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Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of Society for the Scientific Study of Religion
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1387400
Accessed: 13/07/2012 04:13

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The Church and Political Opposition: Comparative Perspectives on Mobilization Against Authoritarian Regimes

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The Catholic Church has recently taken a greater role in encouraging and aiding political opposition to authoritarian regimes. The ability of the church to do this derives in part from its dominant cultural presence in these societies. It also derives from the unique character of authoritarian states. The need for legitimacy is common to these regimes. The quest often takes the form of appealing to religious legitimation. In return, the church is accorded privileges enjoyed by no other institution outside the state. This raises a paradoxical situation for the church: the less legitimate a regime, the more it needs the church. However, it is not in the church’s interest to identify too closely with an unpopular and often repressive regime. There is also a second side to the paradox: the less legitimate the regime, the more the church may be disposed to oppose it for moral and evangelical reasons. If the church uses its freedoms in support of opposition movements, it may cultivate popular support, but it risks repression of its normal religious activities and loss of its freedoms, thereby jeopardizing its spiritual mission. This paper examines how this paradox is manifested in Latin America, Spain and Poland. Based on our observations, we offer several propositions concerning the circumstances, nature and intensity of church participation in anti-regime activity. Church resources, its organization and the level of social and political development of the country in question are the variables which are most strongly suggested as determining factors of the church’s response.

INTRODUCTION

Religion has often been thought of by social scientists and revolutionaries alike as a conservative influence. For centuries, religious institutions maintained close alliances with the centers of political power and consciously bestowed their legitimating blessing. With the rise of secular nation states in the West, churches became less overtly political, but nevertheless supported the political order indirectly by remaining aloof from political and class conflict. Recent events, however, indicate a more active role for organized religions in movements for social and political change. From the largely denunciatory role of the Catholic Church in the recent Filipino and Korean oppositions, to the rise of fundamentalist Islamic states, and the active presence of Catholic priests in the Sandinista revolution,

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there is wide variation in the role religion plays in oppositional processes. In this paper we will limit our focus to one frequently occurring situation: the Catholic Church as a factor in the development of opposition to authoritarian regimes.

The sources for much of the contemporary Catholic participation in political life can be traced to the Second Vatican Council in 1962-63. At this time, the church reconsidered its traditional pastoral role and turned its attention to social concerns. Where poverty, disparities in wealth, and abrogation of political and human rights existed, programs for social justice took root quickly. Soon the church became involved in more openly political activities. It is here that the association between authoritarian regimes and an oppositional church first appears. In this paper we will examine how the role of the church varies according to levels of institutional development, policies of the regime, geo-political considerations, and the structure of the national church. We will offer seven testable propositions about the empirical association between the church and contemporary opposition movements.

THE CHURCH AND AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

We suggest that there are three compelling reasons for this association. First, in societies where the church is oppositionally active, it remains an important social force in the lives of much of the population. For the regime's perspective, it is easier to placate the church than to confront it, especially since the church ostensibly has spiritual, not political, goals. Hypothetically, compliance should be purchased at little political cost.

Second, many authoritarian regimes come to power in crisis situations as diverse coalitions through the exercise of military force (Linz, 1976). The authoritarian label may also be applied to some regimes that have evolved from more totalitarian forms, such as some of the more "liberal" Eastern Bloc countries. In either case, authoritarian regimes are confronted with problems of legitimacy. Clerical complicity, if not outright support, can wrap the regime in the church's sacred cloak. Frequently, these regimes allow the church to exercise freedoms denied other institutions in the hope that their quest for legitimacy might benefit from the church's moral and spiritual aura.

Third, authoritarian ideologies, with the exception of Marxism-Leninism, often have a synthetic and ad hoc quality about them. This is because of the tumultuous circumstances in which these regimes sometimes come to power, and because of pushes and pulls from different quarters of the ruling coalition. Attributing transcendent and messianic qualities to the official "movement" can give coherence to an otherwise ragtag collection of ideas and interests. Here, the symbols and authority of the church are indispensable. Association with the church becomes an ideological necessity, as in the case of Pinochet's Chile (Moulain, 1981) or Franco's Spain. It would be baldly hypocritical for the regime to draw on these "sacred resources" while severely restricting the freedoms of the church. Thus, it is not only on account of political calculation, but also a result of the regime's need for ideological consistency, that we frequently find the church being the only place for public, associative life outside of police scrutiny.

