# CREATING TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY: THE USE OF NARRATIVE IN THE U.S.-CENTRAL AMERICA PEACE MOVEMENT*

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*As social problems become increasingly global, activists are working across state boundaries and forming transnational social movements. However, there is little information that illuminates how groups are able to overcome ethnic, class, ideological and cultural differences that could be obstacles to collaboration. Through an analysis of the story of Salvadoran martyr Archbishop Romero, I demonstrate how this narrative fostered solidarity between the progressive Central American church and U.S. Christians. By symbolically mirroring the social ontology of Christianity and melodramatically presenting the Salvadoran conflict with moral clarity, Romero's life story facilitated the construction of a transnational collective identity and provided a model of action. The moral credibility of the narrators, and the context in which Romero's story was told, influenced many Christians' decision to prioritize this religious identity over their national allegiance.*

Increasingly, social problems are expanding beyond national borders. A shift in one country's economy can have profound effects on the international market and economic health of other nations. The proliferation of nuclear and biological weapons threatens the security of all countries and global warming affects the entire earth. As problems are becoming more transnational, so too are movements for social change. Activists are stretching beyond state boundaries to work in solidarity with those they identify with in distant countries (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco 1997). Although there is growing academic interest in such "transnational social movements," there are few empirical studies that draw out the theoretical implications of the formation and dynamics of these movements.

Toward this end, I add another case to the literature on transnational movement emergence through an examination of the U.S.-Central America peace movement. This was a movement of U.S. citizens who, throughout the 1980s, proclaimed solidarity with the poor in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala in their efforts to establish new societies based on the principles of social justice. Activists also attempted to constrain American military influence in the region and change U.S. foreign policy toward Central America. The movement was primarily composed of numerous local and regional groups that undertook a wide array of actions including vigils to remember the casualties in Central America's wars,

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campaign work to defeat aid to the Nicaraguan Contras, clothing and medicine shipments to refugees, and picketing the military base that houses the School of the Americas where Latin American military officers are trained (Nepstad 2000; Smith 1996). A few organizations coordinated large-scale national campaigns. Witness for Peace led more than 4,000 North Americans on delegations to the war zones of Nicaragua to gain first-hand experience of the effects of the Contra War. The Sanctuary effort mobilized over 70,000 U.S. citizens to aid Central American refugees by breaking federal immigration laws (Golden and McConnell 1986). The "Pledge of Resistance" committed over 80,000 Americans to civil disobedience if the U.S. engaged in acts of aggression toward Central America (Smith 1996: 60).

These are only a few examples of the thousands of actions undertaken in the U.S.-Central America peace movement. Given the amount of transnational collective action that occurred, a number of questions arise: Why did U.S. citizens organize around El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala but not other countries that were suffering from social injustices and human rights abuses? How were activists able to overcome the racial, class, ethnic, linguistic, national and ideological differences to form transnational links? What contributed to the solidarity that emerged between this group of North and Central Americans? I propose that answers to these questions can be found in the collective identity that progressive Christians in both regions shared.[1] However, these Christians did not initially hold a similar understanding of the values, beliefs, and practices that this identity represents and therefore this collective identity had to be constructed. The aim of this article is to elucidate the factors that facilitated this process. To do so, I draw upon qualitative in-depth interviews that I conducted with thirty-two Central America solidarity activists. A theoretical sample (Glaser and Strauss 1967) was employed to ensure a diverse representation of geographic regions, age range, gender, and levels of participation within the movement.[2]

## TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The globalization of social problems and emergence of numerous cross-national and transnational social movements has generated a few studies that provide a starting point for examining the U.S.-Central America peace movement. For instance, research on cross-national movements—referring to movements that begin in one nation and are imitated or diffused to another—indicates that three factors are important. First, the object of diffusion must be of interest and use to both the originating movement and the adopting group. Second, both movements must possess a number of similar cultural and/or structural characteristics that provide the basis for mutual identification. Finally, both movements must be linked together through relational ties and social networks and/or through non-relational ties such as the media (McAdam and Rucht 1993; Morris 1981; Oberschall 1989; Tarrow 1994). In other words, the more these movements hold shared interests and are similar on a number of social, cultural, or institutional dimensions, the more likely that diffusion will occur.

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[1] As Smith (1996) documents, Christians constituted a significant portion of the U.S.-Central America peace movement. There was also a secular segment of the movement that was primarily influenced by socialist values. While participation of secular groups and individuals was important, the central focus of this article is on the mobilization of "progressive Christians." I use this term to denote an ecumenical group that is predominantly comprised of members of the Historic Peace Churches, mainline Protestant denominations, and progressive Catholics.

[2] Due to FBI harassment and repression, many solidarity organizations were not willing to give out their membership or mailing lists; therefore, I was unable to randomly construct a sample. Instead, I contacted several national Central America organizations and developed a "theoretical sample" (Glaser and Strauss 1967) that was guided by several criteria: an equitable representation of gender, age, levels of participation in the movement, geographic regions, secular as well as religious groups. My sample included seventeen women and fifteen men who ranged in age from thirty-two to seventy-five years old. Participants included movement leaders as well as rank-and-file activists.

