RETHINKING
MEDIA,
RELIGION,
AND
CULTURE

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About the Contributors
In recent years, I have become increasingly aware of the profound changes in the way people come together socially and how they relate to each other when they are together. I think that this constitutes, at the deepest level, the object of the study of human communication. What does, in fact, bring people together socially? This is connected, I would argue, with the study of the media as the locus of the constitution of identities and as a space for configuration of communities. The media are, above all, a factor in the differentiation of various types of communities. This implies, of course, that the media are not just economic phenomena or instruments of politics. Nor are the media interesting simply as one more instance of rapid technological change. Rather, the media must be analyzed as a process of creating cultural identities and of bringing individuals into coherent publics that are "subjects of action." To conceptualize the relations of modernity, religiosity, and media, one must see the media as a central factor in the constitution of social actors.

The Disenchant ed Modernity

I begin this chapter with the affirmation that modernity has not lived up to many of its promises of social, political, or cultural liberation. But there is one promise that it has fulfilled: the disenchantment of the world. Modernity has drained off the sense of the sacred, in large part, because it has rationalized the world. The reduction of values to instrumental efficiency has left the world without magic and without mystery. Today one finds a whole generation of young people who are living, in their daily experience, what Weber (1947, 1958) has called the disenchantment of the world. I think that it is almost impossible for many people to comprehend what it means for the young to live the dizzy pace of today or the ecstasy of drugs if one does not see this in relation to the profound loss of awe and fearful reverence that pervades contemporary cultures. Every aspect of our experience reflects this disenchantment, from our blind faith in empirical science to insensitivity to environmental pollution, but especially the superficiality of social relations. In virtually all of us, especially in those who have drunk in the rationality of formal education, the disappearance of the holy has changed the way we see the world.

And yet modernity, for all its power of control over nature, has left its sense of emptiness. Few people have learned to live without some form of enchantment, mystery, mythic vision, and some ritual moments. Strangely enough, we continue to seek ways to re-enchant the world, bring back the magic, and clothe our lives with mystery.

One of the most lucid social analysts of our time, Daniel Bell (1994), a sociologist ready to declare the end of utopian thinking, has argued that the real problem with modernity is a kind of crisis of spiritual vision. The old foundations of our culture are now buried and the new have turned out to be illusory. Such an affirmation is interesting because Bell by no means holds a brief for religious apologetic. And in Latin America, Beatriz Sarlo (1994) writes in one of her recent articles that in the last twenty years, where once people were inspired by socio-political movements, today the new religions are advancing.

Closely linked to this pervasive rationalization of the world are the phenomena of fundamentalist, sectarian, and integralist movements that are once again implanting themselves on our planet precisely when we thought we had risen above all that. This is in part a reaction against the forces of modernization and in part filling the void—especially at the level.
of popular religiosity—of the sense of unchanging absolutes. In the midst of rapid cultural changes, people look for foundations beyond human construction where they can anchor their personal and social identities. In some cases, such as the case of former-Yugoslavia, these fundamentalisms are a mixture of religion and ethnic nationalism. In other cases, the fundamentalist anxiety strikes back in the form of violent, racist hatred, such as the skinheads in Germany who see the immigrant Turks as so threatening that they feel they have the right to kill them as “invaders.” In virtually all forms of fundamentalism, the media play a central role in this search for identity and in the attempt to affirm that the religious and the sacred can be the basis for significant social actors in a modernizing world.

I would like here to explore the phenomenon of disenchantment primarily in the Latin American context. It is not easy to give an account of the relations of modernity, religion, and media on this continent because secularization has such a different connotation here. In cultures that have experienced an ongoing confrontation between Catholicism and the liberal Enlightenment, the extreme ideological polarization has colored the concept of secularization with layers of misunderstanding. Indeed, one can say that Latin Americans, caught between poles of integralisms, have lived the relation between religion and modernity in a quite schizophrenic manner. On the one hand, modernity is synonymous with the triumph of reason, equality, democratic participation, and progress. For persons who think in this manner, religion is simply a matter of the past: irrational obscurantism and the remnant of an uneducated peasant society.

