

# **CHURCH AND STATE IN CUBA'S REVOLUTION**

By

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## CHURCH, REVOLUTION, NATION

In a predominantly Catholic country, the changing relationship of the Catholic Church to the revolution was a key part of the process of social change – political, social, economic – that took place in Cuba from the end of the 1950s until today. The data for this research come from the 120 in-depth interviews I conducted with Cubans who lived through various stages of the Cuban revolution and who were representative (in social class, race, gender, family composition) of those who left the island from 1959 to 2005. The interviews resulted from participant observation and in many different cities where the Cuban diaspora settled: Miami, Hialeah, Homestead, and Key West; the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan in New York city; Union City, Paterson, and Elizabeth; Boston and Amherst; Chicago; Los Angeles; Houston and Huntsville; Phoenix; Ann Arbor, Detroit, Flint, Ypsilanti, and Lansing; St. Louis; and New Orleans; as well as Montreal, Canada; San Juan, Puerto Rico; and Madrid, Spain (Pedraza 2007). To organize the data from the interviews, I chose Nelson Amaro's (1981) depiction of the process of social change in the beginning years of the revolution (1959-62) as comprising five different stages: democracy, humanism, nationalism, socialism, and Marxism-Leninism.

## DEMOCRACY

Cubans who fought for the revolution in the fifties were against Batista's dictatorship and wanted to restore the republic: the constitutional elections that General Fulgencio Batista's 1952 *coup* had broken. With the attack on the Moncada army barracks on July 26, 1953, the charismatic Fidel Castro became a legend and armed struggle became the only solution to the problem of Batista. While in prison, Castro conducted his own defense with the speech "History will Absolve Me," which presented a program of social democratic reforms together with civil liberties and political democracy.

The revolution increasingly gathered the overwhelming support of the Cuban people as well as most of the Catholic Church. For example, while Castro was in jail, the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, Enrique Pérez-Serantes, interceded for his life and saved him. The revolution had two major thrusts: the 26<sup>th</sup> of July Movement and the student movement. The university students from the *Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil* first opposed Batista. Castro and his followers established guerrilla operations in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra. Militarily, the *Directorio* was responsible for the attack on the Presidential Palace that tried to kill Batista, a virtually suicidal action. Led by José Antonio Echeverría, "*Manzanita*," as he was affectionately called, was shot by the police. His loss left a vacuum that was never filled. A practicing Catholic, a man fiercely committed to constitutional principles, the death of José Antonio meant the loss of the leadership that could channel the revolution towards a constitutional, democratic state. With

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Fidel in *la Sierra*, the movement was then totally in the hands of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July.

Batista fled Cuba on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December, 1958. In the end, his support was minimal and his departure provoked in Cuba an enormous joy that New Year's Day. Triumphant songs could be heard everywhere, particularly the *Canción de Libertad* (Song of Liberty) that asked for God's blessing on the new revolutionary society.

Initially, the Church supported the revolution. Archbishop Enrique Pérez-Serantes sent a message to all regarding the "*Vida Nueva*," the new life that was about to begin in Cuba, full of enthusiasm for Fidel Castro. Catholic intellectuals also strongly supported the revolution. The *Agrupación Católica Universitaria* wanted to influence the implementation of public policies consistent with the Catholic social doctrine of assisting the poor, such as the peasants and slum dwellers. In addition, José Ignacio Rasco founded the *Movimiento Democrático Cristiano*. These organizations sought to address Cuba's problems through structural social reforms, and not just charity. Still, Catholicism exerted a much greater weight on the culture than on social behavior. A survey of religious attitudes showed that while 72 percent of Cubans declared themselves to be Catholic, only 24 percent of those said they regularly attended mass (*Agrupación Católica Universitaria* 1954).

## HUMANISM

In the second stage, Fidel Castro defined the revolution as humanistic during his visit to the US in April 1959, when he said: "Neither bread without liberty, nor liberty without bread," as he assured everyone elections would soon be held. Rebels who had fought in the Sierra Maestra often wore medals or rosaries around their neck, outward signs of faith gave the lie to the allegation that the revolution was communist. When the Agrarian Reform Law was signed, Castro gave the revolution its definition: the revolution "will solve Cuba's problems, because this revolution is not red, this revolution is olive green" -- green as Cuba's palm trees. However, the Church began to truly worry about the direction the revolution was taking. While supportive of the Agrarian Reform, they were also concerned over the excessive power given to the National Institute for Agrarian Reform under *el Ché* Guevara.