Such similarities may not be a prerequisite for the emergence of transnational social movements. These movements emerge semi-independently in various countries, rather than being intentionally transmitted from one to another, but they share common goals and mobilize action against similar targets (Tarrow 1994). In a study of first wave international feminists, Rupp and Taylor (1999) note that there were conflicting interests, goals, and ideas among the various organizations that were part of this transnational feminist movement. There was no consensus on what feminism means, nor was there a single, unitary ideology or political strategy. Yet they argue these divisions were surmountable because feminists embraced a collective identity of "international sisterhood" that united them. Collective identity is typically understood as a "shorthand designation announcing a status—a set of attitudes, commitments, and rules for behavior—that those who assume the identity can be expected to subscribe to" (Friedman and McAdam 1992: 157). These identities are frequently a reflection of ascribed characteristics—such as race, class, gender, or sexual orientation—but they can also reflect beliefs, ideologies, or loyalties. In the case of the international feminist movement, a transnational collective identity was constructed from their ascribed gender status and shared social location. On the broadest level, feminists accentuated the boundaries between men and women to generate this sense of "we-ness." They drew upon the shared experience (or potential) of motherhood and women's vulnerability to sexual violence as another means of fostering feminist identity. This simultaneously allowed for differences in tactics and strategies while unifying feminists around their commonalties as women.

Although a collective identity may enable activists within a transnational movement to transcend their internal differences, we must also study how activists deal with the external pressures and challenges of competing interests and identities. Like all people, activists seldom possess a single identity. And, as Gamson notes, "however much we identify with a movement, we have other subidentities built around other social roles. Inevitably, we may face conflicts between how we as movement members feel called upon to act and the actions called for by these other role identities" (1991: 45). As movements become more international, activists will undoubtedly face potential contradictions between their identities as activists and as citizens of particular nations. Yet we have little knowledge of how activists deal with opposing identities and the factors that lead them to prioritize one over the others.

If Rupp and Taylor are correct that collective identity may be crucial for transnational movements, then we need a greater understanding of how such identities are formed. Moreover, we need to learn why some identities are granted precedence over competing identities and loyalties. By exploring the construction of a collective Christian identity in the U.S.-Central America peace movement, I aim to enhance our understanding of these processes, thereby providing some answers to these questions. I expand upon Rupp and Taylor's work by examining another transnational movement in which participants did not share a common understanding of the beliefs and behavior associated with a particular identity. But, unlike the international feminist movement, Christians in the U.S. and in Central America had no common social location or ascribed traits that could provide the basis for the construction of a collective identity. In fact, they faced race, class, linguistic, and ideological differences and shared only a Christian faith. I posit that one strategy for building a collective identity that could overcome these obstacles was the use of a symbolic narrative.

## NARRATIVES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

There has been a surge of interest in the cultural dimensions of movements, resulting in an abundant literature on framing, identity, ideology, and rhetoric. Only a handful of scholars, however, have examined how movement stories inspire or sustain activism. Specifically, Benford (1993) demonstrates how narratives operated as frames that fostered collective action

in the anti-nuclear movement. Hunt and Benford's (1994) study of the peace and justice movement indicates that stories help align personal and collective identities. Polletta (1998) argues that storytelling can contribute to a movement organization's ability to withstand setbacks and influence mainstream politics. And Fine (1995) has categorized the types of narratives commonly told by activists into "horror stories" that raise awareness of injustices and compel action, "war stories" that relay participants' experiences within the movement, and "happy endings" that boost morale by revealing the unexpected rewards of activism. Somers calls attention to the social epistemology and ontology of narratives:

> Scholars are postulating something much more substantive about narrative: namely, that social life is itself *storied* and that narrative is an *ontological condition of social life.* Their research is showing that stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that "experience" is constituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened. . . by attempting to assemble or in some way integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives (1994: 613-614).

In this context, stories are told to help make sense of the social world, to define who we are, and guide behavior. Narratives are more than an embodiment of movement frames or ideological beliefs; they are an independent cultural resource that can serve unique purposes. Consequently, they should be examined as a distinct phenomenon since "subsuming narrative under the broader category of frame [or other cultural dimensions] obscures differences. . . in how they organize and represent reality, their relation to collective identities, how they engage audiences, and their criteria of intelligibility" (Polletta 1998: 421).

An overview of the traits that distinguish narratives from other cultural dimensions—namely collective action frames—can clarify these differences. The first characteristic is that narratives have a heuristic plot that reveals a moral or grand purpose, which helps to make sense of unusual or disturbing circumstances (Polletta 1998). In contrast, frames are persuasive devices employed by movement leaders to convince an audience that a situation is unjust and that change is both possible and imperative. In other words, narratives make a situation intelligible; frames recruit people to do something about it. Second, narratives employ three points of view: the protagonist, the narrator, and the audience (Polletta 1998). An effective narrative fosters the audience's identification with the protagonist who embodies the values of the movement. Yet unlike framing—which is inherently dialogical and interactive (Snow and Benford 2000)—narratives are unidirectional. The narrator tells the story to an audience who listens or dismisses it, but typically does not challenge the plot. Framing, on the other hand, reflects ideological maneuvering and debate on the part of movement leaders, opponents, and the targeted recruitment pool. Finally, narratives are based in a limited number of plot lines or canon. Although there is no consensus on the number of plots or the extent of their universality, "there is agreement that stories not conforming to a cultural stock of plots typically are either not stories or are unintelligible" (Polletta 1998: 424). To be effective, frames must also be compatible with the values and beliefs of the targeted audience. However, frame resonance is not dependent on canonical familiarity. Multiple frames are possible and leaders use marketing skills to compose frames for the intended population and gather evidence to underscore their validity.