In contrast, those with religious commitment have tended to identify modernity with atheism. Dating from the condemnation of “modernism” by Pius X, modernity has been associated with a society abandoned to the forces of evolution and to beliefs in naturalistic determinism that destroy values of tradition. For those with this perspective, modernity means secular humanism and an individualism that makes a communitarian commitment impossible. Thus, in Latin America, our lived perception of secularization is characterized by this radical split of worldviews and a Manichean polarization. One is supposed to make a choice between becoming modern or remaining a believer. Whereas, in countries such as the United States, modernity not only is equivalent to being religious or has its foundations in religious belief (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985), in Latin America we have faced an irreducible opposition of worldviews.

To understand this radically polarized conception of secularization, one must go back to the explanation of secularization suggested by Max Weber (1958). First, for Weber, a secular, modern world is not only a world without gods, but a world completely rationalized, a world guided by a scientific reasoning that destroys the foundations of a magico-mysterious perception of human existence. Second, Weber understood the secular world to be a world in which experience is without an ultimate meaning. No longer are there realities that have meaning in themselves and that can be a starting point “outside our constructed reality.” What guides the world, in this explanation, is a type of instrumental rationality that Weber called, with a very apt metaphor, “a cage of iron.” Persons now come to live in a world that is so entirely constructed by human logic that it becomes for them an inescapable cage because the reasoning that guides human destiny is concerned only with instrumental means, without reference to any ultimate ends.

Finally, the secular means the breaking apart of the old certainties that have supported the communitarian integration of the city. Because we can no longer assume the existence of community, we have to make enormous efforts to somehow find the kind of sociability that we have associated with community.

I have found Gellner’s (1989) rephrasing of the position of Weber a particularly apt one:

What Weber meant by disenchantment is the Faust-like acquisition of cognitive, technological and administrative power. We have acquired diabolical capacities by trading off our world full of meaning, a meaning humanly experienced even if risky and threatening, for a world that we can manipulate. We have abandoned that insecure world for a world that is predictable and much more manageable, but a world that is coldly indifferent and insipid.

This is the matrix of the concept of secularization. It is a world ruled by instrumental rationality—cold, pragmatic, and functional. To this, one would have to add, from the tradition of the sociology of religion, two other elements. First, as Hegel emphasized, a secular world is an entirely human project, created out of our images and desires, an objectivation of
the consciousness and creativity of humans. Second, a secular world is an autonomous world, a world in which the state, society, culture, and art have made themselves more and more independent of religion and have created their own bases of social power. This is a world that has progressively won its cultural, ideological, and cognitive freedom and that no longer needs justification from beliefs, creeds, and religious institutions. Once cultures cut their ties to religious institutions they become diverse and complex, no longer following univocal paths of evolution. Consequently, this kind of culture does not provide a substratum of meaning that can be linked with any form of religion or any form of church (Rahner, 1969).

How Secularization Has Been Lived and Thought From the Perspective of Latin America

In a very schematic way, I would like to sketch out two Latin American conceptions of secularization. The first is what I would call a historicist perspective, represented, for example, in the work of the Chilean, Pedro Morande (1984), a sociologist for whom modernity in Latin America is characterized by the secular politicization of faith. By this, Morande means that the history of these peoples, which was once identified with religious institutions, has become identified with their nation-states. In Latin America, he would argue, the conception of history, through influences as diverse as textbooks and political rhetoric, has gradually found its principle of unity in its sociopolitical project and in the development of the nation-state. Whatever may have been its origins, the history of the peoples has become identified with the history of the states. It has been forgotten that there were once other symbols around which community was formed, other cultural syntheses and other mediating institutions through which these peoples expressed the richness and the tragedy of their own history. Among these other social contexts, there was, above all, the church. According to Pedro Morande, the history texts of Latin America have lost the memory of the profoundly important role of the church as a specific space for social meeting and a place for cultural synthesis. More concretely, the histories of Latin America have forgotten what was called barroco. The Latin American baroque, one of the periods of greatest creativity and cultural synthesis, has been covered over to make way for a political-economic unity that allows us to find our identities in the nation-state.

