Religious Folklife and Folk Theology in the Sanctuary Movement[1]

William Westerman

Founder-director, Program for Immigrant Traditional Artists, International Institute of New Jersey, Jersey City

This is a study of a religious movement with political overtones, the U.S. the Sanctuary movement, which lasted from 1982 to 1992. The movement was comprised of about 500 congregations that gave shetler to Central American refugees in defiance of the U.S. government. In its theology, Sanctuary had folk religious elements because, like liberation theology on which it was based, it involved the reinterpretation of scripture, it was oppositional in intent to official religion, it developed a new social structure within the congregation, it utilized the concepts of folk saints and martyrs as well as new liturgical elements, and it espoused an alternative version of Christ. Furthermore, Sanctuary, like liberation theology, emphasized action, namely the taking in of strangers, as an essential component of religion.

This is a study of a political movement in the U.S., inspired by faith, that led to the development of emergent religious traditions. At the height of this movement, known as the Sanctuary movement, one would hear the statement, "If you knew the truth, then surely you would help us," echoing the refrain of Central American refugees in the U.S. According to some estimates, there were during the 1980s more than half a million refugees from El Salvador in the United States, and another 200,000 from Guatemala. From El Salvador they fled government-backed death squads and bombardment of civilian populations which claimed more than 75,000 lives during the civil

war between 1979 and 1992. From Guatemala they fled army massacres that probably killed well over that many, as well as detention and military control of the government and the countryside. From both countries they fled from hunger, malnutrition, high infant mortality, torture, and government repression. Many of these refugees arrived without papers, as undocumented aliens in the U.S., and even in Mexico through which they passed. During the Reagan years, political asylum was granted to fewer than 3%. Those deported back to Central America often faced persecution or retribution, and many were taken directly into police custody at the airport and never heard from again.[2]

In response, the Sanctuary movement sheltered, sponsored, and protected about one thousand of these refugees in over 400 local houses of worship, in defiance of the federal government of the United States. These faith communities—Catholic, Quaker, Mennonite, mainline Protestant, and Jewish—attempted to criticize and change the Reagan administration's support of the brutal and repressive governments and armed forces of these two Central American nations from the persepctive of the refugees. Furthermore, these congregations hoped to force the government to obey its own immigration laws as well as that international law to which the U.S. is a signatory.[3]

While originally I had appreciated the ingenuity of the political statement, as a student of Folklore and Folklife—as opposed to Political Science, Sociology, or other disciplines—I wondered about the cultural aspects of Sanctuary: Did it really have something to do with religion? Or was it merely a clever guise for a trendy—albeit appropriate—political statement? It did not take long to discern that Sanctuary was not only a (folk) political movement, but also a folk religion, one which was based on traditional Latin American liberation theology, only adapted for North American white middle-class congregations. In fact, rather than remain a humanitarian gesture by well-meaning North Americans, the Sanctuary movement developed a culture of its own, with profound changes in the theology, religious practice, political and social consciousness, liturgy, music, foodways, dress, material culture, language. and social structure—in short, the folklife—of its participants. It is this folk religious nature on which I concentrate in this article.

The definition of folk religion I would like to use is a well- known one in the discipline of Folklore and Folklife, by Dr. Don Yoder. I find it especially helpful for the purposes of thinking about religious practice. "Folk religion," he writes,

"is the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion"[4].

What I intend to show is that the Sanctuary movement, like liberation theology, was a folk theology, that is, that it took and reinterpreted some concepts of official Judeo-Christianity, and emphasized other concepts which official religion has overlooked

or spurned. The theological basis for the Sanctuary movement drew equally on two traditions: Latin American liberation theology, and the Biblical concept of "sanctuary," meaning "sacred place." To understand the movement it is necessary to examine both of these traditions and the interplay between them.

While I cannot dwell at length on the historical development of liberation theology,[5] it is necessary to discuss some of its basic features, in order to show its links to the Sanctuary movement. Briefly stated, liberation theology is based on the belief that through a change in the interpretation of scripture (specifically the Bible in Judeo-Christian liberation theologies) and through action based on that change, the poor and oppressed can bring about their liberation—political, cultural, and personal. The classic Judeo-Christian model of this liberation is the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, detailed in the Book of Exodus. Liberation theology more or less formally originated in 1962, when Pope John XXIII referred to this "Church of the Poor," as he called it, in a speech concerning the Second Vatican Council.[6]

Six years later, at a conference of bishops in Medellín, Colombia, the Latin American Bishops formalized the discussion of the Church's role in liberation from poverty and oppression, in the context of Latin America. Far from being an official religion, however, the theology of liberation has frequently met with disapproval from the Vatican since Pope John XXIII,[7] and various theologians and clergymen have been summoned for official conferences and even questioning in Rome.[8]

