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Church-State Relations in Cuba

By Shawn T. Malone

Since 1959, relations between the churches and the state in Cuba have followed a complex path. Measured from a starting point of open hostility in the early years of the Revolution, relations have undeniably improved.Yet debate continues over the substance, significance, and sustainability of those improvements, as well as the compromises made to achieve them. Various factors have influenced church-state relations.The government's perspective has been affected by the status of the economy, the related degree of need for humanitarian assistance, the level of church. growth or contraction, concern about international image, and the ability to maintain control of religious activity.

The perspective of the churches has been influenced by three additional factors: internal denominational objectives, domestic structures, and international connections. Identifying similarities between their views on social justice and those of the Revolution, many mainline Protestant denominations moved quickly towards cordial relations with the regime, while the more conservative Catholic Church experienced a greater degree of conflict. Denominational variations have also been rooted in distinctly non-ideological factors. A denomination's vulnerability to state pressure and the consequent likelihood of its cooperation with the state have been inversely proportional to the size and strength of its organizational structure within Cuba as well as the amount of international solidarity it enjoys. The Catholic Church, with a long presence throughout the island, a well-established hierarchical structure, and the support of an influential international institution, has historically been less susceptible to government pressure than the Protestant churches, many of which are relatively young, small, and lacking both domestic and international ties. That vulnerability has contributed significantly to the Protestant churches' greater interest in establishing and maintaining cordial relations with the government. By contrast, the Catholic Church's institutional strengths have allowed it to follow a more confrontational path.

Finally, external actors have also influenced church-state developments. On one hand, the European Union's emphasis on religious freedoms as a condition for economic cooperation has encouraged greater tolerance. On the other hand, the Clinton administration's focus on "Track

Two" of the Cuban Democracy Act, which promotes greater interaction with the Cuban people as a means of ideological subversion, has severely damaged past progress. In early 1995, when a spokesman for the administration explicitly named the churches among the groups targeted for Track Two activities, Cuban government suspicion of any interaction between Cuban and foreign churches understandably soared.

These elements, among others, played a role in the deterioration of church-state relations in the early 1960s as well as the gradual rapprochement that peaked in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Recent events indicate that progress towards increased church-state civility and accommodation is now being eroded. Future developments will be influenced by the aforementioned factors, depending particularly on the pace and nature of church growth and the government's perceived degree of control of that phenomenon.

A Brief History

On the eve of the Revolution, neither the Catholic Church nor the Protestant churches were a dominant force in Cuban society. The Catholic Church was a largely foreign, urban, upper-class institution with broad but shallow penetration of Cuban society. Although the vast majority of Cubans were nominally Catholic, fewer than ten percent were active. The Protestant churches were also fairly marginal, due to small numbers, a relatively brief presence on the island, and division into numerous denominations.

Notwithstanding the work of certain religious individuals, none of the churches as institutions played a significant role in the opposition to the Batista dictatorship. Although many believers supported the opposition movement intellectually, few actively participated. As then-Archbishop of Havana (and current Cardinal) Jaime Ortega noted in a 1986 interview with the journal of Latin American Documentation, in the 50's, the majority of the bishops accepted the Batista government and a group of them were active supporters.

When Castro's Rebel Army came to power in January of 1959, the initial reaction was mixed. Some church leaders were opposed to Castro's radical socioeconomic ideas. Others, however, were hopeful in light of his Catholic education, the role of Archbishop Perez Serantes in obtaining his 1956 release from a Batista prison, and his praise for religious individuals in the revolutionary movement.

Redistributive property reforms and nationalization of the educational system dealt both the Catholic and Protestant churches harsh blows. Removing the churches' primary source of income as well as an important means of transmitting their values, these actions severely damaged prospects for peaceful coexistence with the state. Church leaders also opposed the new regime's

mass execution of former government officials. By late 1959, the Catholic bishops were making public accusations of creeping communist influence within the revolutionary government. In 1961, when Castro officially announcing the Marxist-Leninist (and implicitly atheist) nature of the regime, any remaining chance for church-state cordiality declined precipitously. The presence of three priests and one pastor in the Bay of Pigs invasion later that year further exacerbated the conflict.

By 1962, continued confrontation was undesirable for the churches and unnecessary for the government. Both the Catholic Church and the Protestant denominations had been weakened from two directions, losing many of their more progressive members to revolutionary loyalty and many of their more conservative ones to exile. The latter group included the vast majority of the clergy. The government, perceiving no real threat in the decimated churches and eager to avoid unflattering media attention abroad, was also willing to exercise restraint.

During subsequent decades, the government obtained the cooperation of most Protestant churches and the uneasy silence of the Catholic Church. Leaders of the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal denominations were the first to accept the regime and during this period increasingly supported the Revolution. They played a substantial role in the Cuban Ecumenical Council (now called the Cuban Council of Churches), a Protestant umbrella organization, and the Protestant Theological Seminary, which eventually developed a full theology in support of the Revolution. Church leaders shared the social goals of many of the Revolution's programs and generally downplayed the limitations placed on believers as individuals. One former rector of the Protestant Theological Seminary dismissed any church-state conflict as based "not in an opposition of socialism toward churches and believers, but rather in the opposition of certain ... religious groups toward socialism and the Revolution." (Observers have noted that, in many cases, a pro-regime shift among church leaders did not correspond to an overall shift in church members' attitudes. Even within many accommodating denominations, the membership remained predominantly apolitical.)

