Preface

As life moves, persuasion moves with it and indeed helps to move it. More bluntly, whatever God may or may not be—living, dead, or merely ailing—religion is a social institution, worship a social activity, and faith a social force. To trace the pattern of their changes is neither to collect relics of revelation nor to assemble a chronicle of error. It is to write a social history of the imagination.

Clifford Geertz

If the thoughtful attitude toward the place of religion in contemporary life was summed up in the first half of the twentieth century by Sigmund Freud’s phrase “the future of an illusion,” the corresponding phrase for the second half century has been Peter Berger’s “a rumor of angels.” Differences among Christians, Jews, Moslems, and Hindus are as salient today as they have ever been, and even the exclusive club of the “world religions” is facing the prospect of admitting the globally dynamic Yoruba religion as a new member. That religious consciousness is not merely persistent but resurgent should be no surprise, for religion has always been one of the defining features of the human world. Just as we have been characterized as Homo sapiens, Homo faber, Homo hierarchicus, Homo loquax, or Homo ludens, we have also rightly been called Homo religiosus.

In the above epigraph Geertz offers a pragmatic program for understanding Homo religiosus by identifying religion with persuasion and
imagination. Persuasion establishes those perduring moods and motivations that Geertz in his well-known definition of religion has identified so lucidly; imagination refers to the human capacity to constitute and inhabit multiple realities. The trajectory of this book is toward reformulating the general "what" represented in my title by language and creativity into the specific "how" of persuasion and imagination. Across this trajectory charisma is a middle term made necessary by the kind of episode in the social history of the imagination I will examine and made problematic by my particular claim about the way it is a function of language and creativity.

This book addresses language, charisma, and creativity via the empirical example of a contemporary religious movement known as Catholic Pentecostalism, or the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. How do these theoretical issues take into account the significance of a "rumor of angels" in the bosom of what still portrays itself as a secular, scientific society? In this context, to take a close look at a contemporary religious movement such as the Catholic Charismatic Renewal is to embrace one of the primary tasks of anthropology as a scholarly discipline committed to critical thought: to stimulate reflection by making the exotic seem familiar and the familiar appear strange. In an instance like ours, this is more complex than it at first appears. Unlike anthropological studies of distant tribal societies, where the reciprocal movement between familiar and strange ideally occurs simultaneously as a consequence of the ethnographic portrayal of the cultural "other," our task includes showing that people who might be regarded by many as "religious weirdos" are quite like ourselves, and at the same time that people who might be our neighbors in fact inhabit a substantially different phenomenological world. In addition (though it is also increasingly the case of ethnographies in Third World settings), a text such as this is easily available to participants in the religious movement, and for them what is already familiar can be rendered challengingly strange by the relativizing style of ethnographic writing.

Moreover, by a curious twist, this relativizing style renders itself strange (and the ethnographer along with it) when applied to a cultural phenomenon that is so close to home yet so puzzling within the cultural context of academic anthropologists. I am thinking here of the convention in ethnographic prose of describing religious ritual and spiritual phenomena in straightforward declarative language: "The spirit speaks through the medium," or "The deity is propitiated by sacrifice," or again "The deceased becomes an ancestral spirit that is responsible
for the well-being of the clan." I have adopted this declarative convention in writing and speaking about Charismatics, with the surprisingly frequent result that I am myself suspected of being a "believer." I am not at all concerned here with the question of whether one can be a believer and still be a good anthropologist. I am concerned instead with an observation that to me is quite ironic: that what is strange in a familiar way (because it is part of one's culture) can render what is familiar (in this case a convention of ethnographic prose) strangely difficult to recognize as such.

The question of whether a religious movement like the Charismatic Renewal is strange or familiar to begin with has a temporal dimension as well. "Conservative Christianity" is a media phenomenon even for those who know little about its specifics. Yet beyond this level of popular cultural representation is a more everyday kind of familiarity. When I first began studying this particular movement in 1973—only six years after its inception—anyone who asked me seriously what I was working on listened to fifteen minutes of background discourse before responding that they'd never heard of such a thing. By the early nineties it was more typical, after mentioning that I had studied the Charismatic Renewal, to get a response like "Oh, my aunt is part of that," or "My mother tried to get me to go to a prayer meeting once."