If the official church, as represented by the Vatican, has shown such antipathy to liberation theology, particularly during the 1980s, then it is easy to see how liberation theology could be conisdered a folk religion, since so much of its theory and practice fall outside the bounds of the official Church. Certainly, too, the sense of opposition has been mutual. Pope John Paul II was heckled by a crowd in Nicaragua during his trip there for, among other things, failing to condemn the terrorism of the U.S.-backed contras, who had massacred seventeen civilians only a few days earlier. Feelings in El Salvador and elsewhere were similar; the Pope was seen as an ally of the oppressors, that is, those with land, money, and military authority. For example, in one editorial cartoon in a Salvadoran refugee newspaper of the time, a general turns to a poor peasant and, pointing to the Pope, who appears on a television screen placed at the center of the cross, says to the peasant, "Listen to this. It's exactly what I've been telling you."[9]

The government, the United States, and the capitalist system are frequently depicted as the enemy of God and the people. Often national governments can only exist with the blessing of the U.S. government, and often those who rise to the top of the Church hierarchy in such countries, like then Archbishop (now Cardinal) Miguel Obando y Bravo in Somoza's Nicaragua, are those who are politically compatible or at least ideologically meek enough to survive.[10]

Various visual and verbal manifestations of the religion of the people indicate the perception of this relationship between governments and the Church. Thus for example, some Salvadoran folk art during the war would depict the Bible or a church about to be destroyed by bombs or helicopters with "USA" painted on them.[11] And one piece of graffiti written on a wall in Bogotá read, "The International Monetary Fund knifed the Christ child."[12]

Like many dissident movements, Liberation theology was and is seen as the true word of God, in the context of the social reality of Latin America, while the official church and its traditions can be the creation of fallible human beings. As one Latin American Episcopal priest and exponent of liberation theology now living in the United States explained to me in an interview,

The Pope went to Nicaragua and didn't understand what the hell was going on, 'cause he's so [steeped] in [the] tradition. You see tradition has its place, but tradition is a fabrication of human beings. Theology is the expression of God's will. And when these collide, God has precedence over tradition. [The Pope] says obey your bishops and do what they say, but if your bishops are allied and identified with the oppressors, the hell with that. Who's going to obey oppressors? Jesus' defiance of the religious authority of his day is a clear example.[13]

One Roman Catholic priest I interviewed disagreed with my interpretation of the Sanctuary movement as "folk":

"Christianity today is looking at renewal. It is looking at getting back to Biblical roots. It is getting away from this split between, you know, heaven and earth. It's a holistic thing, and so, who's going to do it—everybody or some small numbers? And small numbers are doing it. To me it's just, I mean, the opposite of what I would see as folk religion. I think it's really an orthodox thing, but it's going to have smaller numbers. To me, you know, the minute we step one inch away from Biblical theology, liberation theology becomes nothing"[14].

Sometimes this true word of God, then, exists in conflict with the existing hierarchical religious structures, or with the beliefs of large numbers of people. For the practitioners of liberation theology and Sanctuary, though, this new theology is "orthodox" (which of course means "right belief"). But the Yoder conception of folk religion defines "folk" in relation to official, hierarchical, and institutional practice, the "strictly theological and liturgical forms" which are but human constructs. Therefore, in relation to the official practice established by the hierarchical power structures, liberation theology is, by definition, folk.[15] The word "folk" should not lessen, and is not intended to detract from, the validity of liberation theology as a legitimate religious system.

I want to emphasize here that to folklorists such as myself the term "folk" carries neither pejorative nor disrespectful connotations. Folk religion should not be considered low, impure, bastardized, common, or devolutionary. Ironically, I became aware of amuse-

ment and trepidation on the part of people I am studying in regard to this issue. (One woman turned to a friend of hers to whom I was being introduced and said to him, "Did you know we're a folk religion?"). What folklorists mean by "folk" encompasses the Yoder definition but also includes the notion of expressive culture in small, local communities.[16] Many of the people I met in the context of this research, both Central and North American, would have an almost implicit understanding of this perspective. Others occasionally took "folk" to mean illegitimate, un-Biblical, or antiquated. I hope it is clear from this article that folk religion, in the conception of our discipline, is none of these.

Aside from the opposition between the official church and liberation theology, though, there are additional aspects of liberation theology which make it folk. First of all, and most important, as a theology it calls for a fundamental re- interpretation and re-emphasis of Biblical scripture, focusing in this case on the oppressed nature of most people in Latin America. Second, the structure through which liberation theology is transmitted are the so-called Christian Base Communities (or Comunidades Eclesiales de Base), neighborhood or regional Bible study groups of a relatively non-hierarchical nature. These can also serve as an economic collective in especially poor areas, such as the barrios of San Salvador or the zones of the most intense conflict during the war. They constitute the core structure of religious practice in many parts of Latin America. Leonardo Boff, the Brazilian theologian, has called them "authentic universal church become reality at the grassroots."[17] Fr. Ernesto Cardenal, a priest and Minister of Culture in the Nicaraguan cabinet, has published transcripts of one such Bible study group in a book entitled The Gospel in Solentiname, which I believe will emerge as a classic of theology.[18] Third, like other folk theologies, liberation theology, particularly in revolutionary situations, has utilized the concept of martyrs and folk saints. The most famous martyr of all—who has in fact become a symbol of the Sanctuary movement—is Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated while saying mass in 1980. He had only recently condemned the Salvadoran government and landowning oligarchy for their war against the poor and their human rights abuses. He foresaw his assassination, and had said, "As a Christian, I don't believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people."[19] In El Salvador today, he is known among the poor as "Saint Romero," and by 1985 there were already reports of healing miracles attributed to him.[20] In addition, his funeral turned into a massacre, as government forces opened fire on the crowd and bombed the area around the Cathedral square. Consequently, there is now a kind of saint's day for St. Romero, March 24th, the anniversary of his assassination. During the period of the Sanctuary movement, Church services and demonstrations took place in El Salvador and the U.S. and the first North American churches to declare themselves public Sanctuaries for

