The Catholic Church and the Cuban Regime

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Among the communist countries the Cuban regime has developed what is perhaps one of the more tolerant, laissez-faire policies toward religion.[1] The Catholic Church has benefitted in a number of ways from the comparatively flexible government attitude to religious believers. It has been noted that the Catholic Church has avoided many of the restrictions and persecutions experienced by East European believers.[2] At the same time, the relatively favourable status of the Cuban Catholic Church has not been reached without efforts by clergy and laity to come to grips with their own pre-revolutionary failings, to break from their conservative Spanish tradition, and to modernise their approach to the contemporary world, particularly Third World development.

Nonetheless, early church-state relations in post-revolutionary Cuba were best described as mutual antipathy. The traditional domination of the Catholic hierarchy by foreign Spanish clergy identified with the upper classes led the Church to be antagonistic to radical native socio-economic change.[3] It reacted sharply against the success of Fidel Castro's guerilla band in 1959 and the Cuban Revolution. Official Catholic antagonism, coupled with the new regime's fears of counter-revolutionaries at home assisted by powerful U.S.-backed émigrés in Florida, provoked a serious counter-reaction from the new government. The nadir of church-state relations was reached on 17 April 1961, when the U.S.-assisted Bay of Pigs invasion — an event still vivid in the minds of the Cuban population — took place. There was substantial involvement by Catholics, including chaplains, in the invasion. Mass detentions of priests, religious and lay Catholics ensued.[4] Two weeks later Castro made a sharp attack on "fascist and Falangist Spanish priests come to make war against the Revolution".[5] On the same day, Cuba was declared a socialist republic and the church schools were closed and nationalised.

However, the early mutual antagonism between Church and State has been substantially mitigated for several reasons. Firstly, the Church in Cuba traditionally represented one of the weaker Catholic bodies in Latin America. The massive importation of African slaves by colonial powers gave Cuba a large population of blacks (about one-quarter), many of whom

retained their native folk religions. Nominal membership of blacks in the Catholic Church is common in Latin America, and the worship of African deities (*santeria*) is extensive.[6] Although many blacks were members of the Church, "while Catholicism is outwardly embraced, it is inwardly rejected".[7] Moreover, it was only after a long and bitter struggle that Cuba became one of the last Latin American colonies to be freed from Spanish control, with which the Church was closely identified. Cuba's independence from Spain on 10 December 1898, by the Treaty of Paris, not only lessened the political support from the government the Church had enjoyed under the Spanish regime but resulted in the loss of much of the property which had been acquired earlier.[8] Furthermore, pre-revolutionary social corruption in the form of gambling, narcotics and prostitution had earned the seaport of Havana the title "whorehouse of the world", and widespread poverty obliged religious believers to disobey church teaching and engage in immoral activities for the sake of economic survival. In addition, the fact that the hierarchy was dominated by Spanish clergy who were popularly identified with the hated Spanish colonialism resulted in a degree of alienation between hierarchy and believers and consequently a lessening of ecclesiastical authority within the Church. The clergy's imperfect observance of the rule of celibacy encouraged a certain amount of practical infidelity to church teaching among the people.[9]

The extensive emigration of anti-Castro elements, particularly Spanish clergy, immediately after the Revolution tended to weaken official Cuban Church criticism of the revolutionary government. In the wake of the Bay of Pigs, moreover, emigration and expulsions of believers hostile to the Revolution further defused the potential threat of the Church to the new regime.

Finally, the genuinely popular nature of the Revolution under a charismatic leader and its rapid consolidation meant that the political authorities, though vigilant against counter-revolutionary religious activities, possessed a confidence which rendered the expenditure of scarce resources for aggressive anti-religious activities a low priority. The relative weakness of the early "church of silence" combined with the increasingly solid popular base of the new regime significantly reduced the possibility of intense militant atheism.

In the two decades since the Bay of Pigs, Castro's approach toward the Church has changed. He proclaimed his adherence to Marxism-Leninism well after his triumphal entry into Havana. Possibly his education in Catholic schools left him some sympathy for religion. Perhaps also the influence of liberal principles propagated extensively throughout Latin America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries left an imprint. Remarks such as: "Religion is one thing and politics is another" suggest some belief in separation of Church and State.[10] Similarly, Castro stated that he did "not consider there to be any incompatibility between being Catholic and maintaining loyalty to the Revolution": a sharp contrast to the pervasive militant atheism of the Soviet regime.