Finally, the very fact of having been concerned with cultural analysis of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal for twenty years has created the additional consequence of rendering the phenomenon strangely familiar to me, the ethnographer. It is a feature of my intellectual biography, and the ethnographic encounter culminating in the text I present here has inevitably been transposed across a variety of theoretical developments in anthropology during that period. These twenty-odd years span a shift in the very idea of temporality in anthropological work, from an approach that might conceive this period as an example of "long-term field research" (Foster et al. 1979) that deepens and intensifies anthropological knowledge in a cumulative fashion to one that bears the dual injunction to account reflexively for temporality and history in our analytic construction of the ethnographic object and to explicitly recognize the autobiographical element in ethnographic writing (Fabian 1983). Likewise there is a substantial difference among the research agendas summarized by phrases such as religion and social change, movement dynamics, or revitalization movements in the 1960s and early 1970s and those defined by notions of performance theory, interpretation, hermeneutics, and phenomenology from the mid-1970s.
through the 1980s. Again, my encounter with this empirical phenomenon spans the period in which the modernization theory dominant through the early 1970s has been deconstructed by the postmodern decentering of meaning and the awareness of globalization in the 1980s and early 1990s. My point here is not to suggest that I am offering a synthesis of all these approaches, but more modestly to acknowledge that various insights and passages reflect various periods of my theoretical development as well as of my ethnographic encounter. I would argue that there is nothing inconsistent in this, any more than it is inconsistent to acknowledge the existence of a postmodern condition of culture (which I do) while demurring from the impulse to write a postmodernist ethnographic text (which I also do).

Given these considerations it is incumbent upon me to specify the method of my ethnographic investigation over this twenty-year period. In 1973, having been discouraged by a senior anthropologist from a plan to study a Native American religious movement, I decided to determine what might be afoot among Euro-American Christians. In a Christian bookstore I came across an intriguing little book with the apparently oxymoronic title *Catholic Pentecostals*, and soon began a study of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Columbus, Ohio. At the time in that city there were about half a dozen “prayer groups,” most based in local parishes. I concentrated on the social organization and ritual life of the largest among them, while attending as well to their differences, the degree of organization by which they were linked to one another, and their links to the non-Catholic Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal communities in the metropolitan area. During this early period I was aware that these groups were part of a larger “movement” through their circulation of published literature, cassette tapes, and their own magazines. The importance of the movement as such was highlighted for me when at the end of this field period I attended the movement’s 1974 “national conference” where I observed twenty-five thousand people enthusiastically gathered for a large rally in the football stadium of Notre Dame University.

Nevertheless, when I began a second period of fieldwork, from 1976 to 1979, for my doctoral dissertation, I returned first to the group in Columbus. I found that a highly active core group of participants was increasingly attracted to what was already the largest community within the movement, The Word of God in Ann Arbor, Michigan. On a visit there with several Charismatic friends from the Columbus group (who eventually moved to Ann Arbor), one of The
Word of God leaders, called head coordinators, suggested that I should come there—the “center” of the movement—if I wanted to get a full understanding of Charismatic life. Taking advantage of this opportunity meant submitting a proposal to the community’s coordinators concerning my interests. One among them was assigned to arrange interview appointments with community members and officials and for me to live for a week in one of the community “households.” I was also given access to the community library with its archive of audiotapes of community gatherings and ritual events, from which the bulwark prophecies analyzed in chapter 7 were transcribed.

These experiences led me to problematize anew the sense in which the Catholic Charismatic Renewal could be characterized as a movement. To what extent was it accurate to say that the movement had a center, no center, or multiple centers? Certainly it did not appear to have a single “charismatic leader” as one would expect from the sociological literature deriving from Max Weber. To what extent was it homogeneous as opposed to being separated into regional branches or ideological factions? How could one account for the evident internationalization of the movement as it spread beyond its North American point of origin? What were the scope and nature of this religious phenomenon as an episode in the social history of the imagination?

These questions were evidently not being posed in the small but focused literature that was appearing on the movement, which even when acknowledging the existence of different orientations within it, adopted methods biased toward the perception of homogeneity. These methods were of two types. The first was a statistical homogeneity present in the work of quantitative sociologists who, while selecting groups from different regions or localities, did not distinguish among them (Fichter 1975; Mawn 1975; Bord and Faulkner 1975); this was the homogeneity of the representative sample. The second was a parochial homogeneity present in the work of qualitative anthropologists and sociologists who based their studies on individual groups and communities or on several groups in a particular metropolitan area (Lane 1976, 1978; Hegy 1978; McGuire 1976; Westley 1977; Chagnon 1979; McGuire 1975 a, 1982; Neitz 1987); this was the homogeneity of the exemplary community that was also characteristic of my own first study.