Central American refugees did so on the second anniversary of his assassination.[21]

There are of course other elements of traditional Latin American folk religion which are important as well in liberation theology. For example, Christ's role as a poor worker, *Cristo trabajador*, occurs throughout liberation theology. The most vivid example of this, perhaps, occurs in the *Misa campesina nicaraguense* (Nicaraguan Peasant Mass) in a song entitled, "Tu eres el Dios de los Pobres" ("You Are the God of the Poor"):

"Yo te he visto en un camion de carga, cortando la caña y el maiz; te he visto vendiendo loteria sin que te averguence ese papel. Yo te he visto en las gasolineras checando las llantas de un camion; y hasta componiendo carreteras con guantes de cuero y overol".

(I have seen you in a freight truck, cutting cane and corn; I have seen you selling lottery tickets without being embarrassed in that role. I have seen you in the gas-stations checking the tires of a truck; and even repairing highways in leather gloves and overalls.)[22]

Also, the Virgin of Guadalupe, so important in Latin American folk religion, is particularly important in Mexican and Mexican-American liberation theology, since she has long been a symbol of justice and social change, from Hidalgo to Zapata to César Chávez.[23] There have also been changes and new genres in religious folk art, in Nicaragua, Peru, and elsewhere.

There is one other significant difference between liberation theology and official religion—the emphasis on action, or "praxis," rather than passive experience. The ultimate object of the Church of the Poor is the creation of the Kingdom of God on earth, not in heaven, by ending injustice and inhumanity. Leonardo Boff has written a particularly good explication of this idea. Citing passages in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew and the Book of Isaiah, he writes that the Kingdom of God "is presented as good news for the poor, light for the blind, healing for the lame, hearing for the deaf, freedom for those in prison, liberation for the oppressed, pardon for sinners and life for the dead." He then makes the forceful conclusion that "it follows that the Kingdom of God is not the other world, but this world transformed and made new."[24] The interplay between faith and action—political action—is not only the crux of liberation theology; it became an important aspect of the Sanctuary movement as well, as liberation theology moved into the United States. Liberation theology, and by extension Sanctuary, moves people from seeing religion as orthodoxy ("right belief") to seeing it as orthopraxis ("right practice").[25]

The Sanctuary movement borrowed several of its central implicit concepts directly from Latin American liberation theology. The notion of "oppression," for example, was defined in a Third World post-colonial context; that is to say, the standard features of op-

pression—poverty, economic exploitation, racism, sexism, torture and other human rights abuses, and the lack of freedoms of religion, speech, and opinion—were outgrowths of an unjust economic and political system which depends upon the domination of many for the benefit of few. Consequently, "liberation" is the extensive reorganization of this hierarchical system, in the political, cultural, and personal spheres. "Sin," according to one liberation theologian, the Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez, is

"evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by man, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes. Sin appears, therefore, as the fundamental alienation, the root of a situation of injustice and exploitation"[26].

In the realistic Salvadoran novel, *One Day of Life*, by Manlio Argueta, the narrator (in actuality a real woman interviewed by Argueta) says bluntly, "To let a child die is the worst sin one can commit."[27] Thus, "salvation," a collective rather than individual process, is, according to Gutiérrez, "to work, to transform this world to build the human community."[28] And "every obstacle that degrades or alienates the work of men and women in building a humane society is an obstacle to the work of salvation."[29]

Another concept central to the Sanctuary movement was love and solidarity. The most important Biblical commandment—cited over and over both in the literature and by people in the Sanctuary community—is "to love they neighbor as thyself." In the words of Gutiérrez (which could practically be incorporated verbatim into a Sanctuary sermon):

"Universal love is a question of loving all people, not in some vague, general way, but rather in the exploited person, in the concrete person who is struggling to live humanly[30]".

Also applicable is this statement from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire:

"The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor—when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love"[31].

The Sanctuary movement represented a thousand such risks, and many such acts of love. Sanctuary workers themselves referred to that relationship as "subversive love."[32]

The fact that attention was paid to the "oppressor class" was an important shift between liberation theology and the Sanctuary movement. Virgilio Elizondo, a theologian living in San Antonio, Texas, presaged this kind of awakening in 1975:

A time comes when certain members of the oppressor group—normally good people who had never realized they were oppressors—awaken to the fact of oppression. To awaken and to stay uninvolved i[s] a sin; to see evil and to allow it to continue is itself evil. Some of the awakened members of the oppressor group will join the oppressed in their struggle.[33]

Sanctuary produced this awakening, both among people who had never been politically active before, some of whom come from conservative and even fundamentalist backgrounds, and among people who had been active in prior peace and social justice causes. One Methodist woman (raised Roman Catholic) in Philadelphia told me:

"I think I didn't have very much awareness of Latin America at all... I think up until Sanctuary, I didn't really believe—l knew from Vietnam and ... from being a peace activist for probably close to twenty years... and in nuclear disarmament issues, that our government could lie and that we're not always out for people's best interest. You know, I know a lot about the history of this, You know, Westward expansion and the destruction of the Indians.