With respect to the relation between the church and authoritarian regimes, there exist two fundamental paradoxes. First, the greater the regime's need for the church — that is, the more profound its crisis of legitimacy — the more the church can take advantage
of its unique freedoms to oppose the regime. While regime illegitimacy is not a sufficient condition for an oppositional church, it does increase the doctrinal and popular pressure for the church to exercise its unique privileges in favor of social and political change. Thus, the church's oppositional potential seems to be inversely linked with the regime's legitimacy. Second, the more active the church is in oppositional activities, the more its freedoms are threatened — with important consequences for its spiritual mission. The church must walk a tightrope in these situations. The closer it draws to the regime, the greater its freedoms. However, too close an association alienates people from the church, with deleterious effects on its spiritual mission. The ways in which these two paradoxes are played out in different structural situations by different church organizations comprise the substance of our article. We will discuss first the role the church can play as a result of the regime's need for legitimacy. Then we will discuss how aspects of church organization enable partial resolution of its contradictory involvement in oppositional activities.

Our analysis will have three main foci. The first is the Polish example. Here the church has traditionally been a crucible of nationalist and oppositional symbolism. With the rise of Solidarity and its subsequent repression, the church played a pivotal and highly visible role in the opposition. Second, we will look at the church in Spain under the Franco regime. We will pay especially close attention to the development of the opposition in Catalonia, an ethnic minority region in the Northeast of the peninsula. Here the church was crucial in the nationalist and working-class wings of the anti-Francoist movement. Local and decentralized church organizations were the primary players in the drama while the Spanish national hierarchy remained closely linked with the Franco regime. Finally, we will make reference to the Catholic church throughout Central and South America. There will be particular reference to the role of the church in Nicaragua. Here, the church indirectly helped mobilize large sectors of rural and urban poor through decentralized evangelical activities. While the Nicaraguan hierarchy remained reserved and hesitant, small, local religious groups drew on organizational skills and networks to aid the Sandinista insurrection.

THE MOBILIZATION OF CHURCH RESOURCES

Although much has been written about the church's oppositional role (usually case studies, such as Dodson, 1980; Richard & Melendez, 1982; Opazo Bernales, 1983; and Prendes, 1983), this literature tends to deemphasize theoretical questions about the mobilization process. Instead, it concentrates on the church's "denunciatory" or "prophetic" role. Here, moral criticism, rather than material and organizational support, is the primary focus. On the other hand, when we turn to the extensive literature in political and social movements, there is little said about the role of the church in the opposition process. Structural approaches to social revolutions (Skocpol, 1979) and resource mobilization theory of social movements (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Tilly, 1978; also see Jenkins, 1983 for an overview) treat ideological influences, including those of the type that would emanate from the church, as secondary. It is argued that ideologies, as reflections of group interests, are a constant in political life and not as important as factors relating to the relative power between contending groups.

In this paper we will approach the role of the church in relation to its structural position
in authoritarian regimes and the resources it can bring to bear in the mobilization process. The classical explanation of social and political movements is that they are attempts by aggrieved populations to change their situations. The fundamental voluntarism in this view has been recently challenged because it says nothing about structural conditions (Skocpol, 1979: 15-18) and costs of mobilization (Jenkins, 1983: 532). It is argued that economically rational criteria, the weighing of costs in relation to the likelihood of success, better predicts mobilization; and that improvements in the resources of groups are closely linked to increased movement activity (see Olson, 1968, for the classical statement of this position). These resources include material ones such as finances, buildings and equipment; and non-material ones such as expertise, coalitions, pre-existing group structures and social networks, access to power centers, and organizational strategy. Insofar as the church is concerned, the visibility of its denunciatory function has tended to overshadow the role that its considerable resources can play. While we would disagree that "voluntaristic" factors are irrelevant to mobilization processes, and especially so where the church is involved, this paper will stay within the parameters of the resource mobilization perspective to address what we see as a significant gap in the literature.

THE RESOURCES OF THE CHURCH

Our first propositions concern the resources that become available to the church by virtue of the regime's need for legitimacy. We are accustomed to think of resources as tangible and quantifiable factors. They have an additive quality when applied in pluralistic political contention or in outright insurrection. Mobilization proceeds better and more effectively the more one has, up to certain limits unique to each resource, and determined in relation to the other resources. People, money, buildings and equipment are most clearly counted. On the other hand, channels of communication between militants, networks of trust and friendship, access to those with power, lines of supply, organizational experience, information and strategy are frequently classified as resources despite their less tangible nature. We will deal first with the material resources and then move to the less tangible ones such as organizational networks and groups.

In all cases their availability derive from the authoritarian regime's quest for legitimacy and from the unique moral legitimacy the church is able to bestow. It is a blessing all the more powerful because historical and cultural circumstances (particularly as they relate to colonial and internal-colonial domination) have maintained the church as an important social institution in these societies. In the propositions to follow, we take for granted the central place of the church. We take for granted that the regime must therefore deal with the church, for both pragmatic and ideological reasons, and that the stronger its need for legitimacy, the stronger its need for a friendly and compliant church.

