

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit www.ucpress.edu.

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

© 2007 by The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smilde, David.

Reason to believe : cultural agency in Latin American evangelicalism / David Smilde.

p. cm. — (The anthropology of Christianity ; 3)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-520-24942-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-520-24943-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Evangelicalism—Venezuela—Caracas. 2. Pentecostalism—Venezuela—Caracas—Case studies. 3. Christianity and culture—Venezuela—Caracas. 4. Men—Religious life. 5. Caracas (Venezuela)—Church history. I. Title.

BR1642.V4S65 2007

280'.409877—dc22

2006037487

Manufactured in the United States of America

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on New Leaf EcoBook 50, a 100% recycled fiber of which 50% is de-inked post-consumer waste, processed chlorine-free. EcoBook 50 is acid-free and meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/ASTM D5634-01 (*Permanence of Paper*).

Contents

Note on Translations and Names	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
PART ONE · <i>Beginnings</i>	1
1. Making Sense of Cultural Agency	3
2. The Venezuelan Context: Confronting <i>La Crisis</i>	16
PART TWO · <i>Imaginative Rationality</i>	45
3. Imagining Social Life I: Confronting Akrasia, Crime, and Violence	55
4. Imagining Social Life II: Addressing Personal and Social Issues	77
5. Imagining Evangelical Practice	100
PART THREE · <i>Relational Imagination</i>	153
6. The Social Structure of Conversion	157
7. Two Lives, Five Years Later	184
8. Toward a Relational Pragmatic Theory of Cultural Agency	208

Epilogue	223
Appendix A: Status of Evangelical Respondents after Five Years	225
Appendix B: Methods and Methodology	228
Appendix C: Quantitative Analysis of Networks and Conversion	237
Glossary of Spanish Terms	243
References	245
Index	259

Making Sense of Cultural Agency

CAN PEOPLE DECIDE TO BELIEVE?

Jorge was born in the Afro-Venezuelan coastal region of Barlovento and as a child moved with his family to Petare, the massive group of barrios at the eastern end of Caracas. At fourteen he dropped out of school to work and help his mother support eleven brothers and sisters. During Jorge's formative years, Petare evolved from a slum with grinding poverty into a slum with grinding poverty, drugs, and violence—a process Jorge's family experienced in concrete and tragic terms. When Jorge was in his late teens a feud between some of his brothers and other *malandros* (delinquents) led the latter to invade Jorge's family home to seek revenge. They beat, kicked, and stomped his brother to death on the kitchen floor at Jorge's mother's and sisters' feet. In a not unreasonable panic, his mother quickly sold the house and the family dispersed, moving in with kin or friends in various parts of Barlovento and Caracas. With an older brother, Jorge lived for several years in and out of the homes of kin, in flophouses, and occasionally in the street. They worked odd jobs, occasionally stole, and always partied heavily. Jorge eventually fell in love, and he and his partner lived together.

Jorge started to work stably and had three children with his partner, along with her child from a previous union. However, after a few years of routine, he began to use drugs again. His marriage grew increasingly conflictive as his drug use depleted scarce household resources. To make up the difference, he started robbing people in the street—using his hand-

gun not only to steal people's money but also their jewelry, clothes, and shoes for later resale. He used the money to buy food for his house full of children—as well as drugs for himself. He got to the point of pulling out his gun instead of his billfold at the cash registers of neighborhood *abastos* (small mom-and-pop grocery stores). After narrowly surviving an ambush in which the brothers of a man whose shoes he stole tried to kill him and after listening to a cassette that a friend's Evangelical sister had given him, Jorge decided he wanted to change. He went with his friend to the sister's church where they both "accepted the Lord." When he told his wife about it and said he wanted her to come to the church, she asked him if he was serious. Jorge answered, "I sure am. I want to change this life I'm leading." In my first interview with Jorge, about a year after his conversion,¹ he explained, "I was against the wall. I was cornered and I didn't know what to do." When I followed up five years later he was still attending the same church and was leader of its youth group. Jorge and his wife eke out a living for their family of seven selling cleaning products door-to-door, and Jorge occasionally works on government maintenance crews.

Jorge is typical of converts to Evangelical Protestantism in Latin America insofar as his conversion was undertaken as a solution to persistent life problems—what Andrew Chesnut (1997) has aptly called states of "dis-ease." Evangelicalism has grown by leaps and bounds in Latin America since the mid-twentieth century but especially in the past twenty-five years. According to recent estimates, one-tenth of the population of traditionally Catholic Latin America—some fifty million people—belong to a Protestant denomination (Jenkins 2002). While initial analyses of this boom amounted to shrill accusations of cultural imperialism or laments over a shift toward otherworldly escapism,² empirically grounded research revealed Evangelicalism is a means by which poor Latin Americans address the challenges they are confronted with.