Still, I think it was this movement that's really showed me how arrogant and insulated we are.

And I've been thinking a lot about that today, I've been thinking about that banner I saw yesterday in the march, and it said..."Central America—Our Neighbors, not our Backyard."

You know, up until Sanctuary I think that in some wiay I still pictured that as our backyard.... I think there was an assumption that somehow, there was this mass of humanity down there,

that I didn't have to be very much concerned about, and I just didn't know very much about them,

and I didn't want to know very much about them"[34].

When individuals came to recognize their status as members of the oppressor or oppressed class or nation, notice the sinful situation around them, and decide to work with the oppressed to change that system, that would begins a conversion process Freire calls conscientizacão, awkwardly translated into English as conscientization, or, more weakly, consciousness-raising.

Action, or praxis, was at the heart of the Sanctuary movement. It is the work of salvation, building and creating a more human world according to the examples in Exodus and the Gospels, and the solidarity of universal love. This is the ultimate conclusion of both Freire and Gutiérrez. "True solidarity," writes Freire,

"is found only in the plenitude of this act of love, in its existentiality, in its praxis. To affirm that men are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce"[35].

To which Gutiérrez adds, "Only by participating in their struggles can we understand the implications of the Gospel message."[36] It should be clear that this is exactly the message that the Sanctuary movement attempted to convey.

The second tradition upon which the Sanctuary movement drew is the Biblical and historical role of the "sanctuary." The original sanctuaries, in Biblical times, were cities or houses of refuge for criminals who feared retribution. The fugitive would then either

leave the area or surrender to the authorities, the sojourn having lasted usually a short period of time. This practice existed into the Middle Ages. Such sanctuaries, according to Mircea Eliade, were traditionally built at the sites of theophanies (divine manifestations), hierophanies (insertions of the sacred realm into the earthly world), and signs. Thus they are traditionally seen as places of communication between people and God.[37] North American history has drawn on this Biblical tradition several times. Only during colonial times, however, were refugees criminals.[38] Since then refugees have been victims of persecution or victims of conscience rather than criminals, and the length of the stay has been indefinite. The first instance of such sanctuaries in North America occurred in the 1750s, when Quakers in Philadelphia sheltered several hundred Acadian refugees from Nova Scotia.[39] More famous, of course, was the Underground Railroad before the U.S. Civil War. Many of those involved with that movement were also Quakers. Most recently, in the 1960s, there were sanctuary churches for Vietnam War deserters and draft resisters, although that sanctuary movement was considerably less organized and more spontaneous than today's. Pastors such as William Sloane Coffin were involved[40]; he went on to become pastor of The Riverside Church in the current Sanctuary movement.

Given this theological and historical background, we can see how the traditions meld in the American Sanctuary movement. The theology of Sanctuary was basically derived from one theme in the Bible, stated in Leviticus 19:33-4 (and elsewhere in different forms):

"If a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not oppress him. But the stranger that dwelleth among you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt".

This commitment motivated all those who work in Sanctuary (and became so axiomatic within the movement, that by the time of the Tucson Sanctuary trial in 1986 the special hotline established to disseminate up-to-date trial information was 1-800-LEV-19:33). Rev. Philip Wheaton, a pastor of a congregation that declared itself a public Sanctuary, reflected in writing on this concept of the stranger, finding that most of the Biblical usage concerns actual, historical examples of strangers (as opposed to symbolic or metaphorical ones). Thus the Sanctuary movement must realize that for the refugees, the concern is not how well they will be treated here, but rather the situation that made them leave their lands in the first place. This set up an interesting tension between the purposes of the congregation and the purposes of the refugee, although Wheaton is quick to resolve that tension:

"As concerned citizens of such a foreign land, we therefore must not use our humanitarian response to avoid or cloak this fundamental contradiction for the refugee [W]e must never forget this basic injustice - that they were forced to come here. This is unavoidably a political question. Therefore, our humanitarian

concern for the refugee personally cannot be separated from their political reality as outcasts from their own land. [emphasis in the original]"[41],

This is what I believe Freire writes about when he refers to "risking an act of love." The love here is not merely humanitarian, but must be an act of political solidarity against the oppressors. One risk is the threat of arrest that faces both North and Central Americans. But sheltering refugees is a necessary risk.

Another essential idea in the theology of Sanctuary concerned the nature of God. Citing the Gospel of Matthew ("I was a stranger and you took me in") and the Epistle to the Hebrews ("Be not forgetful to entertain strangers for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."), Wheaton says the issue forces North Americans to choose between "all the little 'laws,' or the larger Law of God." In the Sanctuary movement, he concludes,

"here, God's law prevails; we cannot be faithful to Yahweh's call and turn away the stranger, for who knows, it may well be Jesus himself outside the door, knocking and asking to come in. To close the door to these aliens may well mean alienating ourselves from God"[42].