The Word of God community had also drawn some attention, mostly from the students of the anthropologist Roy Rappaport and the sociologist Max Hirek at the University of Michigan (Harrison 1974a, 1974b, 1975; Keane 1974; and Jeanne Lewis 1995), but primarily as
an intentional community in its own right and not with respect to its place within a movement. Something more of an effort to deal with the movement as such in the United States was undertaken by Richard Bord and Joseph Faulkner (1983), who combined a survey study of groups across the country with a closer study of The Word of God community, and Margaret Poloma (1982), whose work begins to capture some of the internal diversity within the movement and devotes much more attention to published sources and documents from the movement than does my ethnographic approach. Thus, with the intent of contributing a more comprehensive perspective from an anthropological standpoint, by the end of this field period I had visited fifteen groups in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maryland, and North Carolina and gathered additional information about other groups in the United States and abroad. I also subscribed to the newsletters published by the movement’s National Service Committee in South Bend, Indiana, and by the International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Office in Rome, Italy (see Csordas 1980, 1983, 1987, 1992 for some of the results from work of this period).

The next period of field research was from 1986 to 1989, when I worked primarily in southeastern New England with a focus on therapeutic process in Charismatic ritual healing (Csordas 1988, 1990a, 1990b, 1993, 1994a). I opened this period with another visit to a national conference, this time in New Orleans and with interdenominational (or ecumenical, as some say) Charismatic participation. Throughout this period I renewed my knowledge of ritual life and the course of the movement during the decade of the 1980s. I revisited several communities from my earlier study, including The Word of God, where I again interviewed leaders and stayed with friends who had been patiently answering my questions since the days they were leaders of the prayer group in Columbus.

The final phase of research was in 1991, when, realizing that The Word of God was well into its second generation, I conceived a study of moral development among community children and adolescents. In the process of arranging for my research assistant to work within the community interviewing teachers, parents, and children, I became aware that major changes in group life had occurred within the past year. We broadened the focus of our work to include these changes and their implications for an understanding of the movement as a whole. This is where my account ends, though it hardly needs say-
ing that we have not had the last word on the Catholic Charismatic Renewal.

It also need not be said that a claim to comprehensiveness with respect either to diversity or to history in a religious phenomenon of the magnitude of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal is eminently futile. There is no disguising the tension between my effort to understand the movement and the need to fall back on more familiar local exemplars such as The Word of God. Methodologically, this tension reflects the struggle of anthropology to move from community-based studies to an understanding of global social and cultural processes. There is another tension inherent in my attempt to spin out the relationship between ritual performance and everyday practice as functions of language, charisma, and creativity. This stems from the methodological difficulty of observing everyday practice in a society such as ours where, in contrast to the anthropologist's traditional "village" research locale, workplaces are dispersed and households are relatively inaccessible to the outsider. This is compounded in tightly structured communities such as The Word of God where access to everyday life is by consent of authorities and is in addition subject to explicit codes of appropriateness vis-à-vis communication with outsiders. In short, the reader will find fewer of the intimate interactional vignettes than is customary in ethnography, since with the diminished opportunity to observe everyday behavior more of the data necessarily consist of interviews and observation of ritual.³

In Part One, the first chapter introduces the Charismatic Renewal and surveys its development, first within the Euro-American United States, then cross-culturally and internationally. The account is more descriptive than analytical, and it is intended to convey a sense of the scope and internal diversity of the phenomenon that is the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Chapter 2 is a more concentrated attempt to place the movement in its cultural historical context given the contemporary postmodern condition of culture, with emphasis on the contemporary nature of rationality, the question of identity as a Charismatic, and the transformation of space and time in Charismatic daily life. I examine the Renewal as a "movement," arguing that this is an obvious but also a problematic theoretical category under which to subsume the phenomenon, and introducing a distinction between religions of peoples and religions of the self.

Part Two presents a thesis ascribing the performative generation of diversity within the movement to a dual process of rhetorical
involution characterized by the ritualization of practice and the radicalization of charisma. This thesis is elaborated through an account of what is, within the Charismatic world, the largest and most renowned and at the same time the most controversial of Catholic Charismatic communities, The Word of God/Sword of the Spirit. Chapter 3 combines a historical sketch of the community’s development and an ethnographic sketch of its organization. Chapter 4 examines the dual processes of radicalization of charisma and ritualization of practice within the community over the course of more than two decades. Special attention is given to gender discipline and the ritual enactment of key psychocultural themes of spontaneity, intimacy, and control.