The historicist conception of secularization in Latin America has also tended to rewrite the religious history in a way that popular religiosity and the formal rationality of ecclesiastical institutions conflates as one thing. Fortunately, according to Pedro Morande, this mistaken conception never gained much importance because popular religiosity is still, in Latin America, the strongest link of cultural continuity in these countries. Popular religiosity, never absorbed by the institutional church, is precisely what enables Latin American culture to respond so differently to the abstract universalism of modern functionalist rationality. Popular culture is a form of resistance, and popular religiosity is one of the major cultural resources that helps Latin America to resist the instrumental rationality of modernity.

Another current of thought about secularization in Latin America is the populist conception. The theologian Diaz-Alvarez (1978) presents an example of this view quite clearly when he argues that atheism, as a type of secularization that denies any meaning to religion, is something that has affected only a small minority among the dominant elites. The great mass of people, especially the popular classes, constitute the true cultural memory and moral strength of these countries. Diaz-Alvarez argues that for the majority of the people, religion has continued to be the source of meaning in life and a powerful influence for the preservation of moral integrity.

At the same time, Diaz-Alvarez recognizes that the popular religiosity carries strong elements of fatalism, ritualism, and blind devotion to saintly patrons that dilute the strength of the humanity and moral intuition inherent in this religious culture. Diaz-Alvarez also admits that many important social sectors of Latin America, such as intellectuals and educators, are being absorbed into a secularized culture. He is concerned about the fact, and I think rightly, that the historical churches, especially the Catholic Church, have not been able to develop a discourse that captures the interest of young people. As young people become increasingly indifferent to religious and moral commitment, we are seeing a slow but important growth of secularization.

It is quite significant, however, that both the historicist and populist conceptions of secularization sidestep the question of the power of the
churches over social and cultural institutions. For Latin America, secularization has not been a question of atheistic rationalism, but rather of a desire for autonomy from the church in the areas of politics, the state, sexuality, and artistic culture. One still finds countries where the state is strongly tied to the church, where the church feels it has the right to manage and manipulate the field of education and blackmail the area of culture. I think that in questions of autonomy from ecclesiastical imposition, the Enlightenment project of secularization is still very much alive. As Alan Touraine (1992) has put it, a modern society is not indifferent to religion or liberated from religion. Modern society is one that defends the separation of the temporal and spiritual spheres, without the disappearance of the spiritual. With modernity, we have found a way to maintain simultaneously the affirmation of the personal subject with the various freedoms and rights that this entails: the freedom of conscience, the freedom of convictions, and the right to resist the destruction of collective identities.

The Re-Enchantment of the World

How is the world being re-enchanted? I would say that this leads to still another question: What remains of ritual in public performance and entertainment? (Baudrillard, 1993). Or, better put, What remains of ritual in the mass media?

My premise is that the mass media are not just a phenomenon of commercial or ideological manipulation, but are, rather, a cultural phenomenon to be understood by anthropology and other cultural sciences. The mass media are the places where many people—indeed, an increasing number of people—construct the meaning of their lives. The media offer the opportunity for people to come together to understand the central questions of life, from the meaning of art to the meaning of death, of sickness, of youth, of beauty, of happiness, and of pain. Thus, I am suggesting that we should look for the processes of re-enchantment in the continuing experience of ritual in communitarian celebration and in the other ways that the media bring people together. We must ask what remains of ritual and community celebration in the Olympic Games, the political rally, rock concerts, and the television contests. This will help us understand the phenomenon of the electronic church.

The electronic church has its roots in the popular religiosity of the United States, but it has extended into Latin America through the Pentecostal churches and the intensive use of the mass media (Assmann, 1988). The electronic church has been part of a veritable cultural revolution in Latin America: the conversion of millions of people to the Protestant sects and, in particular, the passing of millions of Catholics to the world of the most fundamentalist churches such as the Pentecostals.

This phenomenon has occurred both in the world of rural, indigenous peoples in areas such as Chiapas in Mexico—I am thinking of the splendid study of Gilberto Jimenez (1989) describing the presence of the evangelical churches in Chiapas—and in the more urbanized parts of Latin America, such as Argentina and Brazil, where millions of Catholics have entered the Protestant churches.