Proposition 1. The material resources of the church are enhanced in the mobilization process because of their protected status. As the regime's need for legitimacy increases, so too does the potential role church resources may play in the opposition process.

Material resources of the more quantifiable kind are frequently channeled through international agencies. There is, for example, international support for Brazilian Christian
base communities (Bruneau, 1979: 231), or the Chilean Ecumenical Committee for Cooperation for World Peace (with a budget over $2 million). But for our purposes, it is neither the source nor the absolute quantity that are important. In terms of the overall opposition, these resources amount to but a minor proportion of the total. Rather, they gain their significance because they are the church’s, and thereby are accorded special protection and freedom of use.

The most apparent use of church resources is when buildings, equipment, and funds are directly applied to oppositional efforts. In Catalonia, parish churches in working-class districts were used in organizing illegal unions in the late 1960s. The sanctity of the church, codified in Franco’s 1953 Vatican Concordat, assured that the meeting would not be interrupted by the police. That church buildings and equipment were able to be used in this way facilitated early stages of mobilization. As the opposition coalesced, students, nationalists and intellectuals took advantage of the safe haven provided by monasteries and churches. In a similar vein, the occupation of a church, such as the 1975 student protest in San Salvador provides a relatively safe method of voicing dissent under otherwise repressive conditions. In Nicaragua, many churches played a direct role in the uprising: stockpiling food and medicine, giving first aid courses, and some directly giving aid to the Sandinistas (Dodson & Montgomery, 1982: 174).

In Poland, the use of church buildings for political demonstrations has been rare, but they have been used for less overt oppositional activities. Church-owned buildings have been used for lectures and debates and scientific conferences organized outside the official system of government sponsorship. After 1981, artists who refused to join government-sponsored unions or participate in official exhibitions began to rely on church-sponsored art galleries and on exhibitions in church-owned buildings. Churches have also been used for protest hunger strikes, the first and perhaps best known taking place at the St. Martin Church in Warsaw. It was organized to protest imprisonment of several members of the Committee for Workers’ Defense (KOR). This strike has been characterized by one observer as a major episode in KOR’s history, an “...accumulation of the moral energy of the committee...” that strengthened the ties among its members (Lipski, 1983: 141-44). Moreover, this strike also popularized both the committee and its cause. Precisely because it took place in a church building, the strike also removed the suspicion that those activities were purely intellectual games.

These observations do not imply that the church became the central focus of the opposition, either in Poland or elsewhere. Rather, the church can be a catalyst in the process of mobilization. It often avoids direct participation, but nevertheless protects the opposition by providing an organizational and institutional framework which is independent of all-encompassing state control.

The above proposition, as well as the three to follow, all link the regime’s need for legitimacy with the oppositional potential of the church. The usefulness of church resources hinges on this relationship. At this point in our thinking, the propositions reflect a logic suggested by comparison of several cases. It may be true that the relationship is not linear, but this is an empirical question to be tested at later stages in our research. We therefore apply the same reasoning to the role of church-sponsored media in the opposition process.

Proposition 2. Access to media is a powerful resource available to the church.

As the regime’s need for legitimacy increases, so too does the oppositional potential of the church’s media.
Access to media and freedom from censorship for its publications are resources which the church can utilize with great impact. In authoritarian regimes, church media are typically the only ones which are not controlled by the state. In El Salvador, the church-owned radio station YSAX was in the hands of progressive priests. The homilies of Archbishop Romero reached an estimated 75% of the rural and 50% of the urban population (Prendes, 1983).

It is more typical, however, that church access to media is limited to the printed word. In Catalonia, for example, the church publication Serra d'Or was the first to appear in the Catalan language after the Civil War, and its emphasis on Catalan culture gave it a clear nationalist flavor. In Latin America, church newspapers and journals provide some of the best economic and social criticism available there (Lernoux, 1980: 201). In El Salvador, the journal Justicia y Paz, associated with the Catholic group of the same name, and elsewhere publications of Catholic human rights groups, have brought international attention to state-sponsored torture, disappearances, and assassinations. In Poland, Catholic journals have been publishing essays and articles by intellectuals who have either been denied access to government-sponsored journals or, as has been the case recently, have been unwilling to publish in them. Journals such as the weekly Tygodnik Powszechny or the monthly magazines Wiez and Znak have been open not only to Catholic writers, but also to non-believing critics of the regime. This is all in addition to the underground press which functions outside government control. An important journal belonging to this category is Spotkania which is published by Catholic students and intellectuals, and which has recently opened its own independent publishing house (Szafar, 1979: 54-55).

