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## African-Hispanic-Cuban Christianity

The title of our paper points to this interesting and striking fact: popular religion and even Christianity in Cuba, very similar to all other Caribbean cultures, is a mixture, a sort of a melting pot in which the final product, the results of the various ingredients, is something completely different from each one of the elements and not the mere sum of those elements. In Cuba, our popular Christianity, like our Cuban culture, is a mulatto Christianity.

A good example of what we are saying now is Ochun, the Yoruba goddess or "Orisha" who on the arrival of the African slaves in Cuba, was syncretized with the Catholic Copper Virgin (*Virgen Del Cobre*). Ochun and the Copper Virgin with whom she is syncretized, both are mulatto entities.

We can identify four religious movements in Cuba today:

1. Catholicism, which arrived in Cuba with the conquerors and which identified itself, as an institution, with the classes in power until 1959 and the triumph of our revolution.
2. The African animist religions that arrived in Cuba with the slave trade at the beginning of the 16th century and, in a certain measure, became syncretic when gradually mixed with Catholicism.
3. Spiritualism, which came from the USA in the middle of the 19th century and pretended to be a scientific expression of religion. Some of the Cuban patriots, whose ideology was rejected at that moment by the

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Catholic Church, found a space and a refuge for their religious beliefs in Spiritualism, and later, in Protestantism.

4. Protestantism, which arrived in Cuba with Cuban exiles returning from the USA between 1871 and 1890 and after 1898 with USA missionaries and found frank opposition in the Catholic Church from the beginning.

The introduction of Christianity in Cuba occurred at the same time that the domination and colonization of our island by Spain. Therefore, the cross and the sword came together, and the native Indians and their original culture were conquered very soon. The Indian Hatay was the first patriot of Cuba who died for the freedom of his people. Caught by the colonizers, he was burned at the stake. When he was burning, a priest invited him to accept the cross, to become a Christian and to go to heaven. Then Hatay asked: "Are those who have put me in this fire going to be in heaven?" "Of course," answered the priest. "Then," Hatay said, "I do not want to be in heaven."

Since the Indians were gradually wiped out and not available for labor, the colonizers started to bring Black slaves from Africa, who were very strong, although they resisted periods of fourteen hours of labor.

When did the first African slaves arrive in Cuba? We do not have yet a satisfactory answer to this question. The historians consider the possibility that the first Black slaves accompanied Diego Valezquez in his quest. The first known document related to the introduction of Black slaves in Cuba is dated in 1513.<sup>1</sup> From this date until 1873, when the last load of slaves arrived, more than half a million Africans were brought to Cuba. They belonged to about twenty different ethnic groups and according to the Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortiz, from not less than ninety-nine countries and regions. Romulo Lachatamère, another Cuban specialist, classifies this Black immigration in six groups: Lucumi, Congo, Carabali, Mandinga, Erve Tshi and Hamito-negroide. All of them belonged especially to two great linguistic families: the "Sudanese" and the "Bantu". The Sudanese

family comprehends the "Yoruba" or "Lucumi" languages, used in the rites of Cuban "santeria" and the language of the "Fon" or "Arara" religion; the "Bantu" or "SemiBantu" languages include the language of the tribes of the "Congos" or "Paleros", and "Efik" language of the secret society "abakua," brought to Cuba by the "Carabali" from Southern Nigeria.

Summing up, in the first period of our history we find already the three elements that made, together, our syncretic mulatto culture: the Indian, the Spanish and the African cultures. The Black slaves would contribute to our culture not only the ethnic factor, but the religious, artistic, linguistic and social elements which later would be so important to define our character and idiosyncrasy.

The evangelizing work of the Catholic Church was very poor at this moment. The Christian instruction and baptism was more a formalism than a sincere project for the purpose of converting the people to a new faith. At that moment the conquerors were interested more in getting gold and glory in the new lands than in anything else. At the beginning of the 17th century (1608-1612?), according to tradition, the Virgin of Charity was discovered on our coasts by two Indians and one Black slave while they were on a boat. Later this virgin became the Copper Virgin, the patron saint of Catholic people in Cuba.