Leaders of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba and the Baptist Convention of Eastern Cuba, historically affiliated with the U.S. Southern Baptist Convention, were more reluctant to cooperate and never joined the Council of Churches, choosing to operate independently. In the late 60s, several pro-regime Baptist ministers separated and formed a distinct Baptist denomination. (Rev. Raul Suarez, well-known for his humanitarian projects and solicitation of donations abroad, is among the leaders of this offshoot denomination.)
The smaller evangelical and charismatic churches, while often working through the Council, generally attempted to remain apolitical, focusing on a primarily spiritual rather than social or

political mission. Although these churches cooperated with the government in order to survive, they were better described as neutral than as pro-regime.

Religious discrimination was common throughout this period, even toward members of the more cooperative Protestant denominations. Individual clergy were persecuted, religious services were obstructed or disrupted, church property was vandalized, educational and occupational access for believers was restricted, and, for a brief period in the 60s, "reeducation camps" grouped priests with prostitutes, criminals, and other "anti-social elements." Some fifteen years after the triumph of the Revolution, at the First Congress of the Cuban Communist Party in 1975, the government's stated strategy remained 'the progressive elimination of religious beliefs through scientific materialistic propaganda."

While the government's position was constant, the stance of the Catholic Church evolved significantly during this time. Left with few options, the Church gradually came to terms with its new context and resolved to work within existing constraints. The hierarchy took steps to show that it remained loyal to Cuba despite the earlier exodus of many clergy and parishioners to Miami. In 1969, the Cuban bishops issued a statement denouncing the U.S. embargo, and a conference of the Cuban laity urged Catholics to fulfill their duty by remaining on the island and participating in the revolutionary process. In 1974 the bishops issued a statement denouncing 'abstraction-filled preaching, false impartiality ... [and] lack of love and effective solidarity with the exploited." The statement was considered by some to be a tacit acknowledgment of past mistakes. In 1979, when Cuban exiles first returned to visit the island, the Church warned its members not to associate too closely with the visitors lest they be contaminated by greed and materialism. The following year, during the Mariel exodus, the bishops reaffirmed the Church's commitment to remain in Cuba and exhorted their flock to do the same.
By the end of the decade, although the Church was by no means allied with the Revolution, it had resolved to coexist with the regime, distancing itself from an opposition role in favor of internal rebuilding and pastoral ministry.

Improving Relations in the 1980s

Beginning in the 1980s, the government began to actively court the churches, albeit in largely symbolic ways. In 1984 Castro surprised observers by attending a nationally televised church service during the visit of U.S. political activist Rev. Jesse Jackson. The following year several U.S. Catholic bishops were allowed to visit the island and later hosted their Cuban counterparts in return. In 1985 Castro also met separately with the bishops of the Catholic Church and the leaders of the Protestant churches to discuss the religious situation. In the same year the Cuban Communist Party elevated the status of its Office of Attention to Religious Affairs, making it an

independent department. In addition, the government requested the Catholic Church's assistance in mediating the release and resettlement of several political prisoners.

The most publicized step of 1985 was Fidel Castro's agreement to a series of interviews on religion with Brazilian priest Frei Betto. Culminating in the publication of the best-selling book *Fidel and Religion* the following year, the interviews expressed Castro's desire for cooperation and even "alliance" with Christians. Although designed to structure cooperation along government lines, many viewed the interviews as a positive sign.

The trend continued in 1986 when the Cuban government granted thirty foreign priests and twenty nuns long-term visas. In the same year the Catholic Church was allowed to hold the *Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano* (ENEC - National Meeting of the Cuban Church), the culmination of a period called the *Reflexión Eclesial Cubana* (REC - Cuban Church Reflection). Although the primary focus of the *Encuentro* was spiritual, it also had substantial implications for church-state relations. The Church criticized moral decay on the island, continued discrimination against believers, the dogmatic educational system, and the state-controlled media. It also admitted past mistakes, particularly regarding its virtual withdrawal from Cuban society in the decade following the triumph of the Revolution. On balance, the document stated the Church's desire to be active in Cuban society and sought from the government the space to carry out that activity.

The very occurrence of the *Encuentro*, with 181 delegates from across the island as well as numerous foreign guests, indicated greater government tolerance. The Catholic Church recognized as much, and the General Secretary of the Council of Latin American Bishops, Dario Castrillón, publicly noted "an opening of the Cuban authorities, an opening that lets one see the possibility of a path of greater accord."

Despite the frank analysis of church-state relations reflected in the *Encuentro*, relations continued to be civil. In 1988, the Church was given authorization to import 30, 000 Bibles and a telex system to facilitate communication with the exterior. The following year, prison ministry, which had been prohibited since 1964, was again permitted, albeit with substantial restrictions. In 1990, a critical letter to Castro from the bishops and disagreement over a proposed papal visit chilled relations somewhat. Castro chastised the Catholic hierarchy in a speech in Brazil, and subsequently channeled his efforts towards the Protestant churches, pledging in a televised two-hour meeting with church leaders to end discrimination against believers.

