

## Christians and The Cuban Culture

"Culture" is one of the most polysemous of modern terms. More than two hundred definitions can be found. It is appropriate for purposes of communication and dialogue to begin with a definition which may not be acceptable, but will serve as a springboard for reflection. Our national hero, José Martí one wrote:

Motherland is a community of interests, a unity of traditions, a unity of goals, a sweet and consoling fusion of hopes and loves.

Cintio Vitier, in a report presented at the "Meeting of Intellectuals for the Sovereignty of Our America," September 1981, stated:

Take note of the classification of the factors mentioned: the economy, history, sentiments, communal projects. This defines culture as everything that characterizes the motherland, through artistic and literary expression.

In one of the sessions of the Assembly of the CMI held in Vancouver, Canada, culture was the topic of discussion. It was thoroughly analyzed. The following definition which, in our opinion, fully and accurately expresses the ideas of Martí, served as basis for the discussions.

Culture is what keeps a community united, and gives it a meaningful structure. It is expressed through language, thought patterns, way of life, attitudes, symbols and budgets; and it is celebrated in art, music, drama, literature and other forms of expression. It constitutes the collective memory of a people and the heritage that is handed down to future generations.

### I. Theological Emphasis

Christian faith is compatible with these affirmations. It stems from such a categoric pronouncement as the one in Genesis: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (1:1). It is taken up again in the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

Now then, among the things that are attributed to God the creator, whose transcendence and immanence we recognize in the divine worship and devotion of the church, is the commandment that He gave to the creature that crowns the process of creation:

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Be fruitful and multiply; and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves upon the earth (1:28).

For this reason, theologically, culture is a prolongation of time and space, which came into existence at the time of creation, and has ultimately been defined as the outcome of the actions of the human creature on the raw material which the original work of God puts at the creature's disposal. What is different from *culture* is creation, what God himself made, but creation and culture are not opposed to each other. The "image of and similarity between" the human creature and his creator, is expressed in this process of forging a culture, initiated in the majestic song of creation with which the Book of Genesis opens.

Culture, in this sense, takes care of and organizes the reality that surrounds the human being and sustains his life; and he does so with the responsibility of a steward, and with a consciousness of ecology.

## II. Cuban Culture

What is designated "cultural identity" is the collection of characteristics of a culture whose members recognize and accept each other (severally and collectively), and constitute a group — the most important unifying factor. Professor Graziella Pogolotti, in "Defiance of Identity," a lecture published in 1985 (*Revolution and Culture*), states that the cultural identity of a people is shaped by a set of values:

### a) Historical values:

History is amply understood, not only by the knowledge of basic history, by virtue of understanding the real forces behind it, but the history that translates into the concrete images of our heroes, in the legends that are woven and the anecdotes that flow into and that become an integral part of the pile of culture in everyone's memory.

### b) Authentically cultural values:

It encompasses everything from the kitchen to feasts, from gesticulation to what we now call formal education, composed of the various forms of showing hospitality and co-existing in an environment of enormous cultural significance. Habits, customs, forms of greeting and welcome, ways of spending leisure, sense of humor, notion of life and death, are all values that naturally form a part of our own identity.

### c) Artistic values:

Art is a particular way of discovering the world; we also gain some perspective on what we are and what surrounds us through art.

And she (Prof. Pogolotti) gives the following examples: As poets have converted the image of the palm or the intensely blue sky into a symbol of what we are, the narrative has given us, in Cecilia Valdés, another symbol as have music and dance. In the plastic arts, she points out, the

mid-points, the arch and the latticed windows have become part of the Cuban identity.

What then is our cultural identity?

The Minister of Culture in Cuba, Dr. Armando Hart, has stated that when it comes to culture, Cuba identifies with the West.

Cuba is a part of the cultural movement that existed among the peoples of the West . . . We declare our cultural warfare on the principles on which Western culture was built and on its vocation or aspiration towards universality.

This is the reason why the reflections and analysis of the missionary, Leslie Newbigin, in his "Can the West Be Converted?" in which he analyzes fundamental elements of Western culture, are so valuable. According to him, the cosmovision around which Western civilization evolves, is of a world in which the rule of "design" has been replaced by the natural; system of cause and effect that attempts to explain everything. The following characteristics are a result of this perspective and typical of Western culture.