The growth of Catholicism in Cuba was slow, but stable in the following years and coincided with periods of economic, political and social expansion of the island. Many young people of both sexes were making decisions for a monastic and religious life and became priests and nuns. The prosperity of the Catholic Church, however, constituted a risk: many might enter this religious life actually interested in a quiet and comfortable life and even moved by ambitions for power and riches.<sup>2</sup>

Through centuries, up to the last decades of this century, the people of Cuba did not know any other gospel than the Roman Catholic gospel, and the people of Cuba considered themselves Catholic. There were

Catholic bishops and priests whose doctrine and life exerted great influence on our people.

The priest, Jose Agustin Caballero, called "Father of the poor and of our Philosophy," Jose Marti and Felix Varela, fathers of our national culture, were the first who "taught us how to think and to think as Cubans." Their main interests were to educate their people for their liberation from the Spanish yoke and, of course, to fight for the total abolition of Black slavery. During the century the work of two disciples of Father Varela took the doctrine of their teacher forward and prepared the way for the liberation from Spain. They are Jose Antonio Saco, who wrote a *History of Slavery* and Jose de la Luz y Caballera.

Both gave the Cuban people moral guidance based on the gospel and helped prepare a new generation of patriots that would carry out the revolution against Spain. However, from 1830 on, the Catholic Church suffered a serious crisis and the high hierarchy left the people in great helplessness and kept them away from the ideals of independence. When Antonio Maceo, our great Black hero and patriot died in the fight against Spain, the bells of the Catholic churches rang cheerfully all over the island.

In 1886 the total abolition of slavery was definitively accomplished and the Black people could freely incorporate themselves in the fight for independence and many died for it. During these last years of the 19th century the first Protestant patriots arrived in Cuba, and later, the Protestant churches sent their missionaries. Many patriots found refuge and support for their liberation ideals in the Protestant church.

The Cuban Independence War was ended with the USA intervention. The signing of this peace with Spain was a sad and frustrating experience. For the Cuban people it was only a change of owner, a situation of dependence and submission to the USA, a situation that did not change after the total autonomy and during the sixty years of the Republican period.

The history of Christianity and the history of Cuba during this century have been more or less the same in all Latin America and the Caribbean.

These countries have always had great natural resources, but have always remained under the control of European and U.S. neo-imperialism through reactionary puppet governments, military interventions and the manipulation of international markets. This is now the situation even in most African and Asian countries, and that was our miserable situation in Cuba until 1959, when our Revolution took place: starvation, illiteracy, sickness, and death for lack of medical attention, racial prejudice, prostitution, begging, alcoholism and gambling. However, the richest families and most of the landowners in the island were Catholic. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church placed itself on the side of the oppressors and of the class in power.

Its consequence was the mass de-christianization, the anticlericalism and the indifference or lack of Christian knowledge on the part of the people. Even those who used to go to church were prohibited from reading the Bible at home, or to be in touch with Protestant people or institutions. Fortunately a renewing current had started in the universal church which would later have expression in the II Vatican Council and would give a religious answer to many situations of the modern world.

Neither did the Protestant churches have a response to the mass of people who suffered such an exploitation and negligence on the part of the governments. It is true that almost all the Protestant Cuban missionaries who had brought the Protestant faith to Cuba at the end of the 19th century had been patriots before becoming Protestant. We have said already that they discovered that Catholicism was supporting Spain in the Cuban fight for liberty. But after the American intervention the Protestant churches entered a process of "decubanization": in a coercive way the American Boards replaced the Cuban missionaries and pastors with American missionaries, and even though many Cubans entered the Protestant ministry, their churches were governed by their USA leaders and in a great proportion, were supported by American money.

According to statistics published by a Protestant magazine, at the end

of 19th century and beginning of the 20th, the Boards which sent missionaries to Cuba belonged to the following churches:

1. The Quakers
2. The Northern Baptist Church
3. The Southern Baptist Church
4. The Congregational Church
5. The Church of the Disciples of Christ
6. The Episcopal Church
7. The Methodist Church
8. The Northern Presbyterian Church
9. The Southern Presbyterian Church

The Cuban Protestant Church in general became a church of "the American way of life" with an American ideology. However, for the first time, a small part of the Cuban people who had found a ritualistic and devitalized religion in the Catholic mass developed in Latin, was now confronted with the Bible, with a new practical gospel and with a serious Christian program to be carried out in their everyday life: honesty, veracity, repentance, service, love, hope for the future . . . but frequently also it was moralistic, puritanical and produced an ascetic preaching in which involvement of pastors and lay person in politics was considered a lack of spiritual life and participation in worldly life. Sometimes a message against exploitation of the poor or racial prejudice or an emphasis on any social affair was suspected of being a communist ideology by many people in the church.