The most significant development came in 1991 during Cuba's Fourth Communist Party Congress, when delegates voted to allow Christians and other religious individuals to obtain party membership. Although the change had been discussed for several years, its approval at the Congress was somewhat unexpected. Castro, speaking in Brazil only a year earlier, had asserted that "problems with the high-level hierarchy of the Catholic Church ... have been the obstacle, the obstacle that has not yet been overcome for Christians to be able to join the ranks of our party ... I do not see it close." Nevertheless, after a rigorous three-hour debate, the amendment was passed, accompanied by a change in Cuba's constitutional status from an atheist to a secular state.

Why the Progress?

Several factors contributed to the improvements that began in the 1980s and continued into the early 90s. For the churches, these centered on survival, recuperation, and the decision to work within existing limitations. Following the Revolution, all denominations found themselves debilitated in membership and cut off from foreign support. With greater resources, the Catholic Church resisted longer than the Protestant denominations. Ultimately, however, none of the churches had either the desire or the ability to actively oppose the government, and preferred to direct their efforts toward pastoral ministry.

Although the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches appeared to take very divergent paths, many differences were as much a matter of circumstance as of identity. The Cuban Catholic Church benefited from the solidarity of an influential international institution, the world-wide Catholic Church, reinforced in 1994 by the appointment of a Cuban cardinal, Jaime Ortega. Its well-organized hierarchical structure on the island also made government pressure on individual parishes or priests less feasible. Finally, although a high percentage of its priests went into exile, the Church's sheer size meant that more than 200 remained. As a result, the Catholic Church was initially more inclined to stand up to the government and was less vulnerable to reprisals for doing so. Its delayed decision to coexist and, in a very limited sense, cooperate with the government was therefore understandable.

Several traditional Protestant churches, particularly the Methodist Church, were perhaps equally conservative. Following the exile of their clergy, however, many quickly came under the leadership of remaining liberal ministers. Many small evangelical or charismatic Protestant churches remained fairly conservative but had no international connections, no national presence, and a loose or even autonomous organizational structure. Unable to resist government pressure, such churches cooperated almost at the outset of the Revolution. Their widespread perception was that a church building could be closed down in a single day, and an entire denomination in little more, and few tested the limits.

Thus, while denominational differences to some degree reflected a truly distinct view of the government, many denominations have faced the same fundamental dilemma: how to relate to the government in ways that are ethically consistent with their values but also permit their survival and facilitate the achievement of internal goals.

For the government, the fundamental issue in improving relations was the consolidation of power. No longer threatened by a weakened, highly restricted religious community, the government focused on more pressing issues. Moreover, communism's view of religion as a dying legacy of the old society gave the authorities little reason to believe the churches posed any reason for future concern.

International media attention was also a factor in increased tolerance. In the 1970s and 1980s, when Castro set his sights on a leadership role in predominantly Catholic Latin America, a widespread image of the government repressing the churches would have been particularly damaging. More recently, relations with Europe and Canada have also strengthened this consideration. For example, several years ago a Canadian pastor illegally brought Bibles into Cuba and distributed them. Returning to Canada, he publicized his ability to "smuggle" Bibles onto the island, highlighting the government's restriction on importing religious material. According to some reports, the negative press from the incident was the primary impetus for allowing the creation of the large Bible distribution network that now exists.

Fidel Castro himself confirmed the prominence of international image concerns during his 1985 interviews with Frei Betto. He noted, "We didn't want to create an image of the Revolution throwing priests into prison" and "We didn't want to play into the hands of the forces of reaction and the imperialists by presenting the image of the Revolution executing a priest."
With the fall of the Soviet Union and erosion of Marxism's legitimacy, domestic concerns have also been important, as reflected in the decision to allow believers into the Communist Party, which currently counts fewer than ten percent of the population in its membership. Castro has publicly argued that many religious individuals sympathetic to many of the Revolution's goals could be a source of support if not for the official restriction on their participation.

On the other side of the coin, Party leaders have likely recognized that continuing the ban on believers in the Party would only serve to alienate a rapidly growing sector of society. Already facing discontent over material scarcities, the government has no reason to aggravate frustration within the religious community, particularly if, as some reports indicate, believers now constitute roughly one fifth of the population.

In addition, government leaders may have generated an unintended "forbidden fruit" effect by tolerating religious activity while still presenting it as somewhat taboo. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this combination did stimulate some individuals' interest in the churches. For example, when the Catholic bishops issued a critical letter in 1993, copies were sold at the archdiocese. One Cuban woman who had bought a copy noted that she was not a believer but was particularly curious after reading harsh rebuttals in the state-sponsored newspapers. Greater government acceptance of or indifference toward religion eliminates this effect.

The fall of the Soviet Union added an economic variable to the church-state equation and generated two additional factors in favor of greater tolerance for religious activity. First, the economic crisis temporarily displaced ideological concerns on the list of priorities. Many government officials, particularly in the reformist sector, identified the economy as the country's primary concern, and viewed religious activity as irrelevant. Accordingly, attention that might otherwise have been fixed on the churches was directed towards the analysis of economic options.

The economic crisis also created a greater need for foreign donations, which religious organizations have been adept at procuring. According to the international Catholic charity *Caritas*, prior to the crisis the government was uninterested in facilitating donations from abroad or allowing the Church to organize humanitarian projects. By 1991, when *Caritas Cuba* was established, the government was much more willing to discuss cooperation with religious groups, which by some estimates now receive or oversee roughly seventy-five percent of all humanitarian aid to the country.