Like frames, however, not all narratives are equal in their mobilizing capabilities. What factors make a story powerful enough to create a collective identity, inspire action, and build international solidarity? Blain (1994) argues that effective movement narratives must "constitute a field of knowledge" for the audience by persuasively presenting information about unjust conditions, key issues, and the central parties in the struggle. Particularly for transnational efforts like the Central America peace movement, Stoll (1999) proposes that stories are more effective at educating a distant audience than the dissemination of facts and statistics. For example, he believes that Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchú's story of life as an indigenous woman under Guatemala's military dictatorship helped draw attention to a conflict that could have otherwise been easily ignored. Her personal account garnered international support because it provided a human face to the victims of repression and economic exploitation that was rampant in Guatemala. Individual life stories can personalize distant or abstract issues by embodying broader injustices, thereby enabling the audience to experience the situation vicariously.

Yet Blain and Stoll both emphasize that these personalized accounts only mobilize action when conveyed melodramatically.[3] Drawing on Kenneth Burke, Blain argues that melodramas are effective because they employ victimage rhetoric that vilifies opponents, generates moral outrage at the violation of the innocent, and calls upon people to join the heroes in redemptive action to defeat the wicked. In other words, they portray a simplified but clear moral struggle between good and evil and invite activists to cast their lot with the oppressed in a redemptive struggle to overcome the villainous powers. Stoll suggests that such moral clarity is essential in building transnational solidarity movements since European and North American audiences will not make an emotional investment in a distant conflict unless there is a despicable enemy who commits egregious offenses against innocent victims:

> Solidarity imagery is a desperate bid for the attention of foreigners who have little at stake but whose governments can have an impact.... If they perceive much ambiguity, such as a contest between equally sordid factions, the only response is a check to a relief agency, if that. What they are most likely to embrace is a well-defined cause with moral credibility.... One of the simplifying functions of solidarity imagery is that it offers a single platform to support.... What happens without the illusion of a single platform is illustrated by Peru and Colombia. In Peru the Shining Path guerrillas made no effort to conceal their terrorism against non-combatants.... In Colombia the guerrillas split into murderous factions, undermining the claim to be a representative political force. As a result, North Americans who care about these countries have not had a single, plausible movement like the Sandinistas or the URNG to support. Instead, they face many-sided conflicts between elected governments, social democratic oppositions, left-wing terrorists, right-wing terrorists, and drug mafia. Even though the death tolls in these countries have approached Central American levels, little has developed in the way of solidarity organizing to change U.S. policy (1999: 235-236).

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[3] I am not using the term "melodrama" in the colloquial sense of an exaggerated or intentionally distorted drama. In this context, it simply refers to a narrative that depicts a situation in morally clear terms and evokes heightened emotions because of the degree of victimization.

Yet not all melodramas mobilize collective action. Benford and Hunt (1992) suggest that such stories only work if the antagonists are easily vilified and the heroes are likable. Moreover, Snow and Benford (1988) propose that if we want to understand the failure or success of movement narratives, the audience's interpretation must be taken into account. This is affected by several factors. First, the story must have "empirical credibility" to be believable. Second, a narrative is always perceived through an interpretive screen that is shaped by personal experience and biographical influences. Some stories may simply be too far removed from the reality and experience of audience members that they cannot identify with the heroes or empathize with the victims. Third, narratives have greater mobilizing potential if they symbolically mirror the cultural heritage of the audience—that is, "ontological narratives" that provide values, beliefs, and a worldview. A story must resonate, as Jasper (1997: 274) puts it, with "a god term or other theme that is widely honored."

## NARRATIVES IN THE U.S.-CENTRAL AMERICA PEACE MOVEMENT

One of the most powerful narratives in the U.S.-Central America peace movement is the story of Oscar Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador. Many of the respondents in my research mentioned that this story strongly influenced their decision to join the movement. For instance, one North American activist described how Romero so transformed and radicalized his own faith that he abandoned his seminary training to join the Salvadoran guerrilla forces. Part of his responsibility was to develop international solidarity by telling El Salvador's story, including the narrative of Archbishop Romero. He reflected:

> Personally, I can't even begin to talk about the effect that Romero had. Not only on Central America, but the whole world.... Romero's words were so powerful, prophetic, revolutionary. The greatest thing about El Salvador is the word got out and built solidarity like it's never been organized before.... I was at a socialist conference in Cuba and people from all over the world were there. They were amazed at the level of solidarity that Central America has been able to gain and it's because we got in from the beginning. We worked very closely with people from other countries and *people told the story*. We didn't rely on the New York Times to tell our stories. It's been person to person, and that's the best thing we've ever done (italics mine).

