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Christianity in Cuba: The Current State of the Art

As the Cuban Revolution has moved more openly toward a reapproachment with the Christian community and the Catholic Church in recent years, many outside the Revolution have viewed this as a tactical move. Some see it as an attempt to win favor with the United States in an effort to reestablish relations. Others consider it a by-product of events in Central and Latin America where the Catholic Church plays a key role. Some accuse the Communist leader of being opportunistic or hypocritical.

Those who view the current situation as being one of recent origin, or as a one-man, top-down decision, based on geopolitical interests, ignore a large body of Cuban history. Interviews with officials of the Catholic Church as well as seminarians, activists in the Student Christian Movement and the Ecumenical Council gave a detailed picture of a long history of both struggle and cooperation.

They all point to four key events that helped form the current policy: Fidel Castro's encounters with Christians in Chile during the Allende period; his conversations with religious leaders in Jamaica in 1977 (when Michael Manley was head of government); similar discussions in Nicaragua after the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution (the most widely-known of these encounters); and the visit of US presidential hopeful, Reverend Jesse Jackson to Cuba in 1984. And they place these in the context both of changes occurring in the churches inside Cuba, and the growing identification of the Catholic Church with the poor and oppressed of Latin America: the Theology of Liberation (which also had its counterpart in the Protestant churches). They also point to the Communist Party Department on Religion. The outstanding role of Christians in the various conferences on the foreign debt crisis held in Cuba in 1985 also played a key role.

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Fidel Castro himself has said on repeated occasions that this attempted alliance with the Christian churches is not a tactical move. In an interview with Dominican priest Frei Betto (published as a record breaking best-seller, *Fidel y la Religion*, first in Brazil, then Cuba), he stated this explicitly. The Cuban leader maintains that it is a correct political principle to respect people's religious beliefs, not a tactical matter. "We think that citizens' religious beliefs should be respected as a right, just like their rights to health, life, liberty and all other rights."

In criticizing himself and the Party for not having worked toward bringing about a closer working relation with the Church, he observed: "If you were to ask me, 'Is it vital for the Revolution to do so?' I would say, no. It's not vital for the Revolution, in the sense that our Revolution has an enormous force, enormous political strength and enormous ideological strength." Why then does it matter to the Cuban leader whether the relation with the religious sector is improved? He answers by explaining that he likes to think of the revolution as a work of art, a work that can be perfected. "But if we don't achieve this climate (of going beyond mere coexistence), then we can't say our Revolution is a perfected work. Because as long as there are circumstances in which there are individuals who, because of their religious beliefs, don't have the same prerogatives as others, although they fulfill their social duties exactly the same as others, then our revolutionary work is incomplete."

But the question isn't so simple. It's one thing to say that anyone can believe whatever they want. It is a far thornier question to decide whether people who do believe in a supernatural being can be members of a Marxist-Leninist party, or hold key governmental posts in a country that explicitly takes Marxism-Leninism as its guiding philosophy.

In his talks with Frei Betto, Fidel Castro appeared to open the doors to real integration between Christians and Marxists when he was asked whether he considered religion "the opiate of the people." That phrase by Karl Marx has been frequently repeated, and according to Betto, greatly misused and misunderstood. Castro's response to this crucial question was that religion can be and has been in various times and places an opiate, but that it does not have to be. He also pointed out that when Marx created the First International, many of the workers who formed it were Christians, just as there were among those who fought and died in the Paris Commune. "There's not a single phrase in Marx excluding those Christians," he asserted. Nor did the Bolshevik Party formed by Lenin specifically exclude Christians from membership in the Party, he went on. The only thing required for membership was acceptance of the Party Program. Pointing to the Nicaraguan experience, Fidel Castro insisted that the concept of religion as an opiate should not be taken as a dogma or an absolute. "It's a truth determined by concrete historical conditions," he insisted. Going further, he added: "In my opin-

ion, from a political viewpoint religion in and of itself is neither an opiate nor a miraculous remedy . . . From a strictly political viewpoint (and I think I know something about politics) I think you can be a Marxist without ceasing to be a Christian, and you can work together with Marxist communists to transform the world." That assertion, is certain to be debated for some time to come, both inside Cuba and abroad.