Castro's willingness to experiment and develop a unique Cuban road to socialism has been periodically apparent. The comparatively undogmatic *fidelismo* was forcefully demonstrated in January 1968 with the trial and expulsion from the Cuban Communist Party of the pro-Soviet "microfaction" led by Anibal Escalante. This was also a signal to the Catholic Church that the regime's policy toward religion in the future might differ from the Soviet line.[12]

The more positive approach toward the Church was greatly influenced by the development of liberation theology in the Catholic Church throughout Latin America. The modification of Castro's original hostility to the Church became apparent on 14 July 1969 when he referred positively to "strong progressive currents that were aware of the tremendous social problems of the Latin countries . . . within the Catholic Church in Latin America".[13] Of particular importance was Castro's genuine admiration for the deceased revolutionary Colombian priest, Father Camillo Torres, whose complete works were published in Cuba.[14] On 5 January 1969, Castro personally opened a polyclinic and boarding school named after Torres at El Cangre, referring to him as "a symbol of the revolutionary unity that ought to preside over the liberation of the peoples of Latin America".[15]

It is unlikely that accommodation could have replaced intense hostility without the efforts of the Church itself. These have some roots in pre-revolutionary history. In the 1940s, for example, Cuban lay-people became active in *Democracia Social Cristiana,* a social movement which condemned economic individualism and the supremacy of capital over labour and emphasised charity as the primary economic principle.[16] Moreover, the successes of the régime, its ability to clean out gambling, prostitution, drug-dealing and other forms of moral corruption, were a positive achievement. The outstanding accomplishments of the literacy campaign in 1961, which has become a model for third world educational development, were undeniable. When the economic and social successes of Cuba are compared with the Latin American countries, where poverty, illiteracy, racial discrimination and disease are seemingly intractable problems under largely unresponsive regimes, they seem all the more remarkable. Whereas Eastern European believers may compare their country's standard of living with Western Europe and find it wanting, Cuban believers compare their own with Latin America and are at least partially appreciative. Furthermore, the detentions and murders of socially active priests and nuns in El Salvador, Chile and other Latin American countries make the Cuban regime seem mild by comparison.

Of special importance in ending the hostility of the "church of silence" was the influence of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, in which several Cuban bishops were able to participate. The Pope's willingness to "open the windows" of the Church and let "fresh air" come in prompted a greater willingness on the part of Cuba's two hundred clergy-

men, with the exception of elderly Spanish priests, to open themselves to the Revolution's achievements and participate in eliminating the poverty of Third World countries.[17] The liberation theology of Latin America, embodied in a growing Christian-Marxist dialogue, had its impact on Cuban clergy. The bishops' call for an end to the U.S. trade embargo on 10 April 1969 indicated the clergy's new attitude.[18]

Nonetheless, restrictions on the practice of religious belief certainly remain. Article 54 of the Cuban Constitution retains a measure of militant atheism:

> It is illegal and punishable by law to oppose one's faith or religious belief to the Revolution; to education; or to the fulfilment of one's duty to work, defence of the homeland with arms, demonstrations of reverence to its symbols, or the fulfilment of other duties established by the Constitution.

Whereas the Church enjoys considerable internal freedom, religious beliefs remain an impediment to full integration into the life of Cuban society. Regular church-goers face restrictions on Membership of the Communist Party, practising believers suffer a certain social stigma, and benefits such as new apartments, cars and promotions go disproportionately to those who shun the Church. In education, discrimination throughout the social sciences and strategic military fields still remains. Proselytism is prohibited and religious literature is difficult to obtain. Children in the youth organisations and schools are subject to informal official pressures to avoid church ceremonies. Parents are obliged to integrate their children into all the activities embraced by the Revolution. Church financing depends on donations from parishioners, increasingly now an elderly female population with few monetary resources. Church repair is a perennial problem; it is common to wait two years for building materials, although such delays are general throughout the island. Restrictions on administering the last rites to dying believers are occasionally found in hospitals and polyclinics.