This idea corresponds exactly with the many new conceptions of the nature of Jesus in liberation theology, as is shown, for example, in the *Misa campesina nicaraguense* quoted above.

Having detailed some of the theology of Sanctuary, I would like to briefly describe some of the features of the praxis of Sanctuary, since, after all, praxis played such an important role in the movement. At the physical center of Sanctuary, obviously, was the refugee or refugee family. The relationship between congregation and refugee was intense, particularly among those North Americans who participated in the 24-hour companionship of the refugees early on in their stay. Sanctuary refugees were carefully selected from the large refugee pool described at the beginning. Usually, the Sanctuary refugees were young, between the ages of 18 and 35. Many were active in their countries of origin, in human rights work, religious work, education, medicine, journalism, union organizing, and all had to leave because of specific threats against their lives, the murder of close relatives or other close friends and associates.

Sanctuary members emphasized that Sanctuary is a process, not an end-product. The core feature of this process, which I have written about elsewhere, is the testimony of the refugee.[43] Throughout Sanctuary, this personal experience narrative was what attracted followers, converted disbelievers, educated and enlightened both the congregation and the community at large. And refugee testimony was what inspired other congregations to declare themselves public Sanctuaries, and thus the movement grew. Needless to say, with testimony including stories of murder, rape, death lists, and torture, such storytelling was very emotional for both speaker and audience.

Sanctuary was an expression of faith by the entire congregation or community. It was a statement of moral opposition to policies and religion that harms

or ignores the oppressed. And it was an expression of unity, solidifying a religious community and strengthening their faith. Rev. Wheaton told me at a dinner that he was pleased that Sanctuary was sending people back to their Bible.[44] This may be so, but it did so in ways that emphasized analysis, thought, and re-interpretation. One Protestant minister in Philadelphia explained this change in the interpretation of scripture to me in an interview:

"I really think though that you can read the Bible with a view towards your own security, and you'll read it one way,

and you could read the Bible with a view toward

change and freedom and it will be a very different book...

...Take any passage having to do with "shepherd."... In... the Gospel of John [10:11-18] there is "I am the good shepherd" passage, and you know a "good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

I'd say one way of interpreting that is that Jesus is the good shepherd and Jesus died for our sins, and laid down his life for us and therefore salvation is assured.

And the other is if you see that as... if we're shepherds one to another, as Christ is in you and I, and we're in a situation of oppression or of ... persecution,

therefore that becomes a call to risk and to put your life on the line..."[45]

This call to risk and to share in the struggles of the persecuted became particularly important as this theology was translated into U.S. contexts. But, like all the theology from which Sanctuary developed, it had Biblical referents.

This may explain why North American church hierarchies did not condemn Sanctuary, and have in fact often endorsed the movement, as did Pope John Paul II on a trip to the U.S. In this case what let us deem Sanctuary "folk" is that so many of its component parts existed not in opposition to, but, in Yoder's words cited above, "alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion."

But significantly, Sanctuary could also be an intensely personal expression of commitment, in at least two ways. First, many in the movement were aware of, and constantly related themselves to, a larger historical perspective. American immigration around the turn of the century, the Depression, and the Sixties—a time of personal growth and rebellion—recurred in interviews as formative periods or periods of historical influence. Others turned to Sanctuary out of a deep religious feeling, as part of a spiritual journey. Two people interviewed on separate occasions began their religious journeys after having experienced a theophany, a manifestation of God. Both were eventually been led to the Sanctuary movement and both were among the most dedicated practitioners I met. Thus, while people in the Sanctuary movement may have been part of a political opposition, their motivations clearly arose out of a cultural and religious sense of justice and duty. Naturally, this sense cannot be mandated and must be felt by the individual. Hence

not all members of a Sanctuary congregation participated equally in the practice and belief.

Typical Sanctuary services would incorporate the personal testimony of the refugee, sermons by one or more clergy, music chosen specifically for the event, reading of significant scripture and litanies (sometimes bilingual), and communion, often with the Host a corn tortilla. Certain occasions merited special church services the arrival of a new refugee, the commemoration of the martyrdom of Archbishop Romero (the first churches declared their participation in Sanctuary on the second anniversary of his assassination) and the four North American churchwomen, holidays such as Good Friday, Passover, and the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, or the release on bail of refugees captured by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Naturally, there was variation in the service depending upon the religion or denomination. But the amount of ecumenism and the number of interfaith services associated with Sanctuary were extraordinary. It was not uncommon to see a rabbi at Mass or to hear a Presbyterian minister deliver a homily in a synagogue. I myself have in my life participated in only two havdalah services, to mark the end of the Jewish sabbath. Both of these related to the Sanctuary movement. One took place in the basement chapel of a Catholic church; the other, in a combined United Church of Christ and Presbyterian church, was followed by communion. Both were conducted by rabbis (with Protestants administering communion).[46]

Clearer examples of folk religion would be hard to produce.