Limitations and Setbacks

Given the pragmatic nature of progress in church-state relations, limitations on that progress are not surprising. In 1990, following a decade of steadily increasing civility, Castro revealed that the underlying mistrust of earlier decades remained. He had reportedly solicited the opinions of the Catholic bishops and received in writing a more daring response than was anticipated. During a subsequent speech to the clergy in Brazil, he attacked the Cuban Catholic hierarchy as "somewhat hidden, waiting to act against the Revolution if the Revolution encounters difficulties."

Many restrictions on religious activity remain a matter of public record, including prohibitions on open-air meetings and public evangelism. Officially, all activity is to be confined to church buildings. Access to the media is severely limited, since the state, with rare exceptions, does not allow religious radio and television broadcasts. While religious publications are not officially

monitored by the government, authors have subjected themselves to a process one Cuban scholar calls "self-censorship," and consequences have befallen those who have failed to do so.

Harassment of believers at school and limited access to higher education have been the most common complaints. In the past, Cuban children were officially discouraged from believing in God and even mocked for confessing their faith. Unwritten rules generally limited Christians to scientific or technical fields with minimal social or ideological impact, excluding many high-level professional, political, and education posts. Workplace and educational records also included information about an individual's religious identification. These practices have been ended officially, but they do continue to occur, which Party leaders attribute to latent prejudice among lower-level bureaucrats.

Although some progress continues to be made, the rapid succession of events seen in the 1980s and early 1990s has slowed, and some gains have been rolled back. Several sources estimate 1993 as the turning point. By the end of that year, the Cuban government believed it had weathered the worst of the economic crisis sparked by the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. At the same time, many of the reforms that slowed Cuba's economic decline had unintentionally loosened the state's political leverage as well. Together, these factors gave the government both the ability and the motive to reassert its position. In addition, an economic improvement allowed the government to be more selective in allowing religious humanitarian projects. The authorities were also reportedly surprised by a 1993 report which indicated phenomenal growth in church membership. Finally, in 1993 and 1994, the Catholic bishops issued two pastoral letters containing the boldest criticism of government actions since the early days of the Revolution. The combination of these factors has led to greater government attention to religious activity and a more cautious government stance.

Of the aforementioned factors, government confidence in an economic recovery has been one of the most important. Economic measures taken after the fall of the Soviet Union began to show positive effects around 1994 and, according to the Cuban government, led to a modest economic recovery in 1995. While further economic reform will undoubtedly be necessary, it no longer carries the all-consuming urgency of past years, and renewed attention can be given to other matters. Since the decentralizing nature of many economic reforms unintentionally loosened many social control mechanisms, reasserting authority has been a high priority. As perhaps the most rapidly growing and least regulated social phenomenon, religious activity has naturally been a sensitive issue.

Within that context, the increasing protagonism of the Catholic Church has exacerbated government concern. After the quiet regrouping of earlier decades, the Catholic bishops have in recent years openly criticized government actions and policies.

In 1991, reacting to a government-sponsored assault on political dissidents, the bishops issued a statement warning of the risk of "a dangerous slide toward hatred and revenge." The bishops welcomed the Communist Party's decision to allow believers into the Party, but skeptically added that if the Party continued its dogmatic stance of atheism and materialism, "it is morally impossible for a Catholic to belong to such a party."

In 1992, Cardinal Jaime Ortega, criticized the country's state-controlled media for its "us-versus-them" attitude toward believers, calling "this way of thinking and acting ... the root of quite a lot of discrimination."

In late 1993, the bishops issued another pastoral letter giving a detailed assessment of Cuba's economic and political situation. The letter decried the "exclusive and all-encompassing nature of the government's ideology, restrictions imposed on freedom, excessive control exercised by state security organizations, the large number of prisoners, and discrimination based on political, philosophical, or religious beliefs" as well as 'intolerance, habitual surveillance, and repression." The bishops also reaffirmed their condemnation of the U.S. embargo. They called for dialogue among Cubans as "a way for promoting understanding among all to build a dignifying, peaceful future," and they warned against the "endless spiral of violence" that popular revolt would set off.

The government's reaction revealed both its distaste for such statements and its indecision about an appropriate response. Two Cuban periodicals, *Trabajadores* (*Workers*, associated with the Confederation of Cuban Workers) and *Juventud Rebelde* (*Rebel Youth*, associated with the Union of Young Communists), printed scathing criticisms of the bishops' statement, calling it "a deliberate provocation, . . . a stab in the back, . . . a crude political pamphlet dressed up as a pastoral letter." Drawing on the darker moments of the Church's past, one editorial asserted that the letter "was written under the light of the same candelabrum used by the colonialist priests who took up arms against the independence fighters, or the purple-robed ones who blessed Batista and his murderers, . . . or the invading chaplains at the Bay of Pigs, or those who sheltered avowed terrorists in temples and convents."

On the other hand, *Granma*, Cuba's largest newspaper and the official organ of the Communist Party, published a surprisingly mild criticism of the bishops' letter. The article's author was a

Catholic intellectual, Cintio Vitier, who even accepted in principle some of the bishops' suggestions, and noted only that economic and political pressures from abroad made those suggestions impractical. Criticizing the harshness of other media attacks on the Church, Vitier also suggested that responses to the bishops should be "as firm in their convictions as moderate in their language." Castro himself showed restraint, never commenting on the letter in public nor issuing an official statement.