I contend that Romero's life story effectively contributed to the emergence of transnational solidarity for several reasons. First, it offers an emotionally engaging, personalized account of the injustices committed during El Salvador's civil war, thereby educating the international audience about the situation. Second, it possesses all the traits of a melodrama including a villainous military regime that committed horrible atrocities against morally credible victims, and a likeable hero with whom the audience could identify. Third, this identification was strengthened because Romero's life symbolically reflected and resonated with the ontological narrative of Christianity. This provided the foundation upon which a transnational collective identity between progressive North and Central American Christians could be constructed. Finally, Romero provided a model of action for all who claimed this identity, namely speaking out against injustices in Central America and choosing the side of the poor in their struggle for liberation. To support these assertions, I turn to a closer examination of the "plot" of Romero's life and activists' accounts of how it influenced them.

*Archbishop Oscar Romero*

In 1977, when Romero was appointed archbishop, El Salvador was deeply embroiled in civil war. Tensions had been simmering for centuries as economic and political problems increased due to a shortage of land, dependence on coffee as the main export crop, and white domination. These conditions benefited an oligarchy who amassed wealth and fortune while the vast majority of the population fell further into poverty. A significant incident that preceded the war occurred in 1932 when the army overthrew a recently elected reformist president and replaced him with a military dictator. A small group revolted but were quickly subdued by the army, who took revenge by executing between 10,000 and 30,000 people, the majority of whom had not been involved in the rebellion (Anderson 1971). This incident profoundly shaped the mentality of the military government, particularly during the 1970s-80s, when "some of the oligarchy's paid political statements in newspapers hinted that something like 1932 might be necessary again" (Berryman 1984: 95).

A series of military regimes reigned throughout the next decades, all of which kept the unequal socioeconomic structures intact. Conditions worsened in the 1960s and 1970s and the landless population grew from 11.8 to 40.9 percent of rural families, leaving 90 percent of these households with insufficient income to provide basic nutrition (Peterson 1997: 29). With a military government protecting the interests of the elite, the impoverished masses turned to grassroots organizing as the only available means of social change. As a result, numerous peasant and labor groups were formed in 1970s, primarily under the direction of Catholic activists who had gained their organizing and leadership skills from participation in base Christian communities and other pastoral programs.

Such programs were the result of a renewal movement within the Catholic church, inspired by the Vatican II Council (1962-65) and the Latin American Bishops Conference in Medellín, Colombia in 1968. Pope John XXIII significantly altered the role of the church during Vatican II by proclaiming that all have the right to a decent standard of living, education, and political participation. Moreover, he emphasized that the church is and should be involved in *this world* and should not focus exclusively on other-worldly, spiritual matters. The Medellín documents stated that justice would be obtained through organization and action by the popular sectors of society. Consequently, the Catholic church created a number of projects in which poor people could meet, study the church's social doctrine, discuss their grievances and goals, and plan a course of action to change their circumstances (Peterson 1997; Smith 1991). While these programs instigated tremendous church renewal in the poorest regions, the relationship between Catholic projects and oppositional politics was unsettling for some church leaders. A division grew between the "campesino priests," who worked among the poor and advocated social change, and many within the church hierarchy who felt that the popular church was too closely aligned with particular political interests and parties.

Just as the popular church saw many of its members gaining confidence and becoming active in community organizations, state repression increased. So-called "death squads" were formed in the 1970s. Dressed in civilian clothes, these paramilitary groups would abduct their victims from their homes, cars or work. They would be tortured and executed, and their corpses left in one of the infamous "body dumps" or a symbolic location, such as the steps of a liberation oriented church. The intention was to create such a climate of terror that people would be too frightened to continue organizing. Because of the effectiveness of their projects, the "campesino priests" were specifically targeted. By the late 1970s, one of the most notorious death squads—the White Warriors—began circulating fliers urging people to "Be a patriot! Kill a priest!" (Lernoux 1980).

This was the context in which Romero began his tenure as archbishop. The church was divided, economic conditions—already abysmal—were further exacerbated by the civil

war, and priests were being tortured and killed. Given the tense circumstances, the choice to appoint Romero was strategic. He was considered quite conservative, emphasizing prayer and personal salvation—not social change. One priest described him as "churchy, a lover of rules and clerical discipline, a friend of liturgical laws [who] suffered from nervous tension. . . and showed signs of delicate health" (Erdozaín 1980: 6, 8). The liberation-oriented priests wondered if he would have the courage to denounce the repression against the church. In short, Romero was not expected to make any changes in the institutional church's status quo-preserving position nor did anyone anticipate that his health would withstand the pressures of the position. Nevertheless, he was respected by all as a man of deep honesty and integrity. Thus, the campesino priests were hopeful but skeptical of Romero.

Ultimately, Romero turned out to be much more than the popular church hoped for; he became not merely a supporter of the poor, but the most outspoken "voice of the voiceless." His transformation is often referred to as a "conversion," a key theme in the narrative of Christianity. A Jesuit in El Salvador describes the change in Romero:

> Romero was altogether aware, from the outset, that he had been the candidate of the right. He had known the cajolery of the powerful from the start.... Thus not only were the powers cheated of their hopes for a nice, pliable ecclesiastical puppet, but the new archbishop was actually going to oppose them. In store for him. . . was the wrath of the mighty—the oligarchy, the government, the political parties, the army, the security forces, and later, the majority of his bishop brothers, various Vatican offices, and even the U.S. government. . . . Romero had in his favor a group of priests and nuns, and, especially, the hope of a whole people. . . If Archbishop Romero set out on new paths, at his age [59], in his place at the pinnacle of the institution, and against such odds, then his conversion must have been very real (Sobrino 1990: 8-9).