- 1) Faith in the infinite progress of science. There are no limits to the capacity of science to uncover laws that explain the causes of phenomena in order to control their effects.
- 2) Work is an activity directed towards producing for consumption. This is the point of divergence between economics and ethics, and also where politics enters the picture to keep the cycle of production/consumption going.
- 3) Work ceases to be a craft and becomes mechanical. Work is performed by machines in big factories. Consequently, work is taken out of private life which is in the home. Besides workers have to live close to the factories, a fact which gave birth to the great contemporary metropolis.
- 4) Applying the model used in the mechanization of labor to the social world, results in bureaucracy. To achieve efficiency and control, everyone becomes a number, a datum, a perforated card.
- 5) On the level of ideas, the dichotomy of "public/private" is made manifest in the opposing forces of *facts* (which are public, obligatory and universal) and *values* (which are private and subject to individual acceptance or rejection). Facts belong to the now "sacred" world of science; facts result from scientific research; values are personal opinions of reality.

Cuban culture is racially mixed, as Martí used to describe the culture identity not only of Cuba, but also of the entire area which we now call Latin America. Culture has been formed in the heat of the complex process of integrating an assortment of ethnic and cultural elements:

- 1) The Hispanic element that invades our land with the conquest and habitation of our island from the 14th century by the Spaniards. A multi-faceted presence of theirs has endured. The major aspect of it is the language. We speak the language of Castilla to communicate with each other.
- 2) The native element is the legacy of our primitive inhabitants. Since they were at a very backward level of culture, they were wiped out by the colonizers. Their legacy is scanty, but they left us with their rebellious love of liberty - among other things: the *bohio* that adorns our countryside, the *yucca* that we use in our traditional foods, and

most especially the names of so many places; to begin with: Cuba, the name of our motherland.

3) Finally, the Chinese made contributions not only by the intermingling of blood with others, but by introducing the rice on our table, the processions and the masquerades at our carnivals with the Chinese trumpet, dragon, and lanterns.

4) These ethnic elements melt into each other producing the mixed race that is "the Cuban reality" in the heat of the struggles for independence and justice which lasted for over 100 years. As a matter of fact, the first decision of the Father of the land, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, in 1868, was to grant freedom to the slaves and to invite them to join in the struggle for the independence of Cuba.

Let us note some examples of the features of culture that identify what is authentically "Cuban."

Food: basic coffee, the staple food of rice, meat and kidney beans. Three meals a day, etc. Architecture: the idea of giving cities a center of activity with such facilities as the "parque," a family house, the house as a center . . . and the porch where one can relax and enjoy the fresh air while chatting with the neighbors. Clothing: for men, the guayabera, and the attire of shirt and pants, shoes and socks which our visitors think is too warm for our tropical weather. Music: European elements from Spanish and French origins, such as the *zapateo*, *la habanera*, *la criolla*. And also the African elements in rhythm and instruments. Religion: The syncretism of the Afro-Cuban religions which are the most common and popular forms. They are mixed with Roman Catholic and African elements. Character: here we quote from the "Documento de Consulta" del "Encuentro Eclesial Cubano" (ENEC), of the Roman Catholic Church.

- \* The Cuban is intelligent and discerning, more intuitive than reflexive and more independent-minded.
- \* Affectionate, cordial, good, full of compassion although he is impulsive, aggressive and impressionable at times.
- \* He is hardworking, creative, but fickle, with a tendency to settle for less. He is not always responsible or punctual.
- \* Socially, he is very open, hospitable, warm, serviceable and reliable. He is not deceitful or insincere, nor is he prone to gossip and back-biting.
- \* Temperamentally, he is cheerful, spontaneous, easily excited, generous, simple, has a high sense of justice and fairness. He is inclined towards superficiality, sensuousness and indiscipline.

### III. Christian Participation

The gospel arrived on the shores of Cuba in 1492 when the European culture came into contact with the aborigines of America. The cultures known as *tainos* and *siboyenes* were at a very primary stage of development. They lived off the land, fishing, hunting and harvesting. But according to the testimony of the conquerors, they had not only an incipi-

ent social organization, but also a form of worship with rites, divinities, and people who were specialized in such.

The newly arrived came from the Spain of Isabel and Fernando, who have been characterized as the "Catholic king and queen" throughout history. Catholicism was the version of Christianity that won the majority of the Spaniards and gave meaning to life, both for the individual and the country. A burning desire for missionary work was consuming them; it pushed them to spread the faith beyond their borders. They had only just finished expelling the Moslems from their soil, and with the same desire for a totally Christian nation, they pushed out the Jews from their land. San Juan de la Cruz and Santa Teresa are examples of the heights attained by their mysticism.