1. I agree with the criticism that the term *conversion* denotes a rapid and radical transformation that rarely occurs in individual religious change (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Stark and Bainbridge 1987). However, alternatives also stack the conceptual deck. *Affiliation* directs our attention away from belief and personal experience and toward the organizational dimension of experience. *Recruitment* places agency with the organization or movement rather than with the person who joins. The term *commitment* means personal assent to the meaning system. Here I simply use the term *conversion* and rely on my substantive descriptions to make clear that I consider the extent and rhythm of change empirical questions.

2. Much of this research refers to a purported invasion of *las sectas* (Albán Estrada and Muñoz 1987; Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano 1982; Gamuza 1988; Silleta 1987). For an overview of this debate in Latin America as a region, see Stoll 1990. For an overview of Venezuela, see Smilde 1999.

In other words, it serves as a form of cultural agency through which they can gain control over aspects of their personal and social contexts. Probably the best-known challenge is substance abuse. Researchers have argued that whereas alcohol traditionally facilitates peasant norms of reciprocity in rural areas, in the context of urban poverty it frequently reaches debilitating levels and can fade into drug use. This, in turn, can exacerbate poverty and family conflict. Numerous researchers (Annis 1987; Brusco 1995; Chesnut 1997; Flora 1976; Mariz 1994; Martin 1990; Stoll 1990) have argued that Evangelicalism provides a solution to problem drinking. It prohibits drinking—as well as drugs, tobacco, and gambling—and provides an alternative social network not based on alcohol consumption. This network also supports individuals trying to overcome addiction and monitors their progress. Backsliding can result in church discipline and the disapprobation of fellow members.

According to researchers, individuals also convert to address conjugal conflict. The challenges of impoverished urban life often lead patriarchal ideals to transform into a male prestige complex referred to as *machismo* (Brown 1991; Brusco 1995; Smilde 1994). The *machista* male frequently consumes in the street resources that should be directed to the home. And his search for female conquests produces conflict with a wife no longer willing to tolerate the patriarchal double standard. Women suffer not only from *machista* men but also from a lack of culturally legitimate opportunities to participate in extrahousehold organizations. Fieldwork has shown that participation in Evangelicalism leads men to focus on the domestic sphere (Brusco 1995; Burdick 1993; Flora 1976), confirms male headship while providing a new basis for female autonomy (Brusco 1995; Burdick 1993; Smilde 1997), and provides women with a form of participation that is relatively nonthreatening to the men who aspire to control them (Brusco 1995; Flora 1976; Smilde 1994). Most of this scholarship has been based on fieldwork carried out with women; inferences are made primarily on the basis of data on women's perspectives. In chapter 4 I address these issues, among others, using data collected among men.

Another reason for conversion to Evangelicalism is violence. In the context of dictatorship, war, and other forms of political conflict Evangelicalism can function as an effective means for withdrawal from situations of violence. By becoming Evangelical, the individual is effectively extracted from extended violent interaction: he or she is no longer considered a threat or an opportunity by either side (Annis 1987; Martin 1990; Stoll 1990, 1993). Research in urban contexts shows a similar

phenomenon in the case of urban violence: conversion to Evangelicalism provides men with a way to step out of conflict-ridden situations (Brusco 1995; Burdick 1993). The crime wave in Latin American societies in the 1990s has only increased the importance of this issue for Latin America's poor, as well as for Evangelicals. I want to mention one final finding of research on Latin American Evangelicalism: religious participation can provide networks of support for rural-to-urban migrants (Roberts 1968). These networks provide information on employment, recommendations, small loans, and other forms of assistance and are therefore key to socioeconomic survival and advancement among the popular sectors (Lomnitz 1977). Without such networks individuals face reduced life chances. In addition to an environment of solidarity, the rigorous norms for personal behavior in Evangelicalism serve as credentials for honesty and hard work in an unstable environment in which work is often day-to-day and one never knows when social support will be necessary (Annis 1987; Mariz 1994; Martin 1993; Roberts 1968).

