestic servants, 5 percent labor in factories, and smaller percentages work in commerce, service, and white collar jobs.[58]

The Religious Arena in São Jorge

What makes São Jorge's active Catholics a "*comunidade*" is the fact that since 1982, when the progressive priest arrived in the parish, they have had an elected council and several small, neighborhood-based Bible reflection circles; that through the circles and periodic *cursinhos* ("little courses") they have been continuously exposed to a rights-oriented reading of the Bible; and that they have learned clearly to identify themselves as a "*comunidade.*" Among São Jorge's almost thirty-five hundred people aged fifteen and over, ninety or so regularly participate in the activities of the *comunidade* (Bible circles, pastorals of baptism, *cursinhos,* and so forth). Of these, forty or so take an active role in coordinating these activities, and another fifty participate, with less fervor, in them.

These are the people who regard themselves, and each other, as "members" of the *comunidade.* Those who show up in church simply

to take Communion, whether once a week or once a month, are outsiders, and ineligible to vote at the monthly general assembly of the *comunidade* for directors, ministers, or on proposals. *Comunidade* members refer to such people by the belittling terms of *misseiros* or *papa-hostias* ("host-eaters").

Hewitt has suggested a political continuum along which six types of *comunidade de base* may be located, ranging from purely apolitical devotional groups, to those that limit their nondevotional activity to consciousness-raising, to those engaged in joint-labor initiatives, to groups involved in extra-*comunidade* social action.[59] São Jorge's *comunidade* appears to be of the second type: for although its members are having their consciousnesses "raised," they are not generally engaged in non-Church social movements.

The relative political quiescence of São Jorge's *comunidade* should not be taken as representing the CEB phenomenon as a whole. In São Jorge's own diocese, several *comunidades* have successfully mobilized members to enter social movements. The reasons for this kind of variation are complex, but may in part be related to the fact that São Jorge had an infrastructure of traditional pre-Conciliar and Conciliar lay organizations already firmly in place when the progressive priest arrived in the parish, while the few towns with politically more activist *comunidades* tended not to. It is thus possible that *comunidades* like São Jorge's include more members whose politico-religious visions were formed institutionally before the arrival of the progressive Church, thus making them generally less amenable to direct political activism. Yet this does not tell the whole story. São Jorge's political inactivity is typical of other *comunidades* in the region, even those without a traditional lay infrastructure; and, if the literature cited earlier is any indication, CEB members' preference for church over non-church activities represents an important national trend as well.

The Protestants are numerically more important in São Jorge than *comunidade* members. Two nonpentecostal churches, the Baptists and the Adventists, claim almost one hundred and twenty members between them, and two small pentecostal churches, the House of Blessing (*Casa da Benção*) and God is Love (*Deus é Amor*) each have about fifty baptized congregants. But these numbers are modest in comparison to São Jorge's largest church: by 1987, the Assembly of God could boast about two hundred and seventy full-fledged, card-carrying members, and a house of worship more imposing than the Catholic chapel. Thus, while *comunidade* Catholics represented about 2½ percent of the town's

population over fifteen, the pentecostals represented over 10 percent. All told, São Jorge's pentecostals outnumbered *comunidade* members by about four to one.[60]

More telling than simple arithmetical sums is the fact that the level of participation in the local institutional Catholic Church has declined over the past ten years, while that of the Assembly of God has increased. Every leading and nonleading Catholic I interviewed voiced concern about what they perceived as the pronounced decline in participation of both members and *misseiros* since the early 1980s. The following complaint, from a current leader, is typical: "This Church used to be filled, filled to capacity! Look at how many people come now. There isn't that participation there used to be."

My best information confirmed these reports. As best I could determine, in the late 1970s about twenty leaders coordinated São Jorge's *capela*'s activities, about two hundred and fifty adults engaged in one or more Church activities other than Mass, and another hundred attended Mass and nothing else. That is, over the course of a decade, while the number of leaders of São Jorge's central Catholic congregation has probably doubled, the number of its nonleading participants has fallen off dramatically. In contrast, the Assembly of God church has continued in the 1980s to grow at a rate of about fourteen new converts per year.

The numbers of locals who regularly frequented an *umbanda* center were harder to determine. In my census of 350 households, only a small number of household heads acknowledged being active practitioners or frequenters of *umbanda*. Other evidence, however, pointed to widespread involvement in the religion. Among over one hundred informants, at least half admitted to having consulted with a medium at some time or another, and a fifth were either regular participants or mediums. Although there were only two *umbanda* centers in São Jorge, located in the hilly rural section of town, most locals frequented centers in neighboring towns, some of which had upwards of a dozen centers.

The *comunidade* in São Jorge, like *comunidades* throughout Brazil, is thus on the defensive, struggling to remain an active force in an arena in which it seems to be losing ground on a daily basis. *Comunidade* members observe the ranks of their Church declining and those of other religions growing, and they are troubled by the contrast. They complain about the difficulty of getting people to participate, with a bitterness born of their awareness of how easily others snap them up. "So few

people come to Church any more," a participating Catholic complained. "They're going to other religions," commented another.

The Argument of the Book

Why, in São Jorge, are pentecostalism and *umbanda* expanding, while the *comunidade* is not? What do the people of São Jorge find in other religions that they do not find in the *comunidade?* My answer to this question comes in four parts. First, I argue that the CEB model has reinforced the association between the institutional Catholic church and relatively more stable, literate, and better-off segments of the local working class, while pentecostalism tends to accommodate a broader sociomaterial range of workers. Second, I suggest that married women find it difficult to resolve domestic problems through progressive Catholicism, because the Church nurtures an atmosphere of gossip; they turn instead to pentecostalism and *umbanda,* where they encounter the supportive atmosphere of groups which recruit members on the basis of suffering. Third, I contend that unmarried youths, squeezed between the urban pressures of unemployment and heightened expectations for consumption and sexuality, find that pentecostalism permits a clear break with the past (which the CEB does not) and the forging of alternative, less-pressured social networks. Finally, one reason so few *negros* are to be found in the CEB, and so many in *umbanda* and *crença,* is that the CEB has failed to forge an effective counterdiscourse to racism. *Umbanda* and pentecostalism, in contrast, through the inversions made possible by their peculiar kind of spirit possession, have created compelling—though tensely contested—counterdiscourses to racism.

I then turn to the political paradoxes of both CEB Catholicism and pentecostalism. While the traditional subjects of CEB studies have been those participants who speak and act according to the ideal, I have broadened my focus to include not only those CEB participants who articulate liberationist discourse fluently, but those who do not. I argue that, far from being an ideological monolith, the people in São Jorge's *comunidade,* and elsewhere, have heard, interpreted, and applied the Church's message in various ways; and that, in fact, only a small, identifiable minority have responded to the message in the way the progressive clergy had hoped. Furthermore, I suggest that *comunidade*