Most consider the assassination of Father Rutilio Grande as the epiphanal point in the archbishop's conversion. Romero had held Grande in the highest regard and considered him a friend although he disapproved of his pastoral work, which he considered dangerously close to revolutionary ideas. A mere three weeks after Romero's inauguration, Father Grande was murdered on his way to mass. This profoundly affected the archbishop, who claimed that it "gave me the impetus to put into practice the principles of Vatican II and Medellín which call for solidarity with the suffering masses and the poor and encourage priests to live independent of the powers that be" (quoted in Peterson 1997: 61).

The violence against the church escalated and more priests were arrested, expelled, and killed. Roughly three months after Grande was murdered, the White Warriors announced that the remaining Jesuits had thirty days to leave the country or they would be systematically eliminated (Lernoux 1980). Romero was pushed to defend the progressive clergy and condemn government and military repression. As he visited base Christian communities throughout the country and heard stories of torture, disappearances, and murder, he became more emphatic in his denunciations of the violence and his calls for social change. He began to discuss the inherent problems of the economic system. During one interview, Romero bluntly proclaimed that "The situation of injustice is so bad that the faith itself has been perverted; the faith is being used to defend the financial interests of the oligarchy" (quoted in Erdozaín 1980: 74). The archbishop also called upon soldiers to refuse orders. On March 23, 1980, Romero addressed them in a homily that was transmitted throughout the country during his weekly radio broadcast:

> Brothers, you belong to our people. You are killing your own brothers and sisters in the peasants. God's law, which says, 'Thou shalt not kill," should prevail over any order given by a man. No soldier is obliged to obey an order against God' law. No one has to carry out an immoral law. It is time to recover your conscience and obey it rather than orders given in sin.... In the name of God, and in the name of this long-suffering people whose cries rise ever more thunderously to heaven, I beg you, I order you, in the name of God: stop the repression (quoted in Berryman 1984: 150).

Romero had come a long way within three years. No longer was he considered the "safe" person to head the Salvadoran church; in fact, in the eyes of the military regime and its wealthy constituents, he was a serious threat.

As a result of Romero's "option for the poor," he was denounced as a subversive and began receiving death threats. When people suggested that he hire security guards; he refused, stating that he would accept the same risks that the Salvadoran people faced. He was keenly aware that he might be killed but he remained undeterred, knowing that his death would only strengthen the cause of the people. In the last interview he gave, just two weeks before he was murdered, he prophetically reflected:

> I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death but in the resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people.... If they manage to carry out their threats, I shall be offering my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace from God that I do not believe I have earned. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, then may my blood be the seed of liberty, and a sign of the hope that will soon become a reality. May my death ... be for the liberation of my people .... You can tell them, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon them, and I bless those who carry out the killing. But I wish they could realize that they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the church of God—the people—will never die (quoted in Sobrino 1990: 99-100).

On March 24, 1980, while conducting a memorial mass, an assassin shot Romero through the heart. Although his physical life ended, he was indeed resurrected in the Salvadoran struggle. His image and words were frequently recalled, eulogized, incorporated into songs, poems and artwork, and his story told repeatedly, throughout Latin America as well as in the U.S.

*Fostering a Transnational Collective Identity and Solidarity*

Romero's narrative found a receptive audience among progressive U.S. Christians, both Catholics and Protestants alike. Yet why was his story so powerful when countless other Salvadoran martyrs were not able to evoke a response? Why did Anglo, middle class North Americans identify with a Latino born into a poor, third world family? How did this story facilitate a collective identity when U.S. Christians lived thousands of miles away and the vast majority had no first-hand experience of civil war, violent persecution, or martyrdom? There are several reasons why his narrative was effective.

*Personalized Account.* One reason why Romero's story fostered international solidarity is because it provided a personalized account that reflected the broader injustices in El Salvador. Seventy thousand people died in this civil war but to North Americans inundated by almost daily news reports of atrocities throughout the world, this could have

easily become just another sad statistic. Romero put a human face to this conflict and his story educated U.S citizens about the human rights abuses that the Salvadoran military was inflicting on the civilian population. Just as "the concrete experience of Anne Frank conveys the meaning of the Holocaust in an experiential mode that no amount of factual information on the six million Jewish victims of Nazi death camps can convey" (Gamson 1995: 104-105), Romero's story offered an emotionally engaging means of understanding the reality of the Salvadoran civil war.