These portrayals of Evangelical conversion and participation as a form of cultural agency have gone far toward undermining simplistic criticisms of this movement as an "opiate of the masses." However, these portrayals are "instrumentalist" insofar as they explain the adoption of a religious meaning system and form of practice as a means of obtaining nonreligious rewards. Some of the literature speaks openly in these terms. Elizabeth Brusco (1995: 146 ff., 222) sees Evangelicalism as "a form of female collective action" in that it is "an intensely pragmatic movement aimed at reforming those aspects of society which most affect [women's] lives." Cecilia Mariz (1994: 121) speaks of conversion as "a cultural strategy in poor people's attempts to improve their lives." When taken by themselves, statements such as these make one wonder why religion is involved at all.

I originally took up this study because although I could understand positive this-worldly effects of religious belief, I could not understand positive this-worldly effects as *reasons for* religious beliefs. Many of the authors I was reading seemed to feel the same tension and concluded their work with disclaimers moderating the instrumentalist tone of their arguments. Thus Mariz (1994: 59) writes that the "cultural strategies" she found might actually be "unintended consequences." Sheldon Annis (1987: 141) concludes his book on conversion as a form economic maximization thus: "Yet one need only attend prayer in any village church . . . to know that Protestantism means far

more than just rationalizing economic gain.” And David Martin (1991: 82–83), in an article on Evangelicalism and entrepreneurship, argues, “People don’t convert for economic gains. But when they come they are happy to thank the Lord for his blessings” (see also Berger 1990: ix).

I entered the field with the idea that religious conversion was undertaken for religious reasons, not for the nonreligious rewards resulting from belief and practice. Nevertheless, from my first days in the field it became clear that my respondents did not support this assumption. My first field trip was to Colombia. During my first week in Bogotá, I interviewed the pastor of a large Evangelical church on the city’s north side. As I was waiting for the pastor I struck up a conversation with his secretary about her becoming an Evangelical. She said that she and her family left the Catholic Church for Evangelicalism when they moved from a small town in the Amazon to Bogotá. When I asked why, she left me speechless by saying they had arrived with little money and without family or friends and decided that “the economic and spiritual fruits [of Evangelicalism] were better.” As my fieldwork continued, such anomalies accumulated: time and again people unabashedly said they had converted because of the perceived economic, social, and personal gains. Jorge, for example, openly communicated his conversion history in terms of an *intentional* project of self or family reform. He unapologetically spoke of conversion as a way to address pressing life problems. He presented it that way to his wife. He presented it that way to me, the interviewer.

Of course, it is hardly news that people intentionally change aspects of their lives in order to address the challenges they face: they get married or divorced, return to or drop out of school, move or stay put, apologize or take stands. But adopting a set of *beliefs* in order to address the pressing challenges of everyday life is different. Can people really *decide* to believe in a religion because it is in their interest to do so? This explanation for adopting religion raises a number of thorny issues that must be addressed if we are to understand the growth of Latin American Evangelicalism and any number of other cultural phenomena in contemporary social life. One need only conduct a quick internet search on the phrase “you gotta believe!” to find a wide range of inspirational books, tapes, music, and speeches that urge people to “believe” in order to overcome addiction, win the big game, increase sales, or defeat injustice. In each case there is the suggestion not only that it is important to believe you can succeed but also that you can decide to adopt that belief.

There is a complex relationship between intention and belief here that is poorly understood.

WHY DOESN'T EVERYONE DECIDE TO BELIEVE?

Aurelio is forty years old but could easily pass for fifty-five. He lives with his mother and sister in the same *rancho* where he grew up and has a permanent grumbly, beleaguered demeanor. During our two-hour interview, he readily told me about a decade of defeats, his collection of regrets, and the serious problems he still confronts. Two years before our interview he had organized residents to close off their sector of the barrio with locked gates to which only the residents would have keys. This is one of a number of ways that residents of Caracas's barrios have found to reduce crime and violence. However, the prospect of gates often causes conflict with those who benefit from disorganization through involvement with the drug economy; and neighborhood organizers are frequently the targets of violence. Indeed, in Aurelio's barrio just one year before his initiative, a neighborhood activist had been brutally murdered in the middle of the night by hooded gunmen. With this in mind, Aurelio was reluctant about his leadership role in this tense process. He expressed resentment at his neighbors for what happened when drug-dealing neighbors opposed to the gate brought in a *malandro* to rough him up. None of the neighbors who supported installing the gate defended him. Instead, he says, "everyone ran into their houses to hide and watch the fight."