The Catholic Church has continued to expand its role and presence in Cuban society. In July of 1994 a government boat sank a hijacked tugboat attempting to flee to the United States, resulting in the death of approximately forty people. (Whether the sinking was accidental or intentional is still a matter of debate on the island and abroad.) Archbishop of Havana Jaime Ortega publicly lamented the action and asked for a full investigation. During the 1994 summer rafter crisis, the Church encouraged the government to inititae a dialogue with the United States and called for a focus on the "fundamental causes" of the problem.

Also in 1994, the Vatican established a Cuban chapter of its Commission for Justice and Peace. Thus far, the Cuban chapter's activities have been low-key, and leaders have emphasized the need to affirm accomplishments as well as denounce failures in the human rights arena. However, chapters of the Commission in other Latin American countries have investigated and condemned human rights abuses, and the mere creation of such a commission on the island was controversial.

In 1995, Rev. Jose Conrado Rodriguez, a Catholic Priest from the eastern town of Palma Soriano, wrote an open letter to Fidel Castro criticizing "the absence and inexistence of a space for freedom, . . . hypocrisy and deceit, insincerity and lies, and a general state of fear that affected everybody on the island." Rodriguez suggested "popular consultation, democratic and free, which in a climate of respect and tolerance would allow the voice of all our people to be heard," and "a national dialogue that would take into account the different factions inside the Communist Party, the dissident groups inside the island, and also include the Cubans of the diaspora." Although quiet measures may have been taken, the government issued no response to the letter, and several months after its release Rodriguez said he had not been harassed.

In late February of the following year, the Catholic Church held the second *Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano* (ENEC-National Meeting of the Cuban Church), ten years after the original convocation. A statement issued following the *Encuentro* offered a critical analysis of the island's situation, focusing particularly on recent events. As in past statements, the unifying theme was reconciliation - reconciliation between governments but also reconciliation among

Cubans, including those in exile. Addressing the February 24 shootdown of two exile planes by the Cuban government, it stated that "although the repeated aerial incursions may have been imprudent and may have exacerbated tensions, the response was disproportionate and violent and its effects devastating for those who maintain moderation as the solution to the crisis."

The statement also criticized the mid-February arrest of several leaders of *Concilio Cubano* (Cuban Council), a coalition of human rights activists and dissidents who had planned a major meeting for February 24. The arrests caused the cancellation of the gathering. Referring to the events surrounding the *Concilio*, the statement defended "the contribution of diverse ideas and initiatives . . . [as] a treasure and a recognized right of all citizens." It was the strongest public defense of the dissident community ever issued by the Catholic Church.

Referring to the then-pending Helms-Burton legislation which aimed to tighten the U.S. embargo against Cuba, the bishops also reiterated their "rejection of any intensification of economic measures against our country." They criticized both the U.S. and Cuban governments, asking "Why do the most intransigent postures seem to come out triumphant in these situations, be it in Cuba or in the United States of America? ... Words like provocation, total blockade ... and all the old vocabulary of the Cold War are coming back into frequent use."

The government's reaction was even more muted than in the past. No official government statement was issued to the press. Foreign Minister Robaina, when specifically questioned by a journalist, answered that the government was trying to learn "If the document is in any way related to the aggressive policy that U.S. imperialism is currently unleashing against Cuba," but added that "this is not an urgent issue."

Several scholars have noted that, while the government went to great lengths to stop the *Concilio* meeting, no actions were evidently taken to thwart the Encuentro, both held in February 1996. In addition, Raul Castro made no mention of the religious community in his otherwise hard-line March 1996 Central Committee speech, which called for greater ideological purity and criticized certain groups for inappropriate foreign connections. Finally, anecdotal information indicates that Fidel Castro has verbally assured Catholic Church leaders that the latter are not considered enemies of the Revolution or agents of the United States. At present, the government remains uncomfortable with the Catholic Church but has shown substantial restraint.

Church Growth

A final factor causing increased government concern has been the massive growth of the churches in recent years, signalled in particular by the aforementioned report given by the churches to the government at the end of 1993. All denominations have experienced a large

increase in membership, such that neither the Cuban Communist Party's Office of Attention to Religious Affairs nor the Cuban Council of Churches, a Protestant umbrella organization, is able to provide even a rough figure. (Some individuals on the island attribute this lack of statistics to political as well as practical concerns.)

While exact figures are unavailable, other sources hint at broad estimates. In a 1995 article, Cuban-American scholar Teo Babun estimated the total number of Protestants at two million, or roughly 18 percent of the Cuban population, with no statement regarding the number of Catholics. A 1994 *Miami Herald* survey, touted as the first independent poll in Cuba since the Revolution, pointed to a more modest number, indicating that twenty percent of the population had attended a church service, either Catholic or Protestant, in the previous month. Other sources point to the formation of roughly 10,000 Protestant casas culto, or house churches, since 1990. With between a dozen and several hundred members per house church, that development represents an increase of several hundred thousand people in six years. In addition to the casas culto, established churches are also overflowing with new members.

Distribution of religious material may also serve as an indicator of growing interest in religion. The Bible was the best-selling title at the International Book Fair in Havana in both 1992 and 1993 (with no data available for more recent years), and copies move briskly on the black market. United Bible Societies, working with the Cuban Council of Churches as well as other Christian ministries outside Cuba, sent 104,137 Bibles and 13,494 other religious publications to Cuba between 1968 and 1990. Between 1991 and 1995, by contrast, they reportedly sent 769,234 Bibles, 597,591 New Testaments, and 4,624,625 other religious publications.