The humanism stage ended with Huber Matos' denunciation in October 1959 of the communist turn the revolution was taking. Matos was a *comandante*, a rebel army leader. This was a turning point for many, as were the executions of the *Batistianos*. To Matos and many other supporters who expected a return to the democratic process, the revolution was betrayed by Fidel Castro. When Huber Matos was imprisoned for treason and sedition, members of the Provisional Government resigned. The Church decided to define the Catholic position. *Acción Católica* called a National Catholic Congress at the end of November that about a million persons attended. The *Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, Cuba's patron saint, was brought all the way from her sanctuary in Oriente and was carried in the procession. José Lasaga delivered the message of the Church in one sentence: "Social justice, yes; communism, no!" That was the last public religious procession until the Pope's visit to Cuba 39 years later. Soon Catholics became divided between those who followed the pastoral line and those who joined the opposition in the armed struggle against the revolution. The rule of the moderates had come to an end.

## NATIONALISM

Nationalism peaked, emphasizing “Yankee” imperialism, which enabled the government to nationalize the big Cuban and American industries. In 1960 the Cuban revolution took its definitive course, and the diplomatic and economic war between the U. S. and Cuba ensued, while Cuba joined the Soviet orbit. Civil society – the independent press and television, independent labor unions -- collapsed under the enormous popularity Fidel Castro had with the masses.

In a massive May Day demonstration, Fidel Castro gave a speech in which he concluded that elections were unnecessary since the people had already chosen. A transformation in the political culture of Cuba had taken place. Cuban society became polarized. The “*contrarrevolucionarios*” (counterrevolutionaries) who did not side with the government were eliminated from the institutions; activists were condemned to prison; many were executed. A massive exodus took force.

While to many observers the incorporation of the socially marginal groups taking place then was social justice, to others, the manner in which it was carried out – e.g., confiscating the private homes of the middle classes who were leaving and giving them to the poor – was a miscarriage of justice. To many of the university students, the revolution was tearing down the civic fabric of society; many of them joined the underground movement. The Catholic Church also became involved in what became known as *Operation Pedro Pan* – the massive exodus of over 14,000 unaccompanied children in the early 60s. A rumor had spread throughout Havana that the government planned to abolish the parents’ *patria potestad*, their parental rights, and send the children to the Soviet Union. The U. S. government and the Church organized it as an effort to save the children from communist indoctrination.

## CHURCH VS STATE

An open ideological confrontation developed between the Catholic Church and the state. They were involved in a profound ideological combat between two opposite philosophies, conceptions of humanity that saw each other as incompatible. The Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, Enrique Pérez-Serantes, the same who saved Fidel’s life, framed it as such in his pastoral letter titled “Rome or Moscow.” Crowds of people interrupted the religious services, accusing the priests of being counterrevolutionaries. An identity had developed between the Catholic Church and the opposition. In the mountains, the armed struggle against Fidel developed.

In his pastoral letters, Monsignor Eduardo Boza-Masvidal candidly explained why Castro’s revolution could not be considered Christian, despite its clearly Christian aims of helping the poor, ending racial discrimination, and ameliorating extreme social inequality. Boza-Masvidal underscored that Castro’s revolution was not Christian because the means to achieve this were not just, as they harmed the rights of others. For the revolution to be truly Christian, he said, it needed to base itself on a spiritual conceptualization of life, rather than the materialist conception that had led to erasing the name of God from the Constitution. Moreover, the revolution needed to base itself on love, not on hate and the class struggle. And the revolution needed to respect liberty of expression and association, as well as the right to private property.

## **SOCIALISM**

Socialism began after the large enterprises were nationalized and lasted until December 1, 1961, when Castro for the first time announced that he was and had always been Marxist-Leninist. By now the revolution that had started as a middle-class revolution, whose aim was to restore the republic, had broadened to incorporate the groups that historically were at the margins of society, particularly the peasants, blacks, often women. Two contrasting social processes were taking place. The upper and upper-middle classes and the professional class were leaving the country, seeing the communist turn the revolution had taken, and suffering the loss of their businesses and homes. But a large part of *el pueblo* (the common people), especially the humblest, centered their aspirations and hopes in Fidel Castro.