CHURCH ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In authoritarian regimes, it is common that church organizations are the only places outside of government or party control where people may gather legally. This gives the church a potentially central role in early stages of mobilization. The importance of pre-existing organizational structures and group networks is one of the more influential findings of research inspired by resource mobilization theory. For example, Obershall (1973) criticized mass society theory by arguing that mobilization is more likely precisely where people are immersed in a viable organizational life. More recently, McAdam (1982) demonstrated the importance of previous organizational affiliation and of interpersonal networks in the recruitment of black activists in the 1960s. These observations are reflected in our next proposition.

Proposition 3. As the regime’s need for legitimacy increases, it is more likely that church organizations play a catalyzing and/or facilitating role in the development of opposition movements.

While Obershall was one of the first social movement theorists to recognize the importance of pre-existing organizational structures in mobilization, he also pointed out that the nature of these structures will vary according to types of society, with distinct consequences for mobilization processes (1973: 118-45). He distinguished between societies that are vertically integrated or segmented, meaning the degree to which strata interact or are isolated; and between societies communally organized (paralleling Gemeinschaft),
those associationally organized (Gesellschaft), and those weakly organized. For our purposes, these dimensions are important in that they affect the primary mobilization task facing the opposition.

To counter state power, an opposition movement must be very broadly based. Previously unorganized populations must be drawn into participation. Also, previously segmented groups must develop ways to bridge their differences. These are two different tasks appropriate to different levels of social differentiation. Our examples have included a broad sample of societies, ranging from industrialized Catalonia to underdeveloped ones with dominant groups clinging to semi-feudal patterns, such as El Salvador, pre-revolutionary Nicaragua, or regions of Brazil. With respect to the role of the church, we suggest that different types of organizations are more appropriate to different levels of social development. We must therefore distinguish between the primary mobilizing task encountered in different societies and then show the role the church is able to play in it. Our next two propositions do just that.

The Bridging Function of Catholic Organizations

Proposition 4. In more economically developed and socially differentiated societies, the role of progressive Catholic organizations in the mobilization process lies primarily in their broadening and bridging effects. They provide 1) common ground for discussion between working-class opposition and the predominately middle-class members of these groups; and 2) an ideological and symbolic bridge between divergent class interests.

The category of progressive Catholic organizations encompasses some of the most visible and active church groups in the mobilization process. We will discuss here three types: human rights organizations, left-Catholic groups, and Catholic intellectual circles.\(^1\) We take them together because, within a given country, there is often extensive contact (if not outright overlap in membership) and coincidence of issues and platforms. They are also grouped together because of similarity of function in the mobilization process. They are "bridging organizations" that provide opportunities for contact between different classes, ethnic groups and interest groups. The effect is to broaden the opposition by creating common understandings and shared symbolism which often become the

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1. In addition to these, Catholic youth and student organizations are often important in the mobilization process. They tend to function as training grounds for oppositional leaders because other youth organizations outside of regime control often do not exist. Their members are highly available for mobilization and typically apply a great deal of energy to their activities. In Catalonia, a section of the Marian Congregations called the Academy of the Catalan Language was comprised of a small group of nationalist youth. Many of their activities were illegal, such as painting nationalist slogans, distributing pamphlets or hanging Catalan flags. The Boy Scouts in Catalonia was another youth organization protected by the church. It socialized young Catalans in nationalist, and anti-Francoist values (Johnston, 1985). Youth groups in Nicaragua’s poor urban neighborhoods were organized by leftist priests, as were Catholic student organizations. These groups were all training grounds for future activists in more militant organizations. In Poland, several members of the early opposition groups can trace their intellectual roots to church-based “Academic Ministries.” These were attached to all academic institutions, but especially in Gdansk and Lublin they fomented a milieu of activism. Another case is offered by the Oases movement. In the mid-seventies, a network of associated groups began to spread through all of Poland. Some took to building illegal chapels and churches in rural Poland (Cvic, 1983: 103; Lipski, 1983: 160), causing open conflict with authorities.
foundations of coalitions. In economically developed and relatively differentiated societies, this is a basic and necessary process if the opposition is to become mobilized on a mass basis. Therefore, we would expect these groups to be relatively more important in countries where industrialization and social mobilization have progressed further, such as in Catalonia, Poland, Argentina and Chile. In less developed areas, such as Nicaragua, El Salvador and in the underdeveloped regions of Brazil, alternative organizational forms predominated, as we shall shortly discuss.