There were also associated customs which are part of Sanctuary. Refugee-led Bible study classes were common, as were the traditional Salvadoran (or Guatemalan) beans-and-rice church suppers and female congregants wearing Guatemalan woven *huipiles*. Some congregations printed newsletters, complete with information about nuts-and-bolts political action, such as lobbying and contacting representatives in Washington. Visual iconography and material culture were also very important. For example, Archbishop Romero's picture was frequently displayed from pulpits, on posters and banners, and on keychains and all types of ephemera. The most famous symbol was the bandana, usually red, which in early days of the movment (before 1987, say), often covered the refugee's face during public presentations. This, like the assumed names that all refugees took, would aim to prevent identification outside the church and protect the refugee's family from governmental retribution in Central America. The bandana was an extremely striking image and visual reminder. One church in Philadelphia issued miniature red bandanas, about two inches long, for congregation members to wear on their lapels in support of the refugees. As a result, the symbol became common throughout the Philadelphia region. Other communities across the country had similar customs.

The Sanctuary movement was among the most visible theologies of liberation in the U.S. but was not

the only one. There are feminist, Black, and Hispanic liberation theologies, and by the late 1980s, there were Christian Base Communities among North Americans in at least four U.S. cities.[47] Sanctuary, however, became the most visible in the U.S. media because it was white and middle-class, and because it defied the policies of the Justice Department. As for why it remained predominantly middle-class, it was in part because Sanctuary was very expensive; congregations needed to have lawyers, doctors, and bail money available as well as funds for the support of the refugees. (There were, however, Black and Hispanic churches and Native American groups which participated actively in the Sanctuary movement, although their story was not so well publicized.)

Finally, I would like to consider the oppositional nature of Sanctuary as a folk religion, drawing on the ideas of Raymond Williams and José E. Limón.[48] Without a doubt, liberation theology opposes the dominant religious order in Latin America. Both Sanctuary and liberation theology opposed the dominant socio-political order, or hegemony, in North and Central America. But what was the nature of Sanctuary in doing so? To use Williams' paradigm, the Sanctuary movement had elements of the residual in it; certain "experiences, meanings, and values" of Sanctuary were residual, particularly the literal reading of the Exodus, Isaiah, and Gospel messages of liberation from slavery, building God's Kingdom on Earth, and universal love. But the structures of Sanctuary, the "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship" were emergent. By these I refer to disobedience of the Reagan administration combined with personal testimony, personal relationships, and subversive love, as well as new liturgy. Ultimately, I maintain it was the cultural dimension which ran at the deepest level of opposition, because of its emergent nature. Not only did one hear "the voice of the voiceless," to use Monseñor Romero's famous term, the word functioning as critique, but we saw religion as critique in truly new ways. Here religion was practice, dialogue, folklife, structure, and interpersonal relationship. Some oppositional movements, according to Raymond Williams, "represent areas of human experierience, aspiration, and achievement which the dominant culture undervalues, opposes, represses, or even cannot recognize."[49] And though Williams says such movements are residual, Sanctuary was not residual but emergent. Most important, if we heed the advice of folklorist José Limón, and examine not merely the content of folklore, or in this case folk religion, we affirm that Sanctuary was oppositional not only in content but also in structure. One minister in Philadelphia addressed this issue in a homily, citing Luke 5:38: "But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins."[50] In Sanctuary, we saw not just new wine, but new wineskins as well. It was this ideal construction of personal relationships within Sanctuary communities and, moreover, between members of the oppressed and oppressor class, and the work that proceeded from that partnership

that truly challenged the system. In this aim we have an unusual liberation—of the oppressors.

Since liberation theology is a folk religion that truly intends to change the dominant system (particularly at that time in Central America), it is indeed oppositional or contestational folk culture in the fullest sense of the term.[51] It is oppositional not merely in its content, which draws on residual elements, but also in its praxis, which is primarily emergent. Liberation theology follows H. Richard Niebuhr's model of "Christ the transformer of culture"[52] not just by re-interpreting or re-observing, but by setting out to achieve that transformation. The Sanctuary movement appeared to be pivotal because it contested the oppressors, and those who contested the oppressors were themselves, in the case of the North Americans involved with Sanctuary, often from the same class background. These people had already been liberated from their dominant role, and the process of this movement, which has liberated them, continued to liberate the oppressors during its lifespan.[53]

It should also be noted that Sanctuary established, or codified, a challenging relationship between members of the dominant classes and their government, because, in the words of Jim Corbett, a Quaker and one of the movement's founders, "[i]t presupposes that the church has come to occupy an institutional place within society that permits it to limit and even challenge the state's uses of violence."[54] Furthermore, the Sanctuary movement confronted the dominant force of the U.S.Government since the central act directly opposed the enforcement of U.S. immigration and foreign policy, which practitioners not only condemned as immoral, but counter-charged was even illegal.

Thus, to summarize, Sanctuary was clearly a folk religion because, like liberation theology, it involved the reinterpretation of scripture, it was oppositional in intent to official religion, it developed a new social structure within the congregation, it utilized the concepts of folk saints, martyrs, and the Virgin of Guadalupe, and it promoted a version of Christ as worker and exile rather than King and ruler. Furthermore, Sanctuary, like liberation theology, emphasized action as an absolutely essential component of religion. Sanctuary also created new liturgical forms, including folk music, art, and storytelling traditions, brought in political consciousness as an important feature of religious belief, and emphasized the taking in of strangers which, while Biblically mandated, does not in most cases receive the same emphasis in the official church.