While skeptical Christians outside Cuba may be convinced this is nothing more than a maneuver on the part of the Cuban president, liberation theologians from abroad and Cuban Catholics (who traditionally have been cooler to the revolutionary process than Cuban Protestants) stated they believe Castro is sincere. Asked whether this reflected a real change in the Cuban government's attitude toward organized religion, Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Cespedes replied: "There is a real understanding. You can't jump to the conclusion that the problems developed over a long period will disappear in a day, but there is evidently a change in climate, and there are concrete deeds to point to." Asked to name some, he cited the fact that government leaders were sitting down and talking with the Catholic Bishops and other Church leaders; changes in attitudes that could be seen in work places and schools. In this sense, he considered the publication of the book itself a concrete step. "The fact that in this book Fidel Castro discusses religion in a more positive light helps promote this climate of change."

Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Cespedes (generally known as Father Carlos Manuel by Cuban Catholics) heads the Secretariat of the Cuban National Council of Bishops, and was its spokesman during the historic Cuban National Ecclesiastical Conference held in Havana February 16-23. As such, he not only explained the workings of that meeting at daily press conferences, but was also called on to defend the Catholic Church against sometimes vicious attacks from Cuban exiles and reactionary Catholics abroad. He and his brother, also a Catholic priest, were the only members of his family. They descended from the "father" of Cuba's independence struggle against Spain in the last century. Father Carlos, who bears his father's name, did not leave Cuba after the Revolution. His willingness to live with the revolution, even praise its many achievements, arouses the ire and condemnation of opponents abroad. But Father de Cespedes claims strong support for the policies he espouses from Cuban Catholics, and from the Pope himself.

"I can tell you that the Pope supports the dialogue that is going on between the Cuban Church and government," he said in an interview following the National Ecclesiastical meeting. Dialogue was one key element in the week-long conference that had just summed up seven years of intensive analysis and reflection from the grassroots level through the hierarchy of the Church, and Monsignor de Cespedes was still radiating the pleasure and satisfaction Church officials felt from that meeting

when I interviewed him two days later at his office at the Archbishopric in Old Havana. On the final Sunday there was a mass open to the public, officiated by Cardinal Eduardo Pironio, Pope John Paul II's special emissary to the conference. Approximately five thousand worshippers came to the Church that morning, many of whom had to listen via loudspeakers hung outside. But it wasn't just numbers that impressed the Church leaders: it was the spirit. At various points in the mass, people began chanting, spontaneously, "Cuba, Cuba, Cuba." They closed it singing the Cuban National Anthem.

When the Pope visited Nicaragua, similar patriotic manifestations at public appearances and prayer meetings were interpreted as hostile provocations — an interpretation about which many Nicaraguan Catholics were greatly upset. But Father Carlos Manuel said that no one here thought for a minute that the intense patriotism of the Cuban worshippers was out of line. On the contrary, they viewed it with great joy. One of the major purposes of the conference was to bring the Cuban Church up to date by discussing how it could revitalize its missionary activity in the present-day society. One aspect of this is the dialogue, not just with Cuban government officials but within the Church, with other Christian denominations and with non-Christians. But other aspects dealt with involving Church members in the daily activities of the country. This would be impossible if the Church were still viewing the Revolution in an essentially hostile light. It is this acceptance of the Revolution as a fact — and, if not a blessing, at least not a curse — that so disturbs anti-communists abroad.

Not all Marxists are happy about the situation, either. In Havana, many people were (as Castro himself predicted) quite surprised by the position he had enunciated in his interview with Frei Betto. While most people welcomed it, there were facetious remarks such as "Well, now I suppose we will all have to start putting on a cross." Even some serious party cadres sometimes reacted with the comment: "I am still not convinced. Materialism is the opposite of idealism. I do not see how Christians could ever be Marxists. I will have to read the book"