However, there are some features of Spanish Christianity which have to be singled out: 1) They profess to believe in and to follow Jesus Christ, the very person who had said "Learn from me. I am meek and lowly in heart" and who exhorted his own: "Withstand evil people" and "love your enemies". Yet they tried to spread the faith by force of arms. 2) They have established an equality between patriotism, being Spanish, and the Catholic religion, with the kind of intolerance that created the dark and gloomy days of the tribunals of the Inquisition. 3) As to the reason for their being so meticulous in carrying out everything by the details of the Catholic ritual: there is a relationship here with guilt over their insatiable thirst for gold and material possessions which caused them to be ambitious and greedy.

The editor of *Historia de las Indias*, by P. Las Casas, Reaparaz, has said that the education of the Spaniards of the period of conquest was based on the following principles: "That it is pleasing to the Lord to kill and rob unbelievers; that the most noble class of people are the warriors and the priests; that manual labor begets evil; that land belongs to the crown, the nobility who conquer it, and the Church that sanctions and shares the possession."

It is intentional that the symbol of the authentically Spanish is the bipolar figure of the spirited gentleman and defender of every just cause, Don Quixote de la Mancha and his ignorant, selfish and materialistic squire, Sancho Panza.

Hence, the indisputable fact is that the Spaniards came to our lands with the gospel and with priests accompanying them in every one of their expeditions, with the express charge to make Christians out of the pagans in these areas. However the results of their evangelism are not that clear. 1) There was a church in the heart of every town, no matter how poor it was. There people would read and talk about Jesus Christ. 2) One sees heroic figures of many missionaries (bishops, priests, etc.). They were the heroes of culture and humanity. At the same time, they were propagating and sowing the seeds of Christianity. They introduced

seeds for cultivation, also domestic animals and tools. They studied the history and the customs of our aborigines and some of them settled among the weak and the oppressed, e.g., Padre Las Casas. 3) There are also images of eminent spiritual stature, such as the Presbyters José Agustín Caballero and Félix Varela. We are now celebrating the bicentennial of the birth of the latter. He is the master of the faith of the young and an example of Christian piety. Martí said of him: "He was the one who taught us to think." 4) There are also outstanding personalities in the arts who are full of noble Christian inspiration. One example is José Nicolás de la Escalera (1734-1804), a black painter who contributed to the creation of symbols of our cultural identity. His best work was the decoration of the parochial church of Santa María del Rosario, called "the Cathedral of the Countryside".

Esteban Salas is another person of distinction. He was the choirmaster of the Cathedral of Santiago de Cuba whose Christmas carols and choral pieces echo the fundamentals of the cultured music in our country today.

In the field of letters, the mulatto, Plácido, was one of the first victims of repression. Readers still find his "Plegaria a Dios" (prayer to God) very touching. 5) The primitive inhabitants were deprived of their island, the *siboyenes* and *tainos* (Indian tribes) who lived in a primitive communist environment had their simple social family life disorganized and were stripped of their freedom. 6) The crime of genocide was committed against them. They were subjected to the shameful and ignominious period of concession which involved holding land and inhabitants granted to a conquistador. This system had been established (according to the laws) to convert them to the gospel. 7) Once this race was wiped out, thousands upon thousands of Africans were imported to work under the same inhuman and servile conditions in the growing sugar industry. They suffered a double exploitation: economic and racial. And all of this was justified theologically, and with the blessing of many church leaders.

#### Tentative Conclusions

We find that Christian culture is not Cuban. Perhaps the following generalization will serve the purpose: Christian culture does not exist anywhere, because the gospel assumed different realities in the various areas in which it was received, albeit, in very complex and imperfect ways. Evangelism has never been carried out with total faithfulness. The weaknesses and unfaithfulness of the messengers is always obvious.

Although we cannot talk of a Christian culture in Cuba, we can say that the best elements of the faith are found in what our Roman Catholic brothers called the "memoria Cristiani" (Christian memory) of our people. On the basis of this, it is possible to think about a present and a future for the Christian presence in Cuba. Evangelism is a job that never

ends. Thus, the foregoing does not necessarily lead to an attitude of disenchantment and discouragement. Our research stimulates and challenges us to participate in the advancement of culture from the Christian perspective. As Cuban Christians we ought to be the Church of God in Cuba, as the Apostle Paul wanted for the Corinthians (I Cor. 1). This has to be expressed clearly in our proclamation of the kingdom of God, which is so much bigger than any ecclesiastical institution. Our participation in the social, cultural, political and economic spheres of life must conform to our creative and prophetic reality, and above all — to love.