Human rights groups are especially common in Latin American authoritarian regimes. In Chile, for example, an ecumenical human rights group called the Committee for Cooperation for Peace employed 300 full-time lawyers and had regional offices (Smith, 1979: 159). Justice and Peace groups existed in both Brazil and Bolivia, where they were harassed by the police. Membership typically includes priests, nuns, and largely middle-class laity, with few working-class or rural participants. While these groups can sometimes bring international pressure to bear to stop human rights abuses, an unintended consequence of their presence is to facilitate coalition formation. In authoritarian regimes, all groups outside the direct control of the state are potential targets of police repression. Because the issue of human rights is not an exclusively religious issue but a concern shared by all sectors of the opposition, human rights groups provide opportunities to establish working relationships among different opposition groups prior to mass mobilization.

In Catalonia, a group called the Solidarity Commission brought together members of the church and several illegal parties, including the Communists. The group was formed as a vehicle to channel aid to families of imprisoned activists, or to the prisoners themselves. Because working-class activists and political militants were often the beneficiaries, the stature of the church was enhanced among groups which might at first have been hesitant in accepting its oppositional credentials. It also brought together parties which previously had not had contact with each other.

In Poland, there were strong ties between the episcopate and a human rights group called KOR (Committee for Workers’ Defense). (See Figa, 1982, for a discussion of KOR.) Some KOR members were also members of lay committees affiliated with the episcopate, such as the Anti-Alcohol Committee. Further, KOR and other human rights groups, such as ROPCiO, helped overcome the traditional gap between the intelligentsia and other social strata by successfully enlisting workers and peasants into their ranks. These groups were also in continuous touch with worker and peasant organizations and the church hierarchy. All of this broadened the base of the opposition by breaking traditional social barriers. By bridging different sectors of the opposition, a basic division between the Polish nation and its rulers was created as a prelude to the Solidarity movement.

Left Catholic organizations are also common in Latin America due to the influence there of liberation theology. These groups are often composed of priests, who through daily contact with the working-class and urban poor, have been politically radicalized. One of the earliest such groups was Priests for the Third World in Argentina. In many respects similar to French worker-priests of the late forties, this group grew out of an attempt by the national hierarchy to evangelize in the working-class neighborhoods (Dodson, 1980: 395). Similar groups had existed in Chile, and in a less organized form, in Catalonia. Other leftist groups were not directly active with the working class, but by virtue of their leftist orientation, did provide an ideological bridge between workers
and their largely middle-class participants. Christians for Socialism functioned in this way (Smith, 1982: 118). It was present in Catalonia during the later stages of mobilization, where it provided a forum for contact between the middle class and the working class.

In Poland, there is a small left-wing Catholic intelligentsia which has its roots in the period prior to World War II. At that time, it was distinctly uncomfortable with the conservatism and nationalism of the church in Poland. The most influential circles were associated with the School for the Blind in Laski, with Fr. Kornilowicz (to whom Cardinal Wyszynski referred as his mentor), and with the Catholic University of Lublin (see Cywinski, 1982). From those circles came leading Polish Catholic writers, journalists and editors of Catholic journals outside the regime-sponsored PAX consortium. Many of these same individuals formed Znak, and eventually succeeded in retrieving the Catholic journal, Tygodnik Powszechny, which was appropriated by PAX in 1953. Znak was active in the 1960s and 1970s in social and political protest. Its activities served as a prototype for the role intellectuals were to play in Solidarity, in effect broadening a working class movement to include middle-class service workers and professionals. Chodak describes the "bridging function" of the intellectual clubs in this way:

The role of Catholic Clubs in unifying the opposition forces in Poland was spectacular. These legally independent Catholic organizations provided shop-windows for ideas and ideals of non-Catholics, Left-wing socialists, humanists, and others as well as the church (1981: 195).

The Mobilizing Function in Less Differentiated Societies

While we should not dismiss the possibility that progressive Catholic groups can perform a similar function in less developed societies, our position is that they are not as important. The stratification of underdeveloped societies typically follows the following pattern: a small and powerful landed class closely aligned with the regime at the top; succeeded by a somewhat larger, urban middle class that may be politically divided. At the bottom is a large and miserably poor rural peasantry and urban underclass. While bridges and links between the middle class and lower classes are important, a more primary task for mobilization is to bring into participation the largely unorganized lower sectors. To this end, the church, especially in Latin America, has propogated a form of grassroots evangelical organization. Although these organizations, called Christian base communities, or CEBs in their Spanish acronym, are primarily religious in nature, they have several positive effects on mobilization.