At about the same time Aurelio learned that his partner of six years was pregnant with her lover's child. They separated as a result, but he has not seen another woman since. They still have occasional sexual encounters, though she is living with the child's father. The combination of neighborhood conflict and relationship breakdown hit him hard. In his terms, he got "skinny, skinny, skinny." In the Venezuelan ethnophysiology of suffering, being *gordo* (fat) means health and success while being *flaco* (skinny) means hardship and affliction.

One of the issues that brought his relationship to an end was gambling. For many years Aurelio was the president of a sports club he founded. The members had created and painted a volleyball court in the parking lot of a hospital just down the street from their neighborhood. However, when neighborhood *malandros* started using the parking lot

to do drugs, the hospital closed it off. This was just the last of several setbacks for a sports club in a city with virtually no green space. Aurelio disbanded it and soon thereafter started betting on horses. This pastime rapidly became an obsession that consumed all his resources. He told me that he got to the point that he would have to leave cash at work, or he would lose it all playing the horses. On the few occasions when he made money gambling he generally used the windfall to buy a crate of beer to drink with neighbors and candy for the neighborhood kids. The financial drain caused conflict with his partner. It also prevented any significant accumulation. Aurelio said his whole family has “vices” and pointed to the decrepit state of their rancho as evidence. Nobody in the family works together, he complained, everyone pulls in their own direction. But he is no exception. “I can find money for vices, even if it means a loan,” he said in self-deprecation. “But for my mother, my pockets are empty.”

One of Aurelio’s good friends is an Evangelical with whom he likes to talk about the Gospel. This friend helped Aurelio through the breakup of his relationship and the conflict over the gate. Aurelio reads the Bible on his own but does not think he could become an Evangelical like his friend. He explained, “I like the Gospel, but I’m not going to tell you that I’m prepared to become an Evangelical because I like women a lot, I like booze. I’m not going to lie to anybody.” Why has Aurelio not become an Evangelical? His case seems overdetermined: he has experienced acute danger and personal conflict, is beleaguered by money-consuming vices, suffers enduring poverty, and is dismayed with his neighbors, his family, and himself. Yet he has not become Evangelical. When I followed up five years later he was still living in largely the same way. If Aurelio, like Jorge, could simply decide to believe, he could overcome his gambling problem, save money, contribute to his household, overcome his fear of violence, and very likely find a new partner.

The issue can be broadened. A large percentage of the population of all Latin American countries suffers from one, a few, or all of the problems Evangelicalism reportedly addresses. Nevertheless, even in those countries with the largest Evangelical populations, such as Brazil, Chile, and Guatemala, only a relatively small percentage of the population has converted. Why? We can go further. If people in Venezuela or anywhere could simply decide to believe, the implications would be vast. Few people would be depressed, family conflict would be resolved,

crime and violence would end, and low self-esteem would be history. Even in the direst of situations, a person could conceivably adopt the belief that he or she is well off and the luckiest person alive. Of course, this is not the world we live in; conflict, dysfunction, and sorrow are constants of the human condition. Yet most analyses of cultural empowerment would lead us precisely down this path.³ So we are left with another question: if people can decide to believe, why doesn't everyone do so?

EVANGELICALISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN LATIN AMERICA

The growth of Evangelicalism in Latin America has received widespread attention and, unsurprisingly, has been given widely differing assessments. Neo-Marxist scholars see cultural movements such as Latin American Evangelicalism as symptoms rather than solutions. Religious movements, in this view, clearly manifest discontent with conditions of inequality, poverty, and suffering, but they are backward looking and inconsequential as solutions. Manuel Castells has provided the most recent version of this theory in his trilogy, *The Information Age*. In his view transportation and communication technologies have reconstructed modern society away from nation-states and toward global networks of dominant classes that are shadowed by excluded masses. The latter have no place in the network society, yet their traditional ways of life are threatened and undermined by it. Chapter 2 outlines changes such as these in Venezuelan social structure since structural adjustment began in 1983. In Castells's analysis marginalized peoples create reactive identity movements that look to reestablish and reaffirm local identities. However, these movements are poorly situated to facilitate any gain in agency among the marginalized and are therefore largely irrelevant and superfluous. In this view poverty and underdevelopment are the result of social structure, not culture. If certain types of culture correspond to poverty, this is because poverty creates the culture, not vice versa.

