

RELIGION AND REFORMS IN CUBA

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A dialogue between religion and politics is always contentious and the Cuban context is no exception. At the center of the debate are questions of boundaries and agency. Should religion institutions also be overt political actors? Are religion doctrines and political convictions complementary or adversarial? In Cuba, the public role of religious institutions also take a deeper tone related to the extent to which these institutions are perceived to support, or at least tolerate and coexist with, the Communist Party and state.

The three papers I have been asked to comment are not exempt from these controversies. Rather than indulging on perpetuating polarization, each paper makes a genuine contribution to understanding the complexities of how religious actors operate within the context of the revolution, continue to thrive despite obstacles, service those in need, and disseminate a message of hope and reconciliation. In addition, taken together, these three papers complement each other very well and give the reader a lot of food for thought. I will first discuss the three papers and then reflect briefly on the church and its message in Cuba.

First, the paper by Professor Javier Figueroa from the University of Puerto Rico, “Cuba: La Iglesia Católica y Estado en Tiempos de Revolución—Una Aproximación Histórica” offers an invaluable reading of the troubled history of church-state relations since the outbreak of the revolution. Focusing primarily on the Catholic Church, Figueroa depicts two phases of this troublesome history. The first, from 1959 through early 1980, which he calls “la confrontación,” is still remembered as one of the darkest and most distasteful episodes in Cuban history. This was

the time of consolidation of power by the Cuban revolutionary elite and they came short of being unanimous, to say the least. During this early period, churches were closed; Catholics and other believers harassed; and priests were expatriated and occasionally condemned to the most horrific public persecutions. Religious freedom, in short, was systematically violated. I would characterize the sad events of this phase—which are well known and have been documented by many academics and protagonists themselves—as Cuba’s own Cultural Revolution.

Figueroa also describes how, with the institutionalization of the revolution starting in 1975, the relationship between the church and the state began to change gradually. He attributes this transformation to a combination of several factors, some exogenous like the Conferencia de Medellín, and others internal to Cuba, like the ENEC in 1987. During the second phase of church-state relations, a period referred to by Figueroa as “acercamiento,” the Catholic Church gained ground in many respects, including greater freedom and tolerance to practice Catholicism publicly, promote Catholic ideas and values, organize public events, and provide a variety of services the state currently cannot afford to support. The two papal visits to Cuba may be one illustration of the new governmental rapprochement towards the Catholic Church. Still, today the church encounters many obstacles and impediments, one example being the challenge to offer Catholic teachings freely in schools and universities and the careful maneuvering of its functions to avoid provoking local and national officials. All in all, it is safe to conclude that church-state

relations seem more harmonious and cordial today than at any time since 1959.

Teo A. Babún, Jr., a Baptist Deacon and Executive Director of ECHOCUBA, proposes another take on the problem of religious freedom in his “El Crecimiento de la Iglesia Protestante y la Libertad Religiosa.” To begin with, Babún makes the obvious—but often overlooked—point that to speak of religion in Cuba is not the same as to speak solely about the Catholic Church since there are many other active religious denominations in the island and they experience much different histories and relations with the state. The work of many Christian churches is still seen with suspicion by government officials in large part because, unlike Catholics, these denominations are not backed by a sovereign state like the Vatican. Nonetheless, since Catholics and Protestants were allowed to celebrate mass and other worship services in 1985, the growth of protestant churches has also been phenomenal.

Babún implicitly agrees with Figueroa’s historical course of church-state relations and with the assertion that internal and external events in the early 1980s gave rise to a new period of relative religious tolerance in Cuba. The framework proposed by both authors leads me to suggest my first recommendation for further research. It seems to me that the decade between the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s is crucial to understand how church-state relations in Cuba were transformed and therefore it deserves more attention and further scrutiny beyond the one already proposed in these papers.

The third and last paper is by Orlando Márquez Hidalgo, editor of *Palabra Nueva*, the official journal of the Archdiocese of La Habana. In many ways, his paper reflects the public position of the Catholic Church with regards to religion freedoms, since it chooses not to dwell in the past (a brief one and one-half page reference of his manuscript of 17 pages). Instead, the paper offers the reader an insightful and penetrating analysis of current interactions between the Catholic Church and the state in the island. Márquez Hidalgo is also careful to evade political

considerations. For instance, I could not overlook noticing that every time he mentions a politically-loaded term, he uses quotation marks.

According to Márquez Hidalgo, in light of the “arquitectura estatal y gubernativa de tipo soviético, instalada y consolidada sobre la ineficiencia económica y la agitación popular durante más de cincuenta años,” the role of the Catholic Church today is to promote a national dialogue and mediation between the state and civil society. After citing several poll data documenting the increasing religiosity among Cubans in the island and the multiple instances of mediation between the Church and the Cuban government, the paper makes it very clear that the Catholic Church is not a passive bystander in the process of reconciliation. The church promotes its pastoral values, advocates for more inclusion even among exiles, and continuously calls for social justice in support of the common good. Herein lays the biggest challenge for the Catholic hierarchy: how to mediate without the appearance of caving in. As I alluded to earlier, this is a remarkable analysis from a witness of the reforms taking place in Cuba today.

The paper provides the reader with a lucid exposition of church doctrine and strategy. Having said that, the reader will most likely be disappointed because of the lack of an account of how the government responds to the Church’s position beyond what we already know from the media. The paper also is silent on how internal debates within the Catholic Church formulated and promoted this new vision and role.

After reading these papers, it is obvious why the strategy of religious institutions moving to the middle is so contentious. These institutions defy their own doctrine by asking Cubans to forget long standing grievances in the name of an elusive reconciliation, but this position goes against the Church’s own proclamation to remember Christ’s sufferings but to forgive trespasses. It seems to me that, as a matter of principle, religious institutions should advocate for both the preservation of historical memory and also forgiveness, as impractical and controversial this mixed strategy may be.