*Moral Clarity and a Sympathetic Hero.* In addition, the story presented the Salvadoran conflict with moral clarity, avoiding ideological justifications or obfuscation. Romero's life melodramatically depicts a struggle of good against evil, in which morally repugnant villains commit unconscionable crimes against morally respectable victims. The violence that the military inflicted on the church was abominable; the most sacred spheres of life were profaned in horrific ways. Church catechists were kidnapped, priests were tortured, missioners were raped and murdered, and a bishop was shot while celebrating the Eucharist. The fact that many victims were church workers devoted to improving the lives of the poor granted them moral authority while the military was perceived as violently preserving an economic and political system built on exploitation. The moral clarity of this narrative, along with the brutality of the repression against the church, generated indignation and created a "moral shock" (Jasper 1997) that caught the attention of progressive faith communities in the U.S. In fact, Blain argues that a crucial reason that melodramas elaborate on the details of violations is to "amplify the level of moral outrage. . . [because] once aroused, these emotions can then be transformed into a campaign to fight the villains" (1994: 820, 822).

Not only was the Salvadoran military regime easily vilified but Romero was a sympathetic hero with whom the progressive Christian audience could identify. Undoubtedly, part of his appeal was due to the fact that he was very human and made mistakes, including his early misunderstandings of the liberation orientation of the popular church. And much like the audience, he was initially unaware of the injustices and human rights abuses occurring in El Salvador but was willing to listen, learn, and allow God to transform him. He was not spouting extremist ideological rhetoric; he was a man of deep faith and integrity, which called him into relationship with those who suffered from the economic and political conditions in his country. Many U.S. Christians may not have been able to connect with the ideology of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front or with a figure such as Che Guevara. Yet they could identify with Romero because in him "that which is Christian and that which is human is very present" (Sobrino quoted in Dennis, Golden and Wright 2000: 116).

*Ontological Resonance.* Snow and Benford (1988) remind us that melodramas with admirable heroes can still fail to create solidarity or inspire action if they are too far removed from the cultural heritage and life experience of the audience. Somers (1994) concurs, stating that we evaluate the importance of narratives by assessing how well they match our fundamental beliefs and values. Therefore, the more closely a movement story reflects the plot and theme of a mobilizing pool's ontological narrative, the more likely it is to engage potential recruits. Not surprisingly, progressive Christians resonated with the story of Romero because the "plot" of his life parallels the life of Christ. For example, both Jesus and Romero were born into families of modest means who were not politically or socially prominent. Each man devoted his life to spiritual pursuits, giving up family, wealth, and security. Both stood up to the religious authorities of their times. Jesus challenged the hypocrisy of the Pharisees; Romero criticized the church hierarchy for collaborating with and condoning the actions of the Salvadoran army. Each called for radical social transformations. Jesus interacted with Samaritans, who were ostracized by society, told the rich to sell their possessions, and overturned the tables of moneylenders in the market when their exorbitant interest rates oppressed the poor. Romero denounced the economic system that benefited a few while

impoverishing the masses. Such actions created enemies for both men. Each had an impending sense of his death but was willing to sacrifice his life for a greater cause and was able to forgive those who took his life. Although Jesus and Romero were assassinated, both were resurrected in the sense that their undeserving deaths amplified and spread their messages, which are still remembered today. The similarities between the two were so clear that it has been said that, "The secret of Monseñor Romero is simply that he resembled Jesus" (quoted in Dennis et al. 2000: 107).

*Model for action.* The familiar "plot" of Romero's story not only helped progressive North American Christians identify with the story, it also imparted valuable lessons. One moral is told through Romero's "conversion" to the poor. This familiar Christian concept of conversion takes on a new, politicized meaning in Romero's story. Recall that at the time of his appointment, Archbishop Romero was considered a moderate conservative who would keep the church out of the intense political conflict brewing in El Salvador. But as his priests were murdered for their advocacy of the oppressed, he became convinced that the church must take a "preferential option for the poor" and work for their liberation. He stated,

> This is the commitment of being a Christian: to follow Christ in his incarnation. If Christ, the God of majesty, became a lowly human and lived with the poor and even died on a cross like a slave, our Christian faith should also be lived in the same way. The Christian who does not want to live this commitment of solidarity with the poor is not worthy to be called Christian (Romero 1989: 191).

This lesson planted the seeds of solidarity by inviting North American Christians to also begin a process of conversion that reveals the political implications of faith and calls for identification with the poor of Central America. Comments from activists indicate that the lesson was heard:

> The witness of the martyrs—the four North American churchwomen and Romero—was so compelling. They were living out their love and following Jesus in ways that knowingly led them to their death. The church in El Salvador believed that it was to serve the poor and they knew it was deadly to do so, but they carried on. So those of us in the church in this country, seeing that, could not help but learn from them and be deepened in our own faith.

Another lesson of Romero's story is that faith requires action. Fine (1995) argues that narratives can contribute to movement mobilization by fostering identification with key characters, who provide a model of appropriate action. Romero unequivocally denounced the repression and exploitation of the poor and began to demand changes. He was untiring in his efforts to address the root causes of the poverty and violence. He called upon the rich to end the feudal system and implement economic reform, he asked President Carter to stop sending military aid, and he called upon soldiers to refuse to follow orders to torture and kill. Sympathizing with the plight of the poor was not enough; Christians must actively work to change the conditions that create this suffering. One activist echoes this moral:

> The witness of Oscar Romero was very important.... He didn't just say people have the right to bread. He said people have the right to organize, to freely march and communicate with others.... So all of this was washing up on our shores—sort of like the Word coming from Palestine to Rome

> and converting Rome.... So all of that was happening and then Romero was killed in such a brutal, deliberate, transparent way. This reverberated shock waves throughout the faith community in this country.... And the fact is that once that happens, the organizing happens and you have to do something. You have to take the next step.... Actions follow on hearing the intolerable.