Chapter 5 is an interlude between those chapters that problematize movement and community and those that more explicitly problematize language and creativity. It juxtaposes material from The Word of God, Melanesian cargo cults, the African Jamaa movement, and the sixteenth-century movement of Savonarola to point toward a rhetorical theory of charisma grounded in performance. I propose that charisma is a self-process the locus of which is not the personality of a charismatic leader but the rhetorical resources mobilized among participants in ritual performance.

The two chapters of Part Three show how charisma operates as a collective self-process by examining the performance of ritual language. Chapter 6 demonstrates the creativity of ritual performance, adopting a methodological distinction among event, genre, and act. I describe an intrinsic dialectic between ritual event and everyday life, between genres of ritual language and the motives or terms that are circulated among participants in performance, and between individual terms and the metaphors generated from them. Chapter 7 examines the ritual genre of prophecy, starting with a semiotic analysis of an important Charismatic prophetic text. This analysis uncovers the rhetorical conditions for the radicalization of charisma that we earlier encountered in covenant community life at The Word of God. I then present a phenomenological account of speaking and hearing prophecy and a comparison of prophecy with glossolalia. I suggest that the existential force of prophecy stems from the sense in which all language can be understood as an aspect of bodily experience, which in turn proves to be the ground of all experience of force. As a self-process, charisma thus appears to be equally a function of textuality and embodiment.

Chapter 8, a theoretical epilogue written in light of the foregoing
discussion of Catholic Charismatic ritual life, foregrounds the anthropological debate about creativity in ritual performance. I examine this issue by comparing the work of Stanley Tambiah and Maurice Bloch, two prominent anthropologists who take contrasting stances on the problem of creativity. The chapter concludes with a summary of how a sacred self is created in practice and performance.

I have been asked on several occasions, including by the scholars who reviewed this book for publication, how the work presented here is related to my earlier volume, *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing*. To say that the first book treats the movement’s healing system while the present one treats the movement as a whole is accurate, but superficial. Although each volume stands independently, there are between them both elements of a common intellectual agenda and elements of theoretical tension. An initial tension, implicit in the differential focus on “healing” and “movement,” is apparent between individual and collective processes, and this tension further implies a distinction between a psychological and a social approach to culture. In principle I mistrust such a distinction, just as I have argued that preobjective bodily experience, the existential ground upon which distinctions between subject and object or mind and body are drawn, is the most productive starting point for cultural analysis (Csordas 1990a, 1994). In this respect I have attempted to use central concepts such as self, habitus, performance, experience, and the sacred consistently across both volumes, in ways that privilege neither an individualist nor a collectivist interpretation.

In other instances, there is a more psychological or sociological emphasis to my use of key terms. In *The Sacred Self*, for example, I discuss imagination predominantly as sensory imagery and secondarily as a feature of a collective habitus, whereas in the present work I have invoked Geertz’s notion of a social history of the imagination, though including a description of the individual experience of prophetic imagery. Again, I address the notion of creativity in ritual explicitly here, though in fact it has appeared in other terms in my earlier discussions of therapeutic process, transformation, and healing.

Finally, there are certain themes I take up here that would have been difficult to address in *The Sacred Self*, such as the theory of charisma and the postmodern condition of culture. Conversely, in the earlier work my debt to phenomenology was more evident, as was my effort to problematize the relation between phenomenology and semiotics. Again, in principle I would not align phenomenology exclusively
with individual experience and semiotics with collective representation. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), from my standpoint the leading phenomenological theorist, was himself convinced that a phenomenology grounded in embodiment could be the starting point for the broader analysis of culture and history. From the other side, scholars like Gananath Obeyesekere (1981) have pointed us toward personal as well as collective meanings of cultural symbols. Yet despite persistence of the notion of habitus as a nexus of bodily practice and symbolic representation, there is in the present book a relative deemphasis on bodily experience and perception, on the one hand, and greater emphasis on language and everyday practice, on the other. In any case, I have ended with two separate volumes, and the reader of the present one is hardly required to undertake the methodological exercise of integrating their arguments about the Charismatic Renewal or about culture theory.