Proposition 5. Christian base communities (CEBs) are an organizational form particularly adapted to societies with relatively low social differentiation. They facilitate the development of anti-regime movements by making previously

2. Leftist credentials in Poland do not necessarily connote opposition to the regime. Indeed, the terms left and right do not adequately reflect the nature of the political spectrum in contemporary Poland. Some priests have been singled out by the regime and decorated as "patriots" for their support of party policies. Many of these "priest patriots" were affiliated with a group of right-wing intelligentsia known as the PAX. It was organized and led for a long time by Boleslaw Piaseci who was a leader of proto-fascist Falanga organization before World War II. PAX was supported by Moscow as an expression of its "salami strategy" (cutting off sectors of the opposition and eliminating them) applied to the church (Kaminska, 1979: 216). Moscow also organized another group of "progressive Catholics," independent of PAX for the purpose of gradually infiltrating the church.
unparticipating groups available for recruitment, through leadership development, and by bridging the developing sectors of the opposition.

CEBs were established as a response by the national hierarchies to implement Vatican II’s concern for the underprivileged. In Latin America, there had previously existed little in the way of voluntary church groups relevant to the lives of the rural and urban poor. The traditional secondary organizations of the church, such as Legions of Mary or Little Courses of Christianity (Levine, 1981: 235), were moribund or nonexistent. There was also a shortage of priests to minister to these populations. In response, several national episcopates authorized the training of laity.

CEB leaders have a great deal of freedom and autonomy in determining the activities and focus of their groups. Generally, there are 20-30 participants who meet regularly to discuss spiritual matters and read the Bible. Their religious basis therefore is fundamental, and any analysis must recognize that this is a source of group solidarity. But these groups also can become forums for expression of daily concerns and vehicles for social action. Indeed, when groups turn their attention to social issues, their programs are typically progressive. This is in part due to the extreme administrative distance from the ecclesiastical hierarchy that these groups enjoy (see Proposition 7).

The pervasiveness of Catholicism in Latin American culture and the class-based concerns of the rural and urban poor led to the rapid diffusion of this new organizational form. They exist throughout Latin America: in Paraguay; in Chile (appearing after the coup); in Brazil, where they number about 50,000 and are politically very active; and in El Salvador, where they are widely repressed. In Nicaragua they played an important role in the revolution. It has been observed that FSLN militants were recruited from the CEBs, and that the CEBs were used as “transmission belts” between the Sandinista cadre and the masses (Opazo Bernales, 1983: 204).

While the religious basis of these groups should not be underestimated, what is important for our purposes is how these groups also provide contexts for social criticism where other avenues are closed. Nicaraguan CEBs were frequently begun by young men called Delegates of the Word who were trained to lead Bible study groups (Dodson & Montgomery, 1982: 170). Their leadership abilities and stature in communities made them likely candidates for repression, especially as communities organized for social action. Many of these young men joined the FSLN as they became targets of state terror. The rising opposition to Somoza in Nicaragua eclipsed religious concerns in some groups in favor of social issues, often causing conflict between them and more religiously-oriented ones (Dodson & Montgomery, 1982: 164). As the repression in Nicaragua increased, these politicized CEBs became more clandestine and naturally drew closer to other illegal opposition groups. Thus, in Nicaragua, CEBs functioned as schools for oppositional militants. Another important function was the creation of a network of intense interpersonal relations which facilitated recruitment and provided an interlocking web of trusted compatriots necessary for the demands of clandestine life.

Like the other church organizations and groups we have discussed, CEBs are not inherently oppositional. It is because their activities take place outside the scrutiny of the state that they tend toward radicalization. This occurs on three accounts. First, as their initial and apparently non-threatening activities become known to the state, the freedom they had enjoyed is curtailed, which often pushes some members toward more
political activities. Second, as the existent opposition recognizes the organizational potential of the CEBs, they may be drawn, perhaps unwillingly, into non-religious and overtly political activities. Finally, as a prelude to our last two propositions, the absence of close ecclesiastical control encourages an oppositional disposition.

CHURCH STRUCTURE AND OPPOSITION

To analyze the full impact of the church in the mobilization process, it is necessary to distinguish between two organizational levels. On the one hand, there is the episcopate, the upper level of administrative and theological authority in a geographical region. This is contrasted, on the other hand, with lower level church organization such as individual parishes, apostolic and devotional groups, special programs, different monastic orders, and base communities.

While the most commonly recognized form of church opposition is criticism of the regime from the ecclesiastical hierarchy (one is reminded of the condemnations by Archbishops Romero of El Salvador; Wyszyński of Poland; Cardinal Sin of the Philippines, and others; and the significance attributed their statements by the media), it is our view that these denunciations are secondary in the overall development of the opposition. Our analysis suggests that more important than words are deeds, a truism fully consistent with the resource mobilization perspective. Based on the fact that in none of the cases we have reviewed has the Catholic church hierarchy fully committed its resources to topple a regime, we offer the following proposition.

Proposition 6. Regarding the application of church resources, the ecclesiastical hierarchy tends to exert a moderating influence on church involvement in opposition activities.