* * *

An historical note: the first version of this paper was originally written on the eve of the trial of eleven North American Sanctuary workers in Tucson, Arizona in 1985. These included two priests, a nun, and a minister, among others. Eight were eventually convicted, six of felonies. Much of the evidence for the prosecution came from two paid informers, who wore concealed microphones and taped church services, Bible study classes, and private conversations. In pre-

trial motions, the judge, Earl H. Carroll, repeatedly refused to throw out the case on the grounds of illegal search and seizure, freedom of religion, and selective prosecution of alien harborers. Furthermore, witnesses, defendants, and defense attorneys were prohibited from talking about their religious motivations, political or social conditions in Central America.

Judge Carroll said that "'the enforcement of immigration laws [creates] only minimal and incidental interference, if any, to the practice of religion.'"[55] Clearly this was and remains contested, for as we have seen, the arrival and the personal experience of the refugees is central to the development of Latin American liberation theology in white middle-class North America, and Sanctuary proponents argued that the Biblical commands to welcome the stranger, visit the imprisoned. and set free the oppressed were all being contravened by government action. Soon thereafter, another Sanctuary worker, Stacey Lynn Merkt, served time in federal prison in Texas. (But years later, in 1999, the Bible was banned in the Elizabeth [N.J. Immigration] Detention Center, because these very sections of the Gospel pertaining to welcoming the stranger and visiting those in prison were being discussed in Bible-study groups.)

What we see with Sanctuary, then, was a failure (or unwillingness) on the part of government authorities to recognize the folk theological nature of the Sanctuary movement, while they nonetheless fully appreciated its contestational nature. The folk religious nature of Sanctuary should not be underestimated; once again, what may not seem like religion to an outsider may well be a tremendously powerful force for the transformation of individuals. The results of this misunderstanding—if indeed it was that and not a deliberate failure to acknowledge theological legitimacy—were often tragic; in retrospect they may have even been catastrophic. Yet, even to this day there remains the hope that through interfaith caring and nonviolence, the dominant culture may be transformed.

Notes

1 This is a slightly revised version of a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society, Cincinnati, Ohio, on October 19, 1985, a date which, coincidentally, had been declared National Day of Justice for Immigrants and Refugees. I am above all grateful to the many people in the Sanctuary movement, Central American and North American, who have shared insights, ideas, and experiences with me and have shown me a tremendous amount of trust. Research on this topic was begun for a seminar with Dr. Don Yoder. I have also benefitted from close readings of this manuscript and comments by Richard Shaull, Nancy Johns, Gary MacEoin, Robert Coote, and Leonard Norman Primiano, and an anonymous reader at the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. I am very thankful to all of them.

2This information is all well documented, particularly in reports from Amnesty International, Americas Watch, the United Nations, the Archdiocese of San Salvador, and a number of human rights commissions in both El Salvador and Guatemala.

3Much has been made, in the media, of the ideas that Sanctuary workers are breaking the law. Evidence, however, indicates the opposite: that the law in fact protects refugees and

Sanctuary workers alike. The best discussion of the legal issues I have read is by immigration attorney Ignatius Bau, in *This Ground is Holy* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985): 38-74.

4Don Yoder, "Toward a Definition of Folk Religion." *Western Folklore* 33 (1974): 14.

5Excellent overviews are provided in Phillip Berryman, *The Religious Roots of Rebellion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984) and Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

6Harvey Cox, *Religion in the Secular City* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984): 110.

7See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1984).

8Christine Gudorf, "Ratzinger, Gutiérrez, and the Bishops of Peru," *Commonweal* 112 (1985), p. 77 and Marlise Simons, "Liberation Theology: 2 Sides Polarize," *The New York Times* (June 3, 1985), p. A3.

9*Nosotros* 1:10 (May 1985), p. 3.

10See specifically in this case Gary MacEoin, "Nicaragua: A Church Divided," *America* 151 (1984): 294-99.

11Seeds painted in 1980 by CONIP (Coordinadora Nacional de la Iglesia Popular) folk art co-operative, collection of the author.

12John F. Talbot, S.J., "A Menacing Cry from Latin America," *America* 153 (1985): 11.

13Interview with Fr. Guy, September 4, 1985. His name, as well as all others cited in this article, except those in the public domain, has been changed.

14Interview with Fr. Donald, August 4, 1986.

15Yoder's definition implicitly creates a dichotomy. Certainly the power relationships, from a social, historical, economic, and political perspective, place the official, the hierarchical, the authoritarian even, at the top, with any variations on that, whether Biblical or not, being "folk."

16See Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971): 3-15.

17Leonardo Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* trans. by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986 [originally published 1977]): 22.

18Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname*, 4 vols. Translated by Donald D. Walsh. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976 [originally published 1975]). Cardenal himself has been publicly scolded by Pope John Paul II and was later suspended from the priesthood for the duration of his government service.

19Plácido Erdozaín, *Archbishop Romero: Martyr of Salvador* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981): 75.