The opposition to communism was spearheaded by the *Frente Revolucionario Democrático*, through which the exile invasion at Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961 was organized, with the goal of restoring democracy in Cuba. The *invasores* (invaders) were accompanied by three Catholic priests. Their class composition reflected that of the first wave of the exodus – mostly middle and upper-middle class, white Cubans, but a sizable number of working-class and peasant Cubans had also joined, as had black and mulatto Cubans. Militarily, Bay of Pigs was a total failure, as the US denied the air cover that was vital for their success. Fidel called them “*mercenarios*” (mercenaries), but the invasion was part of the struggle between major world powers that defined the Cold War. Shortly before the invasion, Castro’s forces had broken the backbone of the resistance in the island. Many who were part of the underground movement were profoundly Catholic and anti-communist. When executed, they died shouting “*¡Viva Cuba Libre! ¡Viva Cristo Rey!*” (Long live Cuba! Long live Christ the King!).

On May 1, 1961, Fidel Castro proclaimed Cuba a socialist nation. The private schools, mostly Catholic, and the seminaries were taken over by the government. In the fall, the Church was dealt a major blow with the expulsion of the priests, at the head of which was Monsignor Bosa-Masvidal. Thereafter, the Catholic Church lost its ability to lead and was silenced.

## **MARXISM-LENINISM**

The revolution then defined itself as Marxist-Leninist and atheist, followers of a materialist conception of society and history that was antithetical to a religious, spiritual conception of life. For the next 30 years, the temples were rather empty. Assisting a church regularly had many social costs – it could keep one from being promoted at work, from getting a fellowship to the university. During this time, *Santería* – the mixture of Catholicism with West African religious beliefs – was the religious expression that grew. Today it defines the popular religiosity. To many Cubans, Saint Barbara is *Changó*, and *Changó* is Saint Barbara; Our Lady of Charity is *Ochún*, and *Ochún* is *la Virgen de la Caridad* (cf. De Céspedes 1995).

## **CIVIL SOCIETY RETURNS**

The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries ushered in a new stage in Cuba, stage which Fidel Castro euphemistically called “a special period.” Civil society began to reemerge. The crisis of the “special period” in the 1990’s and beyond is not only economic but also a crisis of legitimacy. When the Soviet Union and the

Eastern European communist countries collapsed, Cuba lost the Soviet Union's very generous subsidy and the socialist markets that were its lifeline. Those losses precipitated an extremely deep economic crisis in Cuba that resulted in abject hunger for most Cubans. At the same time, it became evident that communism, as a way of life, had been rejected -- no longer did it house 1/3 of the world's people. The crises spurred the return of civil society in Cuba: the growth of independent journalists, professionals, publications, efforts to create an independent labor union, grassroots organizations to wrestle with social problems at the local level. This also entailed a religious revival of all the faiths (particularly the rapid growth of Protestantism), as the churches began to fill with people and were reinvigorated. To all in Cuba today who consciously participate in reconstructing civil society, civil society is the *sine qua non* of a democratic transition, and is also the warranty of a democratic future (Valdés 1997).

### A NEW CHURCH IN THE ISLAND

Today, the Church plays numerous roles in Cuba: providing spiritual sustenance; solving problems; giving refuge; building democracy; sustaining identity; and promoting human rights. To the many Cubans who grew up without any religious instruction, the Church also provides an alternative vision of society -- one where social classes and races are not pitted against one another, but where the social message is about justice with mercy, compassion.

The Church also provides assistance for solving life's problems -- for those who are lonely, hungry, ill, suffer from alcoholism. The commitment to being a missionary church utilizing its lay members was the result of the ENEC, the *Encuentro Nacional Eclesiástico Cubano* held in 1986 (Collazo 2001; Suárez 2002). Thereafter, the Cuban church began to work with CARITAS (the international Catholic charities) to assist in delivering food and medicine to those most in need, such as the imprisoned and the elderly, many of whom were left alone by the massive exodus that now came from all social classes and races. The Church also gave *amparo*, refuge -- physically and spiritually -- when they are in despair, enabling them both to cope with life in Cuba and stay, occasionally also giving them the spiritual strength to leave the island.