The neo-Marxist argument corresponds to the flat-footed common sense of most intellectuals when they confront the phenomenon of

3. I frequently use the term *empowerment* as a subset of *agency*. By "agency," I mean a form of practice in which an individual or social actor's autonomy and control are for the most part increased. I use *empowerment* for more concrete cases in which it is relatively clearer that autonomy and control have been increased.

singing, praying Evangelicals holding their hands high in the middle of Catholic Latin America: Evangelicalism is an expression of futility at best, cultural imperialism at worst (see note 2). The title of Christian Lalive D'Epinay's book *Haven for the Masses* (1969) could hardly be more eloquent. Most versions of this argument, however, are abstract critiques based on impressionistic fieldwork. And they sit uneasily with people like Jorge who seem to be empowered by their religious participation. People like Jorge, and findings like those described in my discussion of his case above, are more consistent with perspectives that highlight the role of culture in social change.

Neoconservative scholars have long pointed to cultural differences when seeking to explain the differential success of development between the United States and in Latin America. Far more advanced at the end of the eighteenth century, Catholic Latin America was eclipsed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the Protestant North in terms of economic growth and political development. Edward Banfield, Samuel Huntington, Lawrence Harrison, and many others have argued, in various ways, that "development is a state of mind." Latin American culture, in this view, lacks the values of personal initiative and responsibility, freedom and peacefulness, and is tied down by a heritage of particularism and patron-client ties of loyalty. From this perspective, culture is an autonomous factor that determines who prospers. While the culture of Latin America has been seen as a hindrance, neoconservative scholars are hopeful that this "new reformation," this dramatic growth of Evangelical Protestantism, is a sign that change is coming (Berger 1990; DeSoto 1989; Martin 1990, 1991; Sherman 1997). This perspective is generally accompanied by the view that neoliberal reforms—such as reductions in state budgets, regulations, and price controls and the opening of national industries and markets to global competition—*generate* values conducive to societal development. "Research that provides evidence of the influence of cultural factors on development prospects is valuable for reinforcing the emerging shift toward neoliberalism in development thinking," wrote Amy Sherman (1997: 17) in her book *The Soul of Development*.⁴

But there is a tension in the neoconservative view that brings us back

4. The idea that the withdrawal of government programs can facilitate culture more suitable for capitalism and democracy is, of course, not confined to debates on third world development. The 1996 welfare reform law in the United States was called the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. The guiding idea was precisely that

to the questions of whether people can decide to believe and, if so, why not everybody does. The attempt to use the rise of Evangelicalism to support the effectiveness of neoliberal development policies sits uncomfortably with the desire to portray culture as an autonomous factor in development. As Howard Wiarda (2001) has pointed out, if culture is a key independent variable in explaining which societies successfully adopt neoliberal capitalism, then the fact that Latin America is still far and away a Catholic majority leads to the conclusion that for the foreseeable future neoliberal reforms would be ill advised. Neoconservative support for neoliberal reforms only works if, in some way, neoliberal reforms themselves produce cultural change—a difficult position if you are trying to argue that previous development regimes failed precisely because “culture matters” (Harrison and Huntington 2000). But several authors have pushed forward with this argument. Harrison (2000: 171) gives seven recommendations for how to change culture in order to facilitate progress, including “religious reform.” Otto Reich (1983: 40) writes that states can facilitate a “culture of responsibility” by “establishing a fertile context for private initiative.” And in the introduction to *The Culture of Entrepreneurship*, Bridgett Berger (1991: 1) argues that given the right context entrepreneurs produce culture. “Any culture is available to any group at any time, provided external conditions (as well as social values, practices, and norms) permit and encourage new patterns to unfold and take root” (6). This position depends on a view in which human actors like Jorge can decide to adopt new beliefs and practices that will help them adjust to their life circumstances.

Applying the neo-Marxist and neoconservative perspectives on social change to the growth of Latin American Evangelicalism makes clear that each lacks an adequate sociology. On the one hand, neo-Marxist pessimism would focus on Aurelio but completely dismiss Jorge. It depends on an abstract determinism that is critical, yet overlooks the increasing power of cultural mobilization among Latin America’s popular sectors. Popular religious movements, ethnic indigenous movements, and subaltern nationalist movements are changing the face of Latin American society in ways that are difficult to reconcile with the abstract determinism of Castells and others. On the other hand, neoconservative triumphalism would point to Jorge and ignore Aurelio. It depends on a decontextualized voluntarism that assumes people can always maximize their social

welfare discouraged values of individual responsibility whereas welfare reform would encourage them.

situations by selecting from an infinite repertoire of culture.⁵ It thereby distracts attention from the dominant if unintended ground-level effects of global restructuring: unemployment, poverty, crime, violence, substance abuse, drug trafficking, and family conflict. If we hope to understand the significance of Latin American Evangelicalism for social change, we need to develop a conceptualization of agency, culture, and social structure that will allow us to understand the simultaneous coexistence of Jorge's transformation and Aurelio's dysfunction.