A successful movement narrative should also provide motivation to persist even in the face of danger or defeat. Once again, Romero's story provides a model of faithful perseverance. Despite the intention of his assassins—who hoped his murder would deter such outspoken criticism—Romero's example encouraged people to continue the struggle despite the risks. For instance, one activist who worked in El Salvador during the war, observed how Romero unequivocally denounced injustices, even though he knew it could cost him his life. Romero's example and belief in the resurrection gave him the courage to continue in his work. He reflected: "At the end of his life, Romero knows he's going to be killed and yet he doesn't stop saying what he's been saying. Right before he dies, he says to the rich, 'Take off your ring before they come for your hand.' And I thought, if we have his promise [of resurrection], if we really believe it, then why are we afraid to die?" By following Romero's example, which is ultimately following Jesus' example, one serves a higher purpose that transcends even death.

The narrative of Romero fostered a collective identity because it draws upon and resonates with the ontological narrative of Christianity. By emphasizing the essential values and beliefs that Christians share regardless of their race, class, or nationality, the life of Romero helped to accentuate a sense of "we-ness." One activist articulated this sense of a shared identity: "We connected to Central America because of our common Christian faith. There was a theological and spiritual dimension to it. They were our 'lesser brothers and sisters,' if you will, in Matthew 25." Moreover, as progressive Christians in El Salvador and in the U.S. identified with Romero as the protagonist of this story, they jointly opposed the antagonists: the Salvadoran military and the U.S. administration that supported them. Thus Romero became an icon that served a very important unifying function:

> An icon [is] a symbol that resolves painful contradictions by transcending them with a healing image.... For white, middle class audiences, icons such as Rigoberta [Menchú], Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela bridge the gap between privilege and its opposite. They create identity by pointing to a common enemy—the Guatemalan army, segregation, apartheid—against whom privileged and unprivileged can be on the same side. Such images ... are probably necessary to pull together any movement (Stoll 1999: 245-246).

Romero not only embodied the values of Christianity but also united people of faith in redemptive action against a common opponent.

*Competing Identities*

By reflecting the ontological narrative of Christianity, Romero's story reminded progressive American Christians of their beliefs and priorities. This was important because they, like all people, had multiple identities; not only were they Christians, but also U.S. citizens. As they learned about the violence and repression that took the life of Romero and many others, U.S. Christians were forced to face the contradictions between their support for the persecuted church of Central America and the actions of their government, which was

sponsoring the groups responsible for this suffering. The Reagan administration argued that Central American regimes needed U.S. assistance in their battle against Soviet aggression (Nepstad 1997; Smith 1996). Since Marxism was considered a serious threat to religious freedom, many people of faith might have concluded that supporting the Salvadoran military regime was a necessary evil in the greater goal of eradicating the communist menace. The assassination of Romero could, from this perspective, be perceived as a tragic casualty in a just war. Faced with these competing identities, North American Christians had to decide whether they would support their government's position on Central America or place their solidarity with the Christians suffering under these regimes.

Despite the familiarity of the cold war theme, many people of faith prioritized their religious identity over their national allegiance. I propose that a couple factors contributed to this decision: the qualities of the narrators, and the institutional context in which the story was told. Narrators are not neutral; on the contrary, the audience's perception of the narrator can strongly influence the authority and authenticity of the story. The context of storytelling is also important since people's attitudes are profoundly shaped by the institutions they participate in and cherish. Thus, "Stories are differently intelligible, salient, available, and authoritative depending on who tells them, when, for what purpose, and in what institutional context" (Polletta 1998: 425).

*Narrator qualities.* Based on his analysis of Martin Luther King, Jr., a master storyteller, Morris (1984) provides insight into the qualities that make narrators effective. First, King had undeniable charisma that emotionally drew the audience into the story. Second, as a Christian minister and a southerner, black churches regarded him as a trusted insider. This enabled him to shape their religious views in support of civil rights. As Morris notes, "It would surely be difficult for an 'outsider' to tamper with the sacred religious beliefs and practices of a people" (1984: 98). Third, King had credibility because he practiced what he preached. King set an example by going to jail rather than submitting to unjust laws, by boldly and nonviolently confronting racists without hatred. In the Central America peace movement, U.S. communities of faith heard Romero's story from North American priests, nuns, and church workers who had served as missioners in Latin America during the violent period of the 1960s-1980s. Like King, these narrators were trusted insiders. Although not all were charismatic, many missioners were skilled public speakers who had years of experience presenting sermons and homilies. They also possessed moral credibility since they had given up wealth and security to commit their lives to the church, and had no apparent ulterior motives. Moreover, the missioners had "empirical credibility" (Snow and Benford 1988) because they had lived among the poor of Central America and therefore had first-hand accounts of the suffering. In contrast, political leaders had little credibility or public trust, particularly after the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War.