Though to some church leaders, among them the current Cardinal Jaime Ortega, the mission of the Church should be strictly religious, not political, in recent years some church leaders have consciously sought to use the Church to build a democratic future. Perhaps no other priest has played this role as publicly as Father José Conrado Rodríguez did on the heels of the dramatic *balseo* crisis of the summer of 1994 when around 34,000 desperate Cubans put out to sea on rafts. That crisis was the immediate result of another incident -- commonly called "*el Habanazo*" on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August -- the largest protest event on record. Massive riots took place on that day as Cubans ran, shouting down the streets of central Havana, protesting the economic conditions in Cuba as well as the lack of liberty. The riots were also preceded by another major incident: the tugboat tragedy in mid-July. A number of Cuban families were leaving the island before daybreak on a tugboat when the Cuban Coast Guard, trying to stop them, overturned the tugboat with powerful shots of water, downing it and causing the deaths of over 40 adults and children. As a result, Fidel Castro announced that the authorities would not interfere with anyone who wanted to leave, announcement that immediately led to the massive outpouring of thousands of *balseos* to sea, until close to 34,000 *balseos* were collected by the US Coastguard and sent to Guantanamo as a safe haven.

This crisis emboldened Father José Conrado Rodríguez to act. On September 8<sup>th</sup>, the national feast day of their cherished Patron Saint, *la Virgen de la Caridad* (Our Lady of Charity), in his church in Palma Soriano, Oriente, his homily consisted of his reading a letter he had written to Fidel Castro. It read:

For over 30 years, our country engaged in a politics at the base of which was violence ... justified because of the presence of a powerful and tenacious enemy only 90 miles away, the United States of America. The way in which we confronted this enemy was to place ourselves under the power that for years confronted it, the Soviet Union ...

While the Soviet Union gave massive assistance to our economy and our arms race, Cuba gradually fell into a state of internal violence and profound repression ... The use, within and without our country, of hatred, division, violence, suspicion and ill will, has been the main cause of our present and past misfortune.

Now we can see it clearly. The excessive growth of the state, progressively more powerful, left our people defenseless and silenced. The lack of liberty that would have allowed healthy criticism and alternative ways of thinking caused us to slide down the slippery slope of political volition and intolerance towards others. The fruits it bore were those of hypocrisy and dissimulation, insincerity and lying, and a general state of fear that affected everyone in the island. ... We are all responsible, but no one is more responsible than you (Rodríguez 1995).

Father José Conrado's letter to Fidel Castro was widely circulated in Cuba as well as in the exile community. While it earned him the admiration of the exiles, in Cuba it caused him innumerable troubles (Yero 1996). The Church sent him to study in Spain to protect him, for his life came to be in danger. Accused of politicizing his masses in Cuba, Padre José Conrado defended himself by noting that "the church is not an alternative to the political power, nor does it wish to be. But it should realize the duty of its prophetic mission: to denounce injustice" (In Correa 1996). He returned to Cuba, to "accompany *el pueblo* in their process of change."

Today the Church also helps Cubans to find their old yet new identity. In the early 1990's, it was decided that believers could become members of the Communist Party, which had not been previously allowed; a constitutional amendment changed Cuba's definition of itself from an atheist to a secular state (Prieto 2001). Together with the new search for meaning prompted by the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, as well as the impact of the liberation theology movement throughout Latin America, such a redefinition resulted in many Cubans participating in the Church.

This period also witnessed the rapid growth of the dissident movement. Non-violent in strategy and approach, it takes its inspiration from the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In recent years, among the many calls for change they have issued inside of Cuba, two particularly stand out: "*La Patria es de Todos*" ("The Nation Belongs to All of Us") and the *Proyecto Varela*, which was named after the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuban priest, Father Felix Varela, whose life represents loyalty to national independence and democratic institutions, rather

than government. The *Proyecto Varela* demanded five forms of change in Cuba: the right to free expression and a free press; the right to free association; amnesty for political prisoners; the right to form small, private enterprises; and a plebiscite – a new electoral law and general elections. As Oswaldo Payá, founder of the *Movimiento Cristiano Liberación* (Christian Liberation Movement) in Cuba expressed it: “Let no one else speak for Cubans. Let their own voices be heard in a referendum” (Payá 2001). Payá himself, as well as Dagoberto Valdés, founder of the magazine *Vitral* (a stained glass window), whose subtitle was “*la libertad de la luz*” (the freedom of light), were young men who participated in the ENEC in 1986 and drew inspiration from it. Both share the principle that Cubans should remain in Cuba to help build the future. Though *Vitral* was a lay magazine, for many years it was made possible by the assistance of Father Siro Bacallao, the Archbishop of Pinar del Río. Today, Valdés edits a new magazine, *Convivencia*. Payá’s political vision is also religious as his movement is part of the international Christian Democratic movement.