For a government in which prediction and planning have been the paradigm, such a high level of unexpected growth in any activity of the population would be unsettling, and a surge in religious activity has been particularly disconcerting due to historical conflicts. On the other hand, while growth may exacerbate certain social tensions, it may also encourage greater tolerance. As the religious community becomes a larger segment of Cuban society, the option of large-scale action against the churches becomes more costly and difficult.

Concern over church growth is compounded by the nature of the growth process. First, the growth rate has been highest among the young. The elderly, who fifteen years ago were virtually the only active church members, are now vastly outnumbered by young families with children. In addition, growth has been fragmented among many small *casas culto* and similar groups rather than being consolidated in large churches. The activities of these groups are particularly hard to monitor because members tend to be friends and neighbors. Thus, some meetings are

spontaneous and other gatherings of members are merely social activities. Members also tend to know each other well and can often recognize those who attend for monitoring purposes. These groups tend to be emphatically apolitical and interested only in religious activities; nonetheless, their close-knit nature has caused some unease among the authorities.

Phenomenal growth in the island's churches has also generated much speculation about the motives of new converts. A common assertion is that the churches are growing merely because of their access to material resources. Indeed, some churches have used material benefits to attract members. One Catholic church cancelled its catechism class due to absenteeism when another church began offering children food parcels along with religious instruction. A scholar otherwise sympathetic to the religious community argues that some churches have adopted this strategy because larger membership places them in a better position to solicit donor funds.

While church growth does partially correspond to the economic crisis, the relationship is much more complex. Cuba's "Special Period in Time of Peace", the government's designation for the post-Cold War crisis period, has generated not only economic questions but also spiritual and philosophical ones, and many Cubans have looked to the churches for answers to multiple concerns. Noted one Catholic deacon, "They are looking for something to believe, to help them understand."

Especially among the young, religious activity also provides leadership opportunities otherwise unavailable to those who are not militant members of the Communist Party or Union of Communist Youth. The more informal and participatory style of the Pentecostal and non-traditional Protestant denominations is particularly amenable to youth leadership.

Even those close to the government, who might prefer to attribute church growth to the economic situation, have weighed economic opportunism as less than half of people's motivation. Many church members were also quick to point out that they regularly dedicate ten or more hours per week to church activities, that most churches can only provide material goods to the most needy, and that they could certainly find an easier way to resolve their material needs if that were their primary goal.

Among the Jewish population, believers joke about another aspect of the economic question. "I know of very few people," noted the vice president of the Hebrew Community, "who are willing to be circumcised for a glass of milk."

Tightening the Controls

With the exception of the most cooperative mainline Protestant denominations, the churches have recently experienced greater government interest and concern. In light of its pubic relations concerns, however, the government has been careful about the ways that it maintains control of the religious situation. In some cases, authorities have taken legitimate complaints against religious groups as the basis for restricting or disbanding them. In other cases, tightening of the reins has been presented as enforcement of laws within the civil code, having no direct relation to religious activity.

The closure of many *casas culto* throughout the island beginning in 1995 provides the best example of this dual phenomenon. In some cases, loud prayer and singing have been cited as noise violations and the basis for prohibiting further activity. Since *casas culto*, which generally have an exuberant worship style, are often located in thin-walled apartment buildings, noise level does sometimes provoke neighbor complaints and legitimate government action. On some occasions, however, believers claim that equally loud non-religious activities in adjacent properties have not been targeted. In other cases, legal technicalities have been selectively enforced against individuals who make their homes available for religious activities. Some closures have been based on improper documentation of title to the property, common throughout Cuba since property is often transferred informally. Another provision has prohibited the establishment of a *casa culto* with a certain number of blocks of a church building, ostensibly to protect the established churches from competition. Since the required number of blocks varies by official and most churches already exceed their capacity, that explanation is questionable.
In the humanitarian arena, tighter control has meant greater government regulation of projects that had been relatively autonomous, many of which have been faced with the choice of operating through established government channels or being bound in red tape and effectively ended. One coordinator of humanitarian work has noted that the government has been uneasy even with projects run by local individuals for the betterment of their own neighborhoods, reluctant to relinquish its 'state as provider'' identity. Rapid growth in the number and size of projects has also stimulated government concern, generating the feeling that the situation is becoming too large to comfortably control. Finally, a number of projects have reportedly deviated from their authorized objectives, raising government questions about the alternative use of funds.

Cuban government concern has been heightened by the fear that funds will be used as part of the U.S. government's Track Two policy. The policy was elaborated in the Cuban Democracy Act passed by the U.S. Congress and signed by President Clinton in 1992. It encouraged greater people-to-people contact between the two countries, including expansion of telephone

communications and easier licensing of humanitarian donations, particularly to "independent" institutions on the island. In order to defend such a policy against accusations of being "soft on Castro," the administration publicly presented this interaction an effective means of subverting the Castro regime. As the most autonomous sector of society, the Cuban churches were identified as an ideal target for this "subversive" activity.