The electronic church has a far more profound meaning than most people suspect. It is not simply that some churches have used the media to project their sermons to a larger audience or have used a variety of media and genres to reach many new sectors of the public. Rather, in my opinion, the significance is that some churches have been able to transform radio and television into a new, fundamental "mediation" for the religious experience. That is, the medium is not simply a physical amplification of the voice, but rather adds a quite new dimension to religious contact, religious celebration, and personal religious experience. To demonstrate this, I quote from an article by an Argentinean, Pablo Seman (1993), describing a Pentecostal ceremony in Buenos Aires recently:

Today we are going to create a "holy scandal," the pastor proclaims to thirty thousand people in the middle of a massive revivalist meeting that has lasted eight hours. A feminine voice is humming in the background, rising above the deep counterpart of the drums and the sound of guitars falling away. Now the preacher, his voice swelling to a crescendo in a commanding tone, draws out the woman as he exclaims, "You are the spouses of the Lord." While the evangelist prays and preaches, the voice-over of the television anchorwoman provides a plaintive counterpart of "Amen!" "Yes, Lord!" "Come now, Jesus!" in the foreground. Now the choir comes in with its part, "Raise me up, Lord! Break me up, Lord! Lord, consume me with your love!" Then the huge chorus pleads, "Oh come, Holy Spirit" with trembling body and voice. Now the sound dies away, and a kind of silence falls over the crowd. In this scene, there may be particular actors who stand out, but the coming of the Holy Spirit in
a trance-like experience is the customary high point that the mass seeks and feels together as one body.

This is not simply a time of worship, but a media event. From time to time, gospel rock groups take the stage, leading the people in an intense dance, some people swirling by themselves, others twisting and turning in unison. Some walk around with home video cameras to catch some of the action for later showing in their local assemblies. There are dozen of counselors circulating among the masses of people with walkie-talkies. A preacher dances frenetically before a huge screen that projects the words of the hymns.

Nothing of this seems to be coordinated. It appears to emanate from the urban cultural experience which the cultural process of the cult seems to know how to take into account as if all were planned.

To me, this account shows that the electronic church is supplying the magic that established religions have intellectualized, made cold and disenchanted. The electronic church has taken hold of the technologies of the image and of the sentiments to capture the messianic, apocalyptic exaltation of the feelings. This gives a face and a voice to the new tribal cults, the new sects, and the new communes. For these communities, ritual and moral norms are far more important than theological doctrine.

Thus, as the Catholic Church and some historical Protestant churches grow rational and intellectualized, the Pentecostals, charismatics, and other apocalyptic groups are making ritual and celebration the focal point of religious experience. And these movements are carrying this experience out of the churches into homes and circles of friends through the mass media. Radio—FM, short wave, and, increasingly, local stations—is by far the most important medium at present. Television, however, is finding ways not only to broadcast religious worship but to intensify and magnify the religious experience itself. Through the use of media, the fundamentalist churches have learned to transform the media into a mediation that is fundamental to the new forms of religious experience; and these churches are now in tune with the popular sectors of Latin America. The Catholic Church has somehow lost the wave length of the masses, especially the young people, in part, I think, because this Protestant tradition has understood that the media are a way to re-enchant the world. The media are the way to transform the everyday life of the people into magic.

For intellectuals, there remains little magic in the world. But for the great majority of people, the media are mysterious, magic, exciting, and enchanting with the melodrama, the star system, the ability to create the drama of the Olympic Games, the frenzy of gigantic sports contests (more real than the actual sports contests), and the spectacle of televised religious revivals. Somehow the media have eliminated the distance between the sacred and the profane. The walls around the sacred that the religions have protected so jealously have been broken down by the media. Television, especially, has introduced magic into the realm of the profane and has made secular what once was sacred. Without doubt, the sacred has undergone a trivialization, but at the same time, the sacred is penetrating into the recesses of everyday life. I am thinking, for example, of how advertising spots make enchanting even the most humble and routine tasks of daily life. Even the simple activities of washing, scrubbing, cleaning, and ironing have been transfigured, made poetic, and somehow raised to transcendence. Just think of how advertising makes a bottle of Coca-Cola a magic source of energy, beauty, and wisdom—the source of life and youth itself.