However many young people who participated in the fight against Batista were of Catholic or Protestant background. Those who died in the fight before the triumph of the Revolution were the forerunners of Liberation Theology. They died before the II Vatican Council and before Medellin. This means that the II Vatican Council and the meeting of the Episcopal Conference of Latin America (CELAM) in Medellin, Columbia, were enriched by the event of the first social revolution in America.<sup>3</sup>

The Afro-Cuban religions that developed after the arrival of African slaves in Cuba are of great importance to our Christianity and especially in respect to our popular religiosity which has had a new efflorescence in these last years and particularly since the decade of the 1970s. By popular religiosity we mean every religious manifestation of the people which does not appear to be institutionally articulated.

The Catholic Presbyter, Maximino Arias, in his book *Iglesia y Religiosidad Popular en America Latina* (*Church and Popular Religiosity in Latin America*) considers one way in which this religiosity appears is in expressions such as dancing, festivities, meals, etc. which are different from the official ones such as Christmas, Three Kings Day, and Holy Week. We should note that frequently there is not a definite line between popular religiosity and superstition.

There are three African cults which have made special religious contributions to our Cuban culture and are easily identified: the *Regla de Ocha* or "santeria" from the *Yoruba* or *Lucumi* culture, the *Conga* sects of cults of ancient *Bantu* origin, from which witchcraft (*brugeria*) comes and the *Abakua* society or *naniquismo* of *Carabali* origin. However, only the culture and religion of the *Yorubas* has a place in this paper on Cuban Christianity, not only because their culture and religion have been of greater influence on our culture, but also because its gods or *Orishas* were syncretized with the saints of the Catholic Church and gave birth to the *Santeria*, a phenomenon which has its equivalent in the *Voodoo* of Haiti and the *Candomble* of Brazil.

The *Yorubas* came from Western Nigeria. They arrived in Cuba possibly in the 16th century, but the drums (*bata*) in their sacred form and character did not arrive until the 19th century. This was due possibly to the destruction of the capital of the *Lucumis* by the *Fulas* of Africa in 1825, and as a result some drum players of *Ana* (sacred name of the drums) were brought to Cuba. The drums or *bata* are three: the *Iya*, the biggest; the *Itotele*,

the medium sized, and the *Okonkolo* the smallest. *Ana* is the deity who dwells inside the *Iya*.

The nature, character and composition of the *Yoruba* religion was one of the factors that facilitated its syncretization with Catholicism.

The *Yoruba* pantheon consists of 401 *orishas* or gods, including their avocations or ways (*caminos*), powers and minor gods. This Olympus is governed by *Olofin*, *Olofi*, *Olorun*, the idea of a Supreme God. This deity is always accompanied by another supreme deity, *Olo-r-dumare*. The fusion of both deities means the fusion of Heaven and Earth. *Olo-r-dumare* is the mother, and also the wife of *Olofin*. Both live in a place, a sort of house called *ile* on the top of the mountain. When *Olofi*, after creating everything, became tired of governing, he gave all his powers to the *orishas*. This way, the *orishas* became the intermediaries between *Olofi* and human beings.

An old woman reporter says: "Everything was made by *Olofi*. He made the world, the saints, the human beings, the animals, and then he said: 'Now get alone by yourselves.' And he went away. He retired. He delegated his son *Obatala* to be his heir, the effective *Olofi*."

*Olofi* is not the object of any cult. There is neither sacrifice nor song for him. However, when a believer wants to reinforce his petition and to be sure of a response, he says: "For *Olofi*, for *Olo-r-dumare*, health and luck" ("Salud y suerte") and then he makes the petition.

Notice how similar is this attitude and relation of the believer to the deities in the *santeria* with the one developed by the Catholic believer toward the Catholic saints. There is a popular expression in Cuba: "When God doesn't want something, no saint will pray."