20Personal communication with Gregorio, a Salvadoran refugee in the United States, October 16, 1985. There are crutches, respirators, etc. in the Cathedral in San Salvador along with notes attesting to the Archbishop's healing powers.

21See Gary MacEoin, "A Brief History of the Sanctuary Movement," in his collection of papers by various authors, *Sanctuary: A Resource Guide for Understanding and Participating in the Central American Refugees' Struggle* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985): 14-29.

22Comisión Diocesana de Musica y Liturgia, *Cantemos en Comunidad* (Diócesis de Cuernavaca, 1982): 193-4. Translation mine.

23See the expanded discussion by Cox, pp. 243-7. Also, I am aware of at least one Sanctuary service in the U.S. in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe, New York City, December 7, 1985.

24Leonardo Boff, "Salvation in Jesus Christ and the Process of Liberation," translated by J.P. Donnelly. In Claude Geffre and Gustavo Gutiérrez, eds., *The Mystical and Political Dimension of Christian Faith* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974): 81.

25Personal communication, Gary MacEoin, August 13, 1986. By "right practice" MacEoin means working for justice.

26Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* trans. by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973 [originally published 1971]): 175-6.

27Manlio Argueta, *One Day of Life* trans. by Bill Brow (New York: Vintage Books, 1983 [originally published 1980]): 23.

28Gutiérrez, p. 159. See also Cardenal, vol. 1, pp. 1-12.

29Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* trans. by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983 [originally published 1979]): 32.

30Gutiérrez, *Theology*, p. 276.

31Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* trans. by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seabury Press, 1970 [originally published 1968]): 34-5.

32Peronal communication with Gregorio, October 16, 1985. This term is said to be more common in the Los Angeles area.

33Virgilio Elizondo, *Christianity and Culture* (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1975): 146.

34Interview with Carol, 21 April 1985.

35Freire, p. 35.

36Gutiérrez, *Theology*, p. 269.

37Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959 [originally published 1957]: 24-29.

38Bau, p. 159.

39George P. Bible, *An Historical Sketch of the Acadians, Their Deportation and Wanderings* (Philadelphia: Ferris & Leach, 1906): 103-4. Also see Garry Wills, "Quaker Hero Started Sanctuary Movement," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (March 3, 1985), p. 7-C.

40Michael Ferber and Staughton Lynd, *The Resistance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971): 186-200.

41Philip Wheaton, "Responding to the Stranger in Our Midst: An Old and New Testament Theological Reflection" (Washington, D.C.: EPICA Publications, 1984): 2.

42Ibid., p. 12.

43William Westerman, "Central American Refugee Testimonies and Performed Life Histories in the Sanctuary Movement," in Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes, eds., *Migration and Identity: International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories* 3. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994): 167-181.

44Philadelphia, March 30, 1985.

45Interview with Rev. John Hutchins, Philadelphia, 21 June 1986.

4627 September 1986 and 24 March 1985 respectively.

47See the works of Dorothee Sölle, James Cone, and Virgilio Elizondo respectively for introductions raised by each group. For reference to base communities in the U.S. see specifically Elizondo's article, "Toward an American-Hispanic Theology of Liberation in the U.S.A.," in Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres, eds., *Irruption of the Third World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983): 51. The Plowshares movement is another such liberation theology active since the War in Southeast Asia.

48Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and José E. Limón, "Western Marxism and Folklore: A Critical Introduction," *Journal of American Folklore* 96 (1983): 34-52.

49Williams, pp. 123-4.

50Rev. Hutchins, 24 November 1985.

51See also Luigi Lombardi-Satriani, "Folklore as Culture of Contestation," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 11 (1974): 99-121.

52H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951): 209-212.

53Much remains to be written about the decline of Sanctuary, which was natural as circumstances changed in Central America, and its overall success or failure. While some participants were changed for their lifetimes, and some changed only temporarily, the eventual impact on U.S. refugee policy was not wholly successful. In fact, it could be argued that in terms of changing U.S. refugee and asylum policy, the Sanctuary movement failed.

54Jim Corbett, *The Sanctuary Church* (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Pamphlets, 1986), No. 270, p. 12.

55Quoted in James A. Gittings, "Religion, the Bill of Rights, and Sanctuary," *Christianity and Crisis* 45 (1985): 375-6.

Thanks to the many Sanctuary activists who opened their places of worship, their lives, and their homes to me during the course of research. Research was partially funded by a Mary Campbell Graduate Fellowship of the American Friends Service Committee. This is a slightly revised version of a paper delivered at the - annual meeting of the American Folklore Society, Cincinnati, Ohio, on October 19, 1985, a date which, coincidentally, had been declared National Day of Justice for Immigrants and Refugees, and other portions were delivered at the 1987 annual meeting of the American Studies Association, in New York City. I am above all grateful to the many people in the Sanctuary movement, Central American and North American, who have shared insights, ideas, and experiences with me and have shown me a tremendous amount of trust. Research on this topic was begun for a seminar with Dr. Don Yoder. I have also benefitted from suggestions and comments by Richard Shaull, Nancy Johns, Gary MacEoin, Robert Coote, Dorothy Noyes, and Leonard Norman Primiano, and an anonymous reader at the Journal of Ecumenical Studies. I am very thankful to all of them.