However, the integration of believers in social reconstruction has perhaps proceeded more rapidly than expected. Church members participate extensively in the ubiquitous Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, which are active in the fields of public health, adult education, crime prevention, and so forth. Although religious literature is difficult to come by, Bibles can be obtained through the office of the papal nuncio. Some efforts at a Christian-Marxist dialogue have been made, although disagreement on the use of violence as a means of social change remains an obstacle to reconciliation. A number of priests and laypeople are active in ecumenical work.

Seminaries appear to suffer virtually no interference in their internal affairs. To help prepare for their future ministry, seminarians have joined on cordial terms with members of mass organisations in volunteer rural labour for several years now.[19] The restrictions on the last rites are often due more

to a desire to protect the patient than to restrict religion: if priests are known and trusted by medical staff, administrative restrictions are greatly eased. Otherwise the Eucharist and other sacraments can be dispensed freely and regularly. Although children face some pressure because of their religious beliefs, catechetical instruction is given to approximately 20-40 children per parish.[20]

Whereas a high level of church-state conflict was evident in the early 1960s, much of the original hostility has been dissipated. A confident regime on the one hand, matched with a more flexible Church on the other, has resulted in a relatively high degree of accommodation. Both Church and State have gone a long way toward rapprochement without compromising their respective beliefs. While certainly enjoying fewer favours, status and influence than in pre-revolutionary days, the Cuban Catholic Church enjoys a measure of freedom perhaps unique in communist countries.

The Cuban experience suggests that historical background, personal characteristics of political leaders, composition and attitudes of the clergy, the comparable experiences of believers abroad and other factors appear to be important variables affecting cooperation between a communist regime and religious believers. The Cuban leadership and Catholic Church have now managed to reach an accommodation because the regime had little to fear from a weak Church and did not have to adopt the strong measures used in some East European countries, while the Church has been willing to be flexible.

[1]Some useful existing works include Leslie Dewart, *Christianity and Revolution: The Lesson of Cuba* (New York, 1963); Alice Hageman and Philip Wheaton, *Religion in Cuba Today: A New Church in a New Society* (New York, 1971); and Fred Ward, *Inside Cuba Today* (New York, 1978).

[2]Hageman and Wheaton, *Religion in Cuba,* p. 32.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 21.

[4]See Aldo Buntig, "The Church in Cuba: Toward a New Frontier", in Hageman and Wheaton, *Religion in Cuba,* pp. 95-128.

[5]*Obra Revolucionaria* (Havana), No. 16, 1 May 1961.

[6]Robert Alexander, *Today's Latin America* (Garden City, New York, 1962), pp. 224-228.

[7]William Bascom, "The Focus of Cuban Santeria", *Southwest Journal of Anthropology,* 6, 1 (Spring 1950), p. 66.

[8]Richard Pattee, "The Role of the Roman Catholic Church", in Robert Smith, *Background to Revolution: The Development of Modern Cuba* (New York, 1966), pp. 104-11.

[9]Richard Dana, "A Boston Yankee's Observations of Religion, Politics and Society in the Mid-Nineteenth Century", in Smith, *Background to Revolution,* p. 90.

[10]*Obra Revolucionaria,* No. 16, 1 May 1961.

[11]*Sucesos* (Mexico City), 10 September 1966.

[12]On the purge see Richard Fagen, *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (Stanford, California, 1969), pp. 117-18; and Edward Gonzalez, *Cuba under Castro* (Boston, 1974), pp. 139-40.

[13]*Ediciones COR* (Havana), No. 11, July 1969.

[14]See Camillo Torres, *Revolutionary Writings* (New York, 1969).

[15]*Ediciones COR,* No. 2, January 1969.

[16]See Pattee, "Role of the Roman Catholic Church", pp. 109-10.

[17]See for example Rev. Carlos Manuel de Cespedes' statement in *Cuba Internacional* (Havana), February 1979.

[18]See Hageman and Wheaton, *Religion in Cuba,* pp. 288-94.

[19]In this connection see Antonio Benitez Rojo, "Fresh Air Blows through Havana's San Carlos Seminary", in Hageman and Wheaton, *Religion in Cuba,* pp. 67-73.

[20]A good deal of information on the contemporary situation was gathered from the author's trip to Cuba in 1980. Much of this corroborates the findings of Ward in *Inside Cuba Today* and C. Ian Lumsden, "The Ideology of the Revolution", in Rolando Bonachea and Nelson Valdes, *Cuba in Revolution* (Garden City, New York, 1972).