### THE POPE’S VISIT

The Pope’s visit in January 1998 also strengthened the Church and spurred the return of religiosity to Cuban culture. For some Cubans, it was also an opportunity to express their dissent and hope for a democratic future. The most obvious sign of the impact of the Church on Cuban identity and culture has been the enormous popularity of the devotion to *la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*. This could be seen when Pope John Paul II symbolically crowned her during the mass in Santiago de Cuba, accompanied by the joyous sounds of the multitudes who sang *Virgen Mambisa*, a song that alludes to the role the virgin played in the struggle for independence from Spain. Religion and nationalism remain deeply welded in Cuba today. And the virgin also gives expression to the plight of Cubans in the numerous paintings that depict *la Caridad* but substitute the traditional rowing boat with three fishermen underneath her with the *balseros* of the nineties.

Pope John Paul II also exhorted Cubans not to leave the island but to remain in Cuba and to become protagonists of their own future. The direction he gave to that future – “Let Cuba open itself up to the world, and the world to Cuba” – is one that many Cubans, both in the island and in exile, today take very seriously (See Pedraza 2002). For the Pope’s visit, along with many other Cubans in exile, Monsignor Boza-Masvidal returned to Cuba. After 37 years in exile, he was greeted with tears of joy by his old parishioners in his church. While in exile his message never wavered: neither Marxism nor neo-Liberalism.

### THE CHURCH IN THE DIASPORA

Among the *émigrés*, the Church also plays important roles: maintaining a threatened culture; expressing their patriotism; and healing their pain. *La Ermita* is the shrine in Miami that Cubans built by the sea, facing Cuba. It is shaped like the cape the virgin wears, under which, it is said, all Cubans can lie. In the shrine, the mural painted by Teok Carrasco tells the history of Cuba as colony, her struggle for independence, the achievement of the republic, and the expulsion of the religious leaders from revolutionary Cuba – all of who surround the virgin and child at the center. As Tweed (1997) pointed out, Cuban exiles come to the shrine to express their diasporic nationalism, to make sense of themselves as a displaced people. There they construct a collective identity and transport themselves to the Cuba of memory and desire.

The Church also serves to express the immigrants' patriotism and heal the pain of exile. As Marill (2000) stressed, a refugee community is a wounded community, made up of people who carry scars. In the exile narratives she listens to, Marill focuses on the inner dynamics of the heart, the place where the memories of victimization, torture, persecution, oppression, as well as heroic acts in defense of family, faith, freedom, justice reside. Precisely because it is situated in the context of such a wounded community, to many in Miami, *la Ermita* is both a spiritual and a patriotic center. For example, when the Cuban air force shot three Cessna planes flown by *Hermanos al Rescate* (Brothers to the Rescue), killing four young men, on February 24, 1996, shortly thereafter a very moving service was held at *la Ermita*. There the relatives of the young men who died folded the Cuban flag as it is folded when soldiers die for their country. Those expressions of patriotism have not always been so positive, however. Prior to the Pope's visit to Cuba, leaders of the Cuban community in Miami put a lot of pressure on the Catholic Church there for its priests not to travel to Cuba to share the event. As a result, Monsignor Román watched the Pope's visit to Cuba on television, in *la Ermita*, surrounded by his parishioners.

An intricate relationship between religion and exodus has existed in this contemporary period, both helping many Cubans to remain steadfast in the island and also helping them to leave the island and become immigrants and exiles in another land. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Cubans' devotion to *la Caridad*, as on both sides of the ocean she represents a welding of religion and national identity. This welding in the form of a national virgin is typical of all of Latin America, but is particularly strong in some countries, such as Cuba (*la Caridad*) and Mexico (*Guadalupe*), where those traditions have deep historical roots and are very deeply held. They also follow their emigrants to other lands, where they root in new immigrant circumstances that bring new forms of hardship with them – the pain of exile for Cubans, the exploitation of farm work for Mexicans.

Today, both in Cuba and the diaspora, for a large part of the population all the churches are an important source of help, an alternative in the quest for meaning that, at all times everywhere, men and women inevitably grope for. And for those Cubans who strive to create a democratic future, at times the Church has been a vital source of support.

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