The *Yoruba* deities or *orishas* are anthropomorphic: they love, hate, fight, are jealous, fond of women, traitors, gluttonous and revengeful. The *Yoruba* myths and stories are of great beauty, richness and complexity. The *Yoruba* mythology may compete with the Greek mythology and even surpass it in its variety, its freshness and its primitivism. The believers take inspira-

tion from these myths and legends and derive their norms of behavior in life from them.

El *monte* (a place of trees, bushes, and grasses and weeds) is the place where the orishas are born and live. Ossian (Saint Ramon in the Catholic Church) is the owner of the *monte*. He knows the grasses and weeds. He is the child of nobody, like the grass, and is symbolized by a *guiro* (gourd) the dry fruit of the calabash tree in Cuba.

These deities are made of wood or stone if they are made in the African style. In this case they are called *ereres*. In general, the santeros' altars are similar to the Catholic altars and its saints, but they are different especially for the offerings (food, flowers, and fruits) offered to the saints.

The most important orishas in the Afro-Cuban pantheon are:

*Obatala*, the owner of all human beings, of peace and justice, who is androgynous, syncretized with the Virgin of Mercy (Merceded). Her/his color is white.

*Eleggua* is the owner of lighting, fire and sex; the owner of the drums. Red is his color and he is syncretized with Saint Barbara.

*Oggyn* is the god of iron, war, minerals and of the *monte*. He is syncretized with Saint Peter in Havana, but with Saint John the Baptist in the Province of Matanzas. He is madly in love with Ochun.

*Ochun* — the goddess of every charm, the Aphrodite of Yoruba mythology, the goddess of love, coquetry, riches and honey (*oni*), the owner of rivers and fresh water and of yellow metals. She has been syncretized with the Copper Virgin of Charity. In Africa, Ochun is black; in Cuba, she is mulatto.

*Yemaya* is the goddess of universal maternity, the mother of all African orishas and owner of the sea waters. She is syncretized with the Virgin of Regla.

In addition to these six most important orishas of "santeria," *Babalu aye* (syncretized with Saint Lazarus) is very important in Cuba with respect to popular religiosity.

In the *santeria* there is a priest, the *babalao*, who knows everything in this religion and is a specialist in divination. He is the one who leads the ceremonies devoted to the saints. In ceremonies and festivities the phenomenon of spirit possession is very important. The person possessed by the saint falls in a trance or ecstasy, dances and performs the actions requested by the saint.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find an aspect of the life of our people in Cuba in which there is no influence of African culture and religions. Africa, and especially the *Yorubas*, is always present among us, particularly in the way in which our people live their Christianity. Music, dancing, singing, cooking, herb medicine and worship: all have an African stamp on them. And even though the Catholic Church rejects some of the saints of great prestige in the *santeria* (such as San Lazaro and Santa Barbara), their believers go to church looking for holy water, make their altars similar to the Catholic altars and adore images of saints on cards printed by the Catholic Church. It is difficult to determine if the ethical values expressed by the people in their everyday life, like friendliness, loyalty, spirit of service and solidarity, love and respect for the family, have a Christian or an African origin, or if they are a syncretic product developed in the transcultural encounter of both cultures.

Christianity in Cuba cannot at present be evaluated by the number of people who go to church every week, especially now when we have a socialist system with an ideology which officially is Marxist and atheist. Nor is it easy to determine what percent of the people consider themselves Christian. Most of those who practice what we call a popular religiosity, when asked about their beliefs, say: "I am a Catholic." Those who would say, "I am an evangelical" (meaning Protestant) are fewer by far, even if the number of Protestant denominations recognized by an official survey is about forty.

The Catholic Church considers that those who ask for baptism for their children, request a mass for a deceased, those who go to the sanctuaries

on special dates during the year, those who worship a crucifix or saints in their homes, or use or know the traditional Christian prayers, belong in one way or another to the Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup> However, the people of Cuba, the same as the people of Brazil, Mexico, Barbados, or Haiti have not been a religious people who go to church for instruction. The Church people have belonged to the middle or upper classes and only as an exception, like the Pentecostal, do they belong to poor or country people. In 1898 the *criollos*, priests, in a public declaration, recognized the "indifference" of the Cuban people toward religion. This has not varied any in this century. It is under these conditions that our revolution developed in Cuba and the Protestant and Catholic Churches offered their witness to society.