Hypothetically, the relation between the official church and the regime can range from total resistance to total support; but in fact, cases tend to cluster around a cautious and moderate center. At one extreme lies post-Civil War Spain. The active support for the Franco regime by the Spanish hierarchy was assured by the 1953 Concordat with the Vatican. It specified the Catholicism of the Spanish state and the relationship between the church and state. An example lying close to the opposite extreme is El Salvador under Archbishop Romero. But even here, strongly conservative forces had a powerful voice with the Salvadorean hierarchy. Romero’s assassination in March 1980 is perhaps the most poignant example of the consequences that the church may face should it choose to play politics to the fullest.

A more likely situation is represented by the Polish case. Here, the moderating influence of the episcopate characterizes its entire activity after World War II. In 1950, an agreement with the new Communist government was reached in which the episcopate committed itself to support of the government’s economic policies, including the collectivization of agriculture (providing it was voluntary). The agreement stated that, “... the church, in accordance with its principles, condemning all anti-state activity, will

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3. Ironically, Romero was initially appointed as a conservative candidate. It was only during his tenure that he became radicalized, and began his condemnations of the armed forces.
in particular oppose the misuse of religious feelings for antistate purposes” (Michnik, 1977: 41). In exchange for these concessions, the church was assured that religious education and practice would continue in schools, and that the remaining Catholic schools would be protected. The agreement also guaranteed pastoral care in the army, in hospitals, and in prisons, the rights of the Catholic University of Lublin, and the rights of Catholic publishing houses, seminaries and monasteries.

During the mobilization of Solidarity, the church was also a moderating influence. Cardinal Wyszyński’s appeals for calm were disseminated by the government media, even if it meant editing them out of their context. For example, the Primate’s sermon on August 26, 1980 called for the government and the workers to work together to improve a grave political and economic situation (Szajkowski, 1984: 95-97). The government’s use of the episcopate in time of crisis suggests both the authority of the church and its moderating role.

In both Catalonia and Nicaragua, the conservative role of the church hierarchy is also apparent. The Archbishop of Barcelona was approved by the regime and moderated anti-regime sentiments among Catalan priests and lay groups. In Nicaragua, despite eleventh hour support, the church could not have helped but reflect on events in Cuba where revolutionary organizations supplanted the church. The Nicaraguan church has recently been a vocal critic of what they see as a similar expropriation of traditional church functions, especially education. Elsewhere in Latin America, where liberation theology represents the most progressive expression of church involvement in worldly affairs, the Catholic hierarchy has not fully committed its resources against authoritarianism.

The above proposition derives from two fundamental facts. First, the church is charged with a mission which, at its most basic level, is not political but spiritual. The state can and does enter churches and monasteries, arrest the religious, and torture and assassinate priests. Authoritarian regimes can make the costs of religious practice excessively high. In Poland during the Stalinist period, and in Catalonia immediately after the Civil War, church activities were severely restricted, threatening the spiritual mission of the church in ways that for most prelates would be unacceptable. Even strident anti-communism by the most reactionary bishops must in part be understood in these terms. Second, the privileged position which the church enjoys under authoritarian regimes has the direct political consequence of providing access to centers of power. The church hierarchy can take advantage of these channels to further its spiritual mission or to work “behind the scenes” for moderately progressive ends. In any event, to enter oppositional politics fully or to make appeals for radical change closes these channels and undermines the church’s raison d’être. These considerations would apparently be less salient for lower level clerics. Because they are more involved in the daily lives of the laity and have first-hand knowledge of the problems that confront them, some priests are led to question the existing social order. When coupled with their lack of influence on centers of power, lower level priests often find themselves in situations with inherently radicalizing potential. This brings us to our final proposition.

**Proposition 7.** The greater the organizational distance from the center of ecclesiastical authority, the greater the likelihood for politicized church activities.

Based on our analysis, decentralized groups and organizations are the most important locus of contemporary oppositional activities by the church. The complexity of ecclesiastical
organization can give rise to the situation that moderation is preached by the prelates and radicalism practiced by the priests. Because of the complexity of church organization, parishes, parish-level organizations, apostolic groups and CEBs can escape the close scrutiny of their superiors. This situation was recognized by Poggi (1967) with respect to Catholic Action in Italy, and was certainly the case with Catholic Action in Spain, which in 1962 played a central role in the strikes in the Asturias coal fields. Similarly, in the early 1960s, Argentine Bishops wanted to increase activity in working-class neighborhoods and establish ties with the Peronist movement. Priests radicalized by their experiences were able to expand their political activity because of the absence of administrative control (Dodson, 1979: 120).