The Cuban Council of Churches
A report from the Council to Fidel Castro, given in March 1991, lists the following as participating institutions:
Member Churches
Ejército de Salvación
Iglesia de los Amigos
Iglesia Apostólica de Jesucristo
Iglesia Bautista Libre
Iglesia Congregacional Pentecostal
Iglesia Cristiana Pentecostal
Iglesia Cristiana Reformada
Iglesia de Dios
Iglesia Episcopal de Cuba
Iglesia Evangélica Bethel
Iglesia Metodista de Cuba
Iglesia Misión Mundial en Cuba
Iglesia del Nazareno
Iglesia Presbiteriana Reformada
Iglesia Santa Pentecostés
Observer Churches
Fraternidad de Iglesias Bautistas de Cuba
Iglesia Biblia Abierta
Iglesia de Confesión Luterana
Iglesia de Cristo

Iglesia de Cristo Apostólica
Iglesia Evangélica Libre
Iglesia Getsemaní
Iglesia Hermanidad Agraria
Iglesia la Luz de Dios Pentecostal de Cuba
Iglesia Misionera de Dios
Movements and Member Institutions
Unión Latinamoericana de Juventudes Ecuménicas
Movimiento Estudiantil Cristiano
Acción Social Ecuménica Latinoamericana

The administration further raised suspicion by stating, in July 1995, that "about half of *[Caritas']* budget is provided by United States donations." Although intended to refer to donations from private U.S. citizens and groups, the ambiguous statement was interpreted by the Cuban government as confirmation of U.S. government funding and manipulation of the Catholic charity. Although the Catholic Church and other religious organizations explictly denied any ties to the U.S. government and rejected its strategy, association with "the enemy" had already inflicted damage. The government has since demonstrated much greater suspicion of any foreign-funded religious activity.

In the communications realm, the modest access to public media that existed in the past has been more closely guarded. In 1994, the government publicly pledged to allow six to seven broadcasts per year, and since 1991, the Cuban Council of Churches had been permitted to broadcast Christmas and Easter messages. In 1995, neither holiday broadcast reportedly occurred. Some developments seem contradictory. In 1995, Protestant churches were not allowed to rent the National Theater for a Christmas concert, yet the Ministry of Culture's choir performed the liturgy of a Catholic mass at the opening of the Havana Film Festival. The situation may improve somewhat in the near future, since authorities have reportedly considered renewing permission for periodic religious radio broadcasts, albeit with strict controls, largely due to pressure from Europe.

The churches have responded to the government's concerns carefully, intent on holding onto the benefits of government tolerance without compromising their core goals. Church leaders apppear to be following several guidelines. First, they have found genuine common ground with the

government whenever possible. The most frequent example has been the U.S. embargo. Directly affected by the embargo, which inhibits material assistance from and collaboration with individuals and institutions abroad, most church leaders also oppose it for reasons of principle. Thus, without stemming directly from the desire to identify with the govemxnent, their public opposition to the embargo may indirectly serve to smooth relations.

Second, church leaders have attempted to be flexible on minor disagreements. For example, when *Caritas* wanted to begin medical humanitarian projects in Cuba, it did not press the government for autonomous distribution channels, although concerns about diversion of donations had been raised. Since Cuba already had a sufficient medical infrastructure, *Caritas* and the government reached a compromise allowing *Caritas* volunteers to monitor distribution. In addition, church leaders have avoided situations in which confrontation is unlikely to have a positive effect, including issues of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. Most have concluded that raising such issues will only antagonize the goverrunent and jeopardize the small gains that have been made. Even the Catholic Church, while somewhat more daring, has recognized the counter-productive results of confrontation.

Fourth, churches have carefully selected those issues that are high-priority and attempted to protect them as tactfully as possible. The Catholic Church, with more resources and less vulnerability to government pressure, has been active in numerous areas, from involvement in local humanitarian projects to commentary on international affairs. The bishops have taken a strong stand on dialogue and reconciliation without shying away from critical and controversial statements, but have clearly avoided gratuitous confrontation and offense. In general, statements have been carefully worded to criticize govermnent actions and attitudes rather than leaders themselves.

The Protestant denominations, on the other hand, have had to choose their priorities more specifically and make greater concessions in lower-priority areas. Most mainline Protestant churches have chosen a strong humanitarian emphasis and have pushed only for space to carry out social projects. In turn, many have wholeheartedly supported the existing political and social system. Charismatic and evangelical churches, on the other hand, have often emphasized evangelization and spiritual development, focusing their efforts on maintaining space for pastoral ministry and attempting to distance themselves from political issues.

In a few instances, churches have also attempted to maintain government favor by tolerating or even supporting goverrunent action against other denominations. Certain mainline leaders, for example, have been willing to defend the governmnent's crackdown on the *casas culto*, which

are predominantly Pentecostal. In other cases, different denominations have supported each other, such as the Catholic hierarchy's request for the release from prison of Pentecostal pastor Orson Vila. Nonetheless, competition between denominations has ocurred.

Potential Stumbling Blocks

In a country where increasing income disparity is spurring social tension, the churches' access to financial and material resources could be controversial. Some observers fear that the govenunent's campaign against profiteering and elitism could potentially be directed at the churches.

While the majority of church resources appear to be distributed according to need, certain projects could give the churches an image of prosperity. In one town, a row of faded buildings is punctuated by a flash of color: a recently constructed church building and parsonage, objectively very modest but striking within its surroundings. In addition, several churches and religious centers are equipped with modern computer and office equipment, either donated or purchased with hard currency.

Another benefit given to some pastors and lay leaders is the occasional opportunity to travel, and to obtain needed goods while abroad. In many cases, official trips for participation in church conferences and activities also provide recreational opportunities not available to most Cubans. In a few cases, observers otherwise supportive of the churches claim that trips abroad are little more than camouflaged vacations.