Television is the place for the visualization of our common myths. I refer to myth, not in the sense of R. Barthes (1974) (a form of ideology), but in the deeper anthropological interpretation: myths as the source of cultural unity, the myths that cause and remove deep anxieties, the myths that protect us from the terror of chaos, and the myths that save us. We find our motivating symbols in our myths, from the myths that give meaning to the life of the poor to the myths that sustain our poor life. It is television that is articulating and catalyzing the integrating myths of our societies. What are the myths of our countries if not our football stars, our rock groups, our champion boxers? The people live their deep identification with their idols and their stars in television.

As trivial and superficial as these symbols may seem, television has a deep resonance with the capacity and necessity of the people to be "someone." And people feel themselves to be someone to the degree that they identify with Someone—someone on whom they can project their fears, someone capable of assuming and silencing these fears.

For those of us who for years now have been studying the cultural meaning of telenovelas, this discussion of re-enchantment leads to important reflections. Why do drama programs occupy such a large part of Latin American television, and why is drama continuing to be ever more important? Is it not because drama is the basic form of ritual? Is it not because the people find in television drama a way to ritualize their fears,
their joys, and the tasks of their daily lives? Despite the limitations of the *telenovelas*—the bad acting, the reactionary themes, the poverty of aesthetic expression—there is, in the dramatization, a poetic moment, an almost frightening poetic mysteriousness, that permits people to break out of the monotonous cocoon of their daily routines and re-enchant their lives.

If, indeed, the media and religion are coming together, then perhaps it is because they are fundamental cultural mediations of the need felt by the people to transform them into magic, into mystery, and into the seduction of the world. We would find, then, that something very curious has happened. Despite all the promise of modernity to make religion disappear, what has really happened is that religion has modernized itself (Gil-Calvo, 1993). Religion has shown itself capable of eating modernity alive and making modernity an important ingredient for its own purposes. What we are witnessing, then, is not the conflict of religion and modernity, but the transformation of modernity into enchantment by linking new communication technologies to the logic of popular religiosity.

### Three Questions About Religion, Media, and Society

The Catholic Church and the religiosity of the Catholic Church have been central factors in the development of Latin American culture. Today, there are three contradictory questions that one must confront in understanding the religious transformations in Latin America. As a form of conclusion, I would like to address these questions.

1. **Is not the religiosity of the less-favored classes—whether this be the popular religiosity of Catholicism or the new forms of Pentecostalism—a factor influencing subordination to the dominant classes?**

   It is very difficult to deny that there is, in religious beliefs and practices, an element of alienation, of conformism, and of the uncritical acceptance of an unjust order. But it would be unjust and false to reduce religiosity to this. No one will deny that on continents such as Latin America, religion has been associated with power. Indeed, popular religiosity has often been seduced into being an accomplice of power, domination, and subjugation and has lost the capacity to make an independent criticism of power.

   Religion and the church have also been a fundamental element in the historical memory of the people. Religion enables many to discover the meaning of life, to create a cultural synthesis, and to develop indigenous cultures. It is necessary to look at both faces of such a complex and contradictory phenomenon—both the complicity with totalitarian religions and inquisitions, and the sense of cultural identity of the popular classes.

2. **Why have the historical churches in Latin America—especially the Catholic Church—seemingly lost their capacity to challenge and inspire the urban masses, the youth, and the popular classes?**

   In fact, the historical churches, particularly the Catholic Church, have been deeply involved in the liberation struggles of Latin America in the past 40 years. For the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council set in motion a great deal of self-criticism regarding its complicity with structures of power. There have been powerful currents of honest examination of the manipulation of popular credulity (for example, the devotion to the saints) and the superficiality of the experience of religious commitment. The theology of liberation went far beyond self-criticism and not only stimulated a questioning of complicity with dominant classes on the part of the churches but also released a spiritual energy to nourish revolutionary movements. To see this side of the church, we must examine the meaning of the movement of the base communities in Brazil and the role of the Catholic Church in Chile in the darkest days of the people’s struggle with the Pinochet dictatorship. In these and other contexts, the churches have been a support and a source of energy to sustain the memory and values of a civil society. The theology of liberation awakened energies that have shown the possibility of a religiosity that not only is not alienating and does not numb revolutionary aspirations, but that instead has been an important inspiration to transform, diversify, and revitalize societies.