The "administrative distance" between the episcopate and the priests can sometimes be exploited by the lower levels. In Catalonia, a church-supported human rights group called Solidarity misrepresented sources and uses of funds to the episcopate. It also obscured association with left parties and activities in support of working-class organizations (Johnston, 1983).\(^4\) In post-Solidarity Poland, there is a clear split between a moderate episcopate and the militant local clergy. The new Primate, Joseph Cardinal Glemp, has been criticized from below for his calls for compromise, mutual understanding and respect (see Kazania Wojenne, 1984: 8). Sermons of the local clergy on the other hand explicitly criticize government policies. They include, for example, appeals by priests to intervene directly on behalf of imprisoned Solidarity activists; they cite specific cases of persecutions of citizens by the government agents; they also point out the increasing alcohol consumption among workers (it decreased significantly during the Solidarity period).

The split between lower level organizations and the church hierarchy is the axis on which turns the paradox of church involvement in opposition movements. The application of resources — buildings, media, organizational infrastructure — all depends on this crucial distinction. Because the hierarchy is ultimately responsible for all church activities, the key question is how much tolerance the regime will extend the episcopate. As suggested earlier, this seems to depend in part on how badly the regime needs legitimacy, and how well the church can provide it, practically and ideologically. To this we must now add, it depends on how well the upper levels of organization can control the lower ones.\(^5\) Because ecclesiastical organization, like any formal organization, is a complex arrangement of conflicting interests, of formal and informal relationships, and of different definitions of

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\(^4\) The Catalan example presents a variant on episcopate-parish split based on the region's minority-national status within the Spanish state. There existed a Catalan Church within the broader Spanish Catholic Church. It was made up of Catalan clerics, Catalan parishes and monastic orders with long traditions in Catalonia. It appears that the role of decentralized church organizations in an opposition movement is likely to be greater where minority-nationalist grievances co-occur with political grievances. This was clearly the case in Catalonia as well as in the Basque region, Quebec, and Walonia. Also, it appears that there is a tendency for priests to embrace leftist demands in these situations. An extreme example is the association of priests with the radical-left nationalist ETA in the Basque region, but also in Catalonia, Quebec and Brittany, we find priests combining nationalism with leftist politics.

\(^5\) It is worth noting here the distinct possibility that the episcopate condemns political activity by priests with a wink. The long-run viability of the church may depend very heavily on how well the prelate plays the political game of preserving its organization in an unstable situation while preparing for life after the generals are gone.
the task at hand, a full understanding of the oppositional church must focus on questions of organization. Specifically, how the dual mission of the Catholic church — spiritual and social — is organizationally manifested is crucial. While our analysis suggests concentration of these goals at different levels of organization, a more thorough analysis requires information on the decision-making processes of the episcopate itself.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

If an authoritarian regime is to eliminate organized opposition, it has to establish control over secondary groups. Also, its legitimacy must be confirmed by segments of society outside of the state apparatus. The unattractive alternative is to surrender its claim to legitimacy and rely on sheer force. Reaching these contradictory goals may be facilitated by maintaining good relations with the church, an organization whose manifest goals and functions are outside of the sphere of politics, but which shares with the regime the goals of preserving the society, its culture and traditions, and minimizing violence.

In the long run, however, if the regime accepts the church’s role in granting it legitimacy, it also establishes the church’s position as an arbiter of legitimacy in general. The church can, therefore, grant legitimacy to an opposition movement. Further, it can provide the opposition with an organizational infrastructure in a situation where other organizational frameworks are monopolized by the regime. The church then becomes the only available formal organizational setting for the opposition. To the extent that it is present in various segments of the society, the church can bridge cleavages between those segments. Above all, this applies to social classes, but it also can help bridge ideological differences which otherwise could lead to fragmentation of the opposition.

As a final point, we should note that there are limits to the application of resource mobilization theory. As Levine (1981) has observed, church organizations are concerned primarily with the spirituality of their members. For participants who are faithful, the mobilization of resources for political opposition may often be a result of the unintended consequences of their actions, or at least a secondary motivation. We cannot understand the role of the church in opposition movements with reference to resources alone.

The authors feel that an important component not discussed here is the church’s central role in the processes of socialization. Given the bankruptcy of official ideologies and the limited scope of official political debate, members of society are likely to reach for the religion known from childhood as the only other source of value and meaning available. Coupled with the failure of the regime to penetrate the network of primary groups (as documented by Nowak, 1981, in Poland), religion becomes closely associated with anti-regime attitudes. The analysis of the formal church structure in the process of political mobilization needs, therefore, to be supplemented with the study of the quotidian organization of religious life and the meanings associated with it. This is the next stage of the authors’ investigations.
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