A related issue is the degree of foreign influence that accompanies foreign financial support. Although the image is largely relegated to the past, both the Cuban Catholic Church and the Protestant churches suffer from their past reputations as imported or foreign-controred institutions. Foreign ties could be used to revive that perception and thereby increase churches' vulnerability to government criticism. In a 1990 Brazfl speech, Fidel Castro explicitly criticized the Catholic Church in this respect, claiming that 'it is very dependent on other Western churches, on the help of the U.S. church and other churches in Europe. . . The hierarchy of the U.S. Catholic Church has no little influence in the Cuban Church." Since manipulation by foreign entities has indeed been a historical weakness of some churches, the Clinton administration's Track Two declaration of its intention to use religious activity to subvert the government is particularly unfortunate and ill-timed.

In reality, foreign organizations have tended to place general conditions on the use of donations but have had minimal direct control over the use of donated resources once they entered the country. When groups have received donations of medicine, for example, the foreign donor's

influence has generally been limited to the understanding that the medicine will be distributed to those in need. Recent reports indicate that some foreign donors are now requiring more accounting; even so, most projects still have Cubans making the majority of the actual distribution decisions.

In sum, despite the objective modesty of church resources and opportunities, their relative abundance in the Cuban context could facilitate the portrayal of the religious community as a violator of Cuba's egalitarian ethos. The foreign origin of most resources further complicates the situation. Mitigating this vulnerability is the fact that, with a few unfortunate exceptions, resources have generally not been used in ways that set the churches above the rest of society but rather in programs that provide basic needs. Moreoever, the proliferation of income disparity as a result of tourism, self-employment, and foreign remittances makes any case against the churches pale by comparison. The basis for popular resentment is therefore relatively small. Nonetheless, in a country where even the essentials are scarce, some jealousy is to be expected and leaves the churches vulnerable to criticism.

Conclusion

After a gradual decline in tension over the last three decades, both the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches are generally on civil terms with the government. Despite the occasional confronta tion, the churches clearly have more space in which to carry out their mission than in decades past.

Nevertheless, a fundamental suspicion of the churches' character and intent remains strong, and there is some evidence that the opening afforded them has diminished slightly since 1993. They continue to operate in a delicate balance, affected by international conditions, domestic economic and political factors, and individual actions and attitudes.

Recent developments have presented new challenges. Gradual economic recovery has given the govenunent less need for church-sponsored humanitarian projects and greater ability to monitor the religious situation. The accumulated political loosening associated with economic reform has led some in the goverm-nent to conclude that reassertion of control is necessary. The trend has been further reinforced by the goverrunent's fear that the churches will be manipulated as part of the Clinton administration's Track Two policy. High levels of growth in religious activity have raised concern as well, but have also made reconciliation more desirable and repression more costly. The fragmented nature of church growth complicates the situation, making religious activity difficult to monitor.

What does the future hold? In the past, with the exception of certain mainline Protestant denominations, progress in the church-state relationship has been pragmatic, each side realizing the desirability of coexistence over confrontation.

At present, relations between certain denominations and the government appear to be approaching their natural cost-benefit equilibrium. The churches have refrained from gratuitous criticism of the government and have even joined it in condenming certain actions of the United States. Even the Catholic Church has not been as confrontational as it might, emphasizing the spiritual nature of the dialogue and reconciliation which it advocates, and distancing itself from openly partisan politics. Moreoever, although the bishops' statements have generated much controversy, their average frequency has been roughly only once a year. As conservative exiles have noted critically, Catholic churches in other communist countries have been far more confrontational toward their respective regimes.

Most mainline Protestant churches have already made substantial efforts to accomodate the government and can go no further without losing the support of their more conservative grass-roots membership. The Catholic Church and the less cooperative Protestant denominations, on the other hand, are also unlikely to go any further in their cooperation with the goverrunent, already approaching the flat segment of the cost vs. benefit curve.

The government finds itself in a similar position. The initial, largely symbolic steps toward reconciliation have been exhausted, and future steps may incur more perceived costs than benefits. Govenunent leaders have met with church leaders and allowed church leaders to meet with their foreign counterparts, and Fidel Castro has granted a series of interviews on religious issues. The most substantial step, admission of believers to the Communist Party, may have carried as much cost in hard-line resistance as government leaders are willing to bear. The next possible steps, such as providing religious groups with substantial access to the media or permitting greater freedom of assembly, risk increasing the churches' infiuence precisely at a time when non-govemment organizations with foreign connections are suspect.

A return to the era of open confrontation is also unlikely, however, since both the churches and the state benefit from the current state of civil coexistence and wish to maintain it. For the leaders of some mainline Protestant denominations, a genuine affinity for the accomplishments of the Revolution also works to prevent future conflict.

The current arrangement is therefore likely to change only as substantial shifts occur in Cuban society, affecting each party's cost-benefit analysis. The status of Cuba's economy, the related

degree of need for humanitarian assistance, the longevity and intensity of the government's current drive to reassert social control, international considerations, and the pace of church growth could all affect the equation. Within the island, church growth and the govenunent's confidence in its abflity to channel and control that growth will be particularly important. Externally, U.S. and European actions could also be very influential. Future developments in these and other areas will continue to shape the balance between conflict, coexistence, and cooperation for the churches and the state in Cuba.