   It is my view, however, that the churches still retain too much social power in Latin America. If the church wishes to rebuild its links with the popular sectors and with the young people, it must renounce any pretension of imposing its cultural power. In some countries, the Catholic Church still attempts to gain a privileged position over other confessions...
and to retain its ability to manipulate political processes. As long as the church attempts to impose a cultural monopoly and sustain its position by cooperating with the most reactionary power groups of these countries, church leaders will not understand what the popular classes are suffering and will not be able to comprehend the discourse of the younger generations.

3. What is the significance of the renaissance of shamanism, spiritualism, and other forms of traditional indigenous religion in the cities of Latin America?

The paradoxical rebirth of religious and magical practices from our rural past in the midst of our great Latin America cities is an aspect of the "ruralization" of our societies that can be traced back, in my view, to the political economic policies of our times.

In a period of little more than 40 years, many Latin American countries have changed from being largely rural, with some 75% of the population in agriculture or in small villages, to being largely urban, with more than 70% in huge cities. But at same time, we are witnessing the impoverishment of the lower-middle classes and the working classes due to the neoliberal policies that discourage social investment and favor high-technology employment. This means that the majority of the people in the cities are learning to survive on the basis of a kind of urban subsistence economy that mixes rural solidarity and traditional practices with the new skills of the city. This affects all aspects of urban life among the lower-middle and popular classes. For example, people are once again learning to get by with a mixture of indigenous herbal medicine and modern medicines. This cultural and socioeconomic context is also affecting the religious practices in that a curious mixture of urban secularization, importation of oriental cults, New Age lifestyles, and rural magic and spiritualism is taking shape.

This new urban religious culture is such a widespread phenomenon that forms of it may now be found in all social classes of the city. Among young people of the professional classes, for example, one finds the attractions of New Age and oriental religions linking up with traditional shamanism and "re-semanticizing" even the traditional religiosity inherited in Catholic families. We are witnessing a kind of new foundational religious logic growing up in the urban areas.

**The Tribalization of Modern Cultures**

In the background of this re-enchantment of modern cities is a profound change in the way young people construct their social life. The youth of today are very much like nomadic tribes.

The new diversity of our cultures is lived by young people as a source of wealth. Although adults still fear this diversity and pluralism, young people love to move from one cultural identity to another. Identification with the cultures of media, especially the culture of popular music, is strikingly important in discovering and experimenting with new identities. For young people, music is not just entertainment, but a language, a way of expressing their dissatisfactions, their anger, their confusion, and their search. The diversity of this music gives birth to a multitude of tribes and communities. There is not just rock music, but plastic rock, authentic rock, rock of the 60s, rock of the 90s, and an endless invention of other musical styles. In all of their searching, young people take to this diversity with an energy and force that enables them to rapidly identify, disidentify, and reidentify with cultures and thus escape the pressure to any one commitment.

Why is this like nomadic tribes? There is no attachment to one particular place. Identity does not come from any place, but rather young people give identity to places, at least for a short, passing moment. Their identities are temporary. This is in striking contrast to older conceptions of identity for a whole life and attachment to a particular place that is semi-sacred, not for religious reasons, but because the place has such affective and symbolic importance (Herlinghams & Walter, 1994). Young people do not live in such a relationship with a defined territory. Rather it is the tribe, the group that in a given moment decides to convert a discotheque, the street corner of a neighborhood, or a village square into "our" place. For this moment, the youthful tribe marks the place with their graffiti; they put up their symbols there and take possession of it. Nation-states now have far less power of attracting identification than does the terrain of the cities. People now live close to the landmarks of their cities, but from a global, transnational perspective. People have developed such a global vision, in large part, because the globe is brought to them by the media. They thus feel at home in just about any part of the globe or in any world, real or imagined.
The patch of soil, the native village, the consecrated church and temple have ceased to have a power of enchantment. Instead, the mass media create symbols of the sacred; and the youthful nomadic tribes, identifying with these totems, have learned how to make holy and enchanted any place they decide to inhabit.

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