Before we finish our paper it is important for us to say something about the Cuban ecumenical movement and the efforts of our people to construct a new society.

Our present Cuban Ecumenical Council (Consejo Ecumenico de Cuba: CEC) was founded in 1941. Before 1959, when our revolution triumphed, the CEC devoted itself especially to opposing the Catholic Church, particularly in its intention of becoming Cuba's official religion. Unfortunately it got away from popular problems. After 1959, while the ideological confrontation was developing, new attitudes and positions of the CEC were taking form.

The Council received influence from Christians from other parts of the world and from the World Council of Churches; the Student Christian Movement was organized, the theological and biblical interpretation was enriched in its dialogue with the social context and, finally, the CEC and a large part of the people and churches who were supporting it in a formal way, made its option for socialism and decided to remain in Cuba, to live and to give its witness in this society.

However, a large proportion of the members of the Protestant and Catholic congregations left the country during the months following Fidel's

declaration of the Marxist character of our revolution. For example, two thirds of the Presbyterians of Cuba left our churches, with consequent reduced attention and support. Black people, in general, remained. Those who decided to remain had to face this first question: "What should the people of God do if suddenly they find themselves inserted in a society with a different philosophy, faith or outlook on life? Leave? Remain? Fight? Is there a role for Christianity in this situation? The second question that we had to confront at that moment was a reaction to the program of the Marxist revolution: everybody had a job, shelter, and food, free education, free medical care, equal opportunities for women and Blacks. Should the people of God support a movement in favor of the poor, the oppressed and the exploited, if it is developed by a communist and atheist people? We found answers to these questions by confronting our situation with the Scriptures.

The following are some phrases from the Declaration of the XV Annual Assembly of the "*Consejo de Iglesias Evangelicas de Cuba* (now *Consejo Ecumenico de Cuba* or CEC)

We declare:

1.1 That we have confirmed that the revolution is an irreversible process that has transformed, down to their roots, the structures of the Cuban society and is giving birth to a new society which is more human and just.

1.3 That this proletarian process with special emphasis on creative work, the universalization of education, public health, the new man/woman and social justice, offers the Christians an option to plainly participate in this enormous undertaking of building socialism in Cuba.

2.1 We declare our adhesion to the Cuban Revolution and our commitment to actively participate in the construction of the new society.<sup>5</sup>

At present about nine or ten Protestant denominations belong to the *Consejo Ecumenico de Cuba*. Our Matanzas Seminary, supported by the Methodist, Episcopal and Presbyterian churches and six ecumenical movements, belongs also to the *Consejo*. The ecumenical relationship bet-

ween the Protestant churches and the Catholic Church is poor, especially in respect to the Catholic hierarchy. Some of the denominations with the greatest numbers of members, such as the Baptists and some Pentecostal sects, do not belong to the *Consejo*. There are various seminaries or Bible schools in the island. The Catholic Seminary of San Carlos in Havana and the Ecumenical Seminary of Matanzas are the ones with highest standards.

Yes, Christianity is a reality in Cuba. The Church of Christ is there. Christian life is lived there at different levels and according to the culture and knowledge of each person because Christianity is the most important ingredient of our popular religiosity. However, the presence of Marxism and our education, which is predominantly Marxist, make Cuba an interesting case. Besides that, the practice of Afro-Cuban religions there, and especially *santería*, makes our popular religiosity a unique phenomenon in Latin America, one deserving more serious and profound study. However, consciously or unconsciously, believers and unbelievers are working for and moving toward a future which we Christians call the Kingdom of God.

### Notes

1. Rine Leal: "La Selva Oscura", tomo I page 65, 66 (Editorial Arte y Literatura, La Habana, 1975).
2. ENEC (Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano) Documento Final, p. 35, Conferencia Episcopal Cubana, Habana, 1986.
3. Rdo. Pablo Oden Marichal: "Apuntes para un ensayo sobre las misiones protestantes en Cuba (Congreso Latinamericano de Sociología, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, 2-7 de mayo, 1986)

4. ENEC (Encuentro Nacional Eclesial Cubano), Documento Final, p. 52, Conferencia Episcopal Cubana, Habana, 1986.

5. "Mensaje" Organo del Consejo Ecumenico de Cuba. enero-marzo de 1974. p. 2.