THE ARGUMENT

In this book I develop an explanation that contradicts the neo-Marxist perspective by arguing that Evangelical conversion is not a reactive response to identities lost but a forward-looking, intentional project of self- or family reform.⁶ Put differently, I answer the question of whether people can decide to believe by portraying Evangelical belief and practice as a form of *imaginative rationality* through which people get things done in this world. "Imaginative" should not be taken here as a synonym for false, insincere, or ungrounded (Anderson 1983; Chakrabarty 2000; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). To the contrary, by "imaginative rationality" I mean humans' ability to get things done by creating concepts.⁷ Part 2 of this book shows the way in which the Evangelical men I worked with imagine their social world as well as their own religious practices and how this facilitates their action. Chapter 3 looks at how my informants use Evangelical meanings to conceptualize problems of substance abuse, crime, and violence in such a way that they can overcome them or at least address their pernicious effects. Chapter 4 examines how my informants use Evangelical meanings to address issues of personal development and social life such as unemployment, family, and conjugal conflict. Each of these chapters provides a clear view of how marginal men can address pressing life issues, recurring sources of dis-ease, by becoming Evangelical. Chapter 5 looks directly at the first question posed in this book: can people decide to believe? I argue that they can. First I argue that there is

5. Several contributors to Sommer 2006 point out parallel issues, arguing that the term *cultural agency* easily fits into a logic of abandonment by the state as a concomitant of *cultural autonomy*.

6. My argument on this point parallels Richard Wood's (2003) argument in *Faith in Action* but at a more micro level.

7. I use the terms *concepts* and *meanings* throughout this book instead of the term *schemas* as I have elsewhere (Smilde 2004), precisely to undermine the distinctions between cultural and everyday or scientific concepts.

no natural distinction between religious and nonreligious goals; this common distinction always depends on the religious meanings used to conceptualize it. Thus in the meaning system of Venezuelan Evangelicalism, seeking to address pressing problems of self- or family reform through religious practice is no more instrumental than seeking eternal life through religious practice. Then I argue that the men I studied had good reason to believe in Evangelical projects. The Evangelical meaning system not only helps me address the problems they face; it also provides a repertoire of meanings with which to understand the success and failure of Evangelical projects. Finally, I argue that the Evangelical meaning system provides narratives through which Evangelicals “remember” their conversion experience as one in which it was God acting, not them. These narratives, in effect, minimize the believer’s responsibility for conversion and thereby increase the interpretive validity of that new identity.

My analysis of imaginative rationality is fully consistent with the neo-conservative view that people can adopt culture that helps them to address their problems and maximize their situations. However, my analysis in part 3 complicates the matter by challenging the idea that “any culture is open to any group at any time.” Put differently, I answer the question of why not everybody believes by arguing that a cultural innovation such as religious conversion depends on *relational imagination*. What the men I studied can imagine and when they can imagine it largely depends on their relational context.⁸ Conversion to Evangelicalism depends on structural contexts that facilitate exposure to a particular meaning system or do not hinder cultural innovation. Chapter 6 shows that young men in Caracas are often spurred to imagine alternatives by contact with household members embodying those alternatives. Alternatively, they are often prevented from imagining alternatives by contact with household members who maintain traditional meanings. Indeed, over the past twenty years of economic and political reform in Venezuela, relatively few people have coped with the breakdown of their way of life by means of religious change. More common strategies run from the benign—such as reduced consumption and informal street selling—to the malignant—such as consumption and distribution of drugs, involvement in crime, and abuse and violence. In chapter 7 I push further into relational imagination through extended attention to two men who find themselves at the intersection of competing networks that provide alter-

8. See Al Young (2004) for a similar argument regarding young African American men in Chicago’s inner city.

native strategies. Reinterviewed five years later, these men reveal their wrenching struggles to extract themselves from networks that lead to participation in the complex of drugs, crime, and violence. These cases also delve more deeply into how family, friends, and particular meanings affect the ability of individuals to imagine alternative futures.

In chapter 8 I push toward a relational, pragmatic theory of cultural agency, returning there to the theoretical issues introduced at the beginning of part 2. Drawing on pragmatist, feminist, and postcolonial theories, this perspective seeks to skirt the Scylla of abstract determinism while avoiding the Charybdis of decontextualized voluntarism and thereby to allow us to understand more clearly how and when people get things done with culture.