*Institutional context.* The setting in which an audience hears a narrative is also important. An institutional context may foster identification with the key characters by physically and symbolically reminding individuals of the values and beliefs the institution and the protagonist represent. It is not surprising that Romero's story was strengthened by the fact that it was often told in churches and religiously affiliated settings. This underscored the similarities between Romero and Christ since images and cultural artifacts that reflect the narrative of Christianity surrounded the audience. For instance, a crucifix symbolizes the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ, which is echoed in the murder of Romero and his resurrection in the Salvadoran people. Additionally, "people's attitudes are heavily shaped by ... such institutions as schools and churches, whose primary purpose is to interpret social reality and make moral pronouncements regarding the 'right' relationship for people with the world around them" (Morris 1984: 96). Thus, a narrative told in church may be interpreted as having implicit institutional endorsement and therefore representing a morally correct view.

Sitting in a familiar and cherished institution, church members were likely open to a trusted and credible narrator's story and message. Of course, the institutional context can also have tremendous structural value for the dissemination of a narrative and the potential for mass action. The pre-existing networks of churches allowed for rapid transmission of the narrative, bloc recruitment, and the availability of financial and human resources (Morris 1984; Nepstad 1997; Smith 1996).

Yet not all Christians in the United States proclaimed solidarity with Central Americans and joined the movement to change U.S. foreign policy toward the region. In fact, the Christian Right strongly supported the Reagan administration's position. If Romero's story resonated with the ontological narrative of Christianity, why did it not engage all Christians? Although this question merits greater attention than can be devoted in this article, a brief answer lies in the fact that people of the same faith will accentuate different elements of religious teachings and consequently socialize members of their tradition to emphasize certain values and beliefs over others. These socialization influences form a cognitive filter that determines whether we "morally focus" on an issue, ignore it as irrelevant, or even take notice of it (Zerubavel 1997).

In essence, conservative or progressive religious socialization functioned as an "interpretive screen" (Snow and Benford 1988) through which the audience perceives movement stories. Those in the Historic Peace Churches, liberal Protestant denominations, or the progressive tradition in the Catholic Church were socialized to focus on justice, peace, and the plight of the poor and oppressed. For instance, the mainline Protestant commitment to social justice dates back to nineteenth-century efforts to abolish slavery; this tradition continued into the twentieth century with progressive social gospel advocates who preached reforms of urban industrial America according to Christian principles of equality and love. The Historic Peace Churches—the Quakers, Mennonites, and Church of the Brethren—have a 500 year old theological tradition of peace and justice. Catholic social ethics can be traced to the 1891 publication of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, "The Condition of the Working Classes." Succeeding encyclicals have built upon this foundational work, taking more progressive stands on the right of laborers to fair wages, the need for an equitable distribution of wealth, an end to economic exploitation, and the priority of communal well being over the right to private property (Smith 1996). In contrast, evangelicals, fundamentalists and other conservative denominations have traditionally focused on personal piety, salvation, and evangelism. Therefore, the central emphases of Romero's story may have been too far removed from the moral focus of conservative Christians.

For those missioners who were appealing to the progressive tradition of Christianity, they drew upon these church teachings to accentuate the Christian nature of this movement, thereby diminishing the accusations that it was leftist propaganda. Romero himself was clear to articulate the needs of the Central American poor in a manner that would connect with the interpretive screen or moral focus of the audience (as quoted in Dennis et al. 200: 39):

> The church is concerned about the rights of people... and life that is at risk.... The church is concerned about those who cannot speak, those who suffer, those who are tortured, those who are silenced. This is not getting involved in politics. But when politics begins to "touch the altar," the church has the right to speak. Let this be clear: when the church preaches social justice, equality, and the dignity of those who suffer and are assaulted, this is not subversion; this is not Marxism. This is the authentic teaching of the church.

## CONCLUSION

As globalization continues, activists building transnational ties will face increasing challenges posed by race, class, cultural and ideological differences. Like Rupp and Taylor (1999), my research confirms that a collective identity can contribute to a sense of solidarity that enables movement participants to transcend these barriers. Unlike the international feminist movement, however, progressive Christians in North and Central America did not share a common social location or ascribed traits. Therefore, the narrative of Archbishop Romero helped accentuate their shared religious beliefs and values and identify a common enemy that both groups of Christians could oppose. Romero humanized a distant conflict, reminded Christians of their moral obligations, and provided a model of action. Yet Romero could not have become such an inspiring icon if he did not resemble Christ, whose narrative formed the ontological foundation of the Christian audience's core values and beliefs. Furthermore, if the narrators had not been credible, Romero's story would have lost its validity.

Symbolic narratives serve a variety of functions within social movements yet they remain curiously neglected. We ought to pay greater attention to narratives as an independent cultural resource rather than merely an expression of collective action frames or ideology. Future research could expand our knowledge of how people prioritize competing identities and why some narratives are effective in mobilizing action while others fail to even arouse interest in their targeted audience. Finally, problems are likely to arise when the key characters are transformed into sacrosanct icons and melodramatic stories oversimplify a conflict, offering an interpretation that does not accurately represent the moral complexity of the situation. The advantages as well as the drawbacks of using symbolic narratives in social movements deserve greater academic attention.

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