

INTERPRETATIONS OF CHURCH AND STATE IN CUBA, 1959-1961

BY

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Unrestrained excitement greeted Fidel Castro when he entered Havana on January 8, 1959. More than any other leader of the revolutionary forces, he personified Cuba's potential to become a progressive and democratic republic. Castro's immense popularity helped to overcome for a brief period the divisions over political philosophies and programs that soon fractured Cuban life.

The Catholic Church stood at the center of the controversies that unfolded, for both what it did and did not do. Until recently, the Church was one of the least studied aspects of the Cuban revolution, almost as if it were a voiceless part of Cuban society, an institution and faith that had little impact on the course of events. Beginning in the 1980's more extensive and serious analyses of the revolution began to appear, and for the most part these studies lacked the emotional charges and countercharges so common in revolutionary historiographies. Instead of attempting systematically to survey all of the literature, this essay selects works that represent the main interpretations of church-state relations. Among the many works available, those of Juan Clark and John M. Kirk deserve notice at the outset.¹ Though their works differ in tone, focus,

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¹Juan Clark, *Cuba: Mito y Realidad. Testimonios de un Pueblo* (Miami, 1990), which includes much of his *Religious Repression in Cuba* (Coral Gables: 1985); John M. Kirk, *Between God and Party* (Tampa, Florida, 1989). Kirk has also written several other important studies. See especially his "(Still) Waiting for John Paul II. The Church in Cuba," in Edward L. Cleary and Hannah Stewart-Cambino (eds.), *Conflict and Competition: The Latin American Church in a Changing Environment* (Boulder and London, 1992), pp. 147-165, and "Frente al Volcán: La Iglesia Católica en la Cuba pre-revolucionaria," in Vol. IV, *Caribe, of Historia General de la Iglesia en América Latina* (Salamanca, 1995). Two helpful booklength treatments that are sympathetic to the Church are Manuel Fernández, *Religion y revolución en Cuba. Veinticinco años de lucha ateista* (Miami, 1984), and Pablo M. Alfonso, *Cuba, Castro, y los católicos: del humanismo revolucionario al marxismo totalitario* (Miami, 1985). Two studies critical of the Church are Sergio Arce

and interpretations, they are both essential for understanding the Church in Cuba.

The following essay begins with a commentary on interpretations of the Church in Cuba in the 1950's, and then discusses church-state relations during the first years of the revolution, emphasizing the difficulty of understanding why events unfolded as they did. It concludes with an assessment of Castro's explanation of church-state relations, and the extent of the discrimination against the Church.

I

As students of Latin America long have recognized, generalizing about anything as institutionally, theologically, and historically complex as the Catholic Church is difficult. Recent scholarship on Cuba addresses this issue, and the best of the writing recognizes that the history of the Church is dynamic and full of contradictory tendencies. To view the Church as synchronic rather than diachronic is a mistake for most times and places in Latin America. The literature also recognizes that some historians overemphasize the importance of the Church, while others de-emphasize it. The Church becomes the metaphor for all that is good and evil, all that is weak and powerful. The objective then is to come to a balanced appraisal, something difficult to do under the best of circumstances, and almost impossible in an ideologically charged atmosphere.²

Another difficulty is the relationship between formal religion and what is often described as popular or folk religion. Most studies of religion in Cuba refer to the institutional Catholic Church, not to the popular expression of religious beliefs. An exception is Damián J. Fernández, who argues that widespread belief in different folk religions belies the notion that religion was unimportant. Indeed, the revolutionary government created a political religion by using the symbols of traditional folk religions to further its objectives.³

Despite the problems, generalizations about the Church and religion do help to clarify the nature of the discourse about church and state.

Martínez, *The Church and Socialism: Reflections from a Cuban Context* (New York, 1985), and Raúl Gómez Treto, *The Church and Socialism in Cuba* (Maryknoll, New York, 1989).

²These comments follow Carlos Manuel de Céspedes García-Menocal, "Puede afirmarse que el pueblo cubano es católico o no?" *Temas*, 4 (October-December, 1995), 13-32.

³Damián J. Fernández, "Revolution and Political Religion in Cuba," in Matthew C. Moen and Lowell S. Gustafson (eds.), *The Religious Challenge to the State* (Philadelphia, 1992), pp. 51-71.

On the eve of the revolution, the Cuban Catholic Church was small, ineffective, conservative, dominated by foreigners, confined to the major cities, and out of touch with the serious social and economic problems of the nation. This sentence, obviously a gross oversimplification, does summarize many interpretations that have become a part of the mainstream historiography on the Church. As an example, the Church "was merely another feeble institution with only superficial strength. . . . Of the Spanish American people, then, the Cuban was the least Catholic."⁴ This interpretation has even found its way into texts on world religions. In the very few lines devoted to Cuba in his fine survey of world religions, Michel Malherbe notes that "well before the instauration of Fidel Castro's regime, Cuba was the Latin American country where religious practice was the weakest."⁵ Perhaps the most telling evidence is that some otherwise very good studies of Cuba by established scholars completely ignore or barely mention the Church.⁶

The numbers do not support such a negative assessment of the size and strength of the Church. In 1955, 220 diocesan (95 Cuban) and 461 (30 Cuban) priests in religious orders served with 329 other male religious and 1,872 nuns (556 Cubans).⁷ Given the history of Cuba, especially its proximity to the United States and the long history of Protestantism, these numbers are not inconsiderable. Nevertheless, as surveys conducted in 1954 and 1957 demonstrate, the formal church was not strong, especially in the rural areas, where Catholics only infrequently attended Mass and received the sacraments.⁸

Compared with the rest of Latin America, the Cuban Church might have been small, but certainly not the smallest, nor the weakest. Measured in thousands, in 1955 Cuba had 8.8 thousand inhabitants per priest, followed by El Salvador with 9.1, the Dominican Republic 10.5, Honduras 13, and Guatemala 13.5. The mean for all of Latin America

⁴Ramon Eduardo Ruiz, *Cuba. The Making of a Revolution* (Amherst, Massachusetts, 1968), pp. 159-160. For other examples see Margaret E. Crahan, "The Church and Revolution: Cuba and Nicaragua," *La Trobe University Institute of Latin American Studies* (1983), p. 1; Hugh Thomas, *Cuba. The Pursuit of Freedom* (New York, 1971), pp. 683-684, 1127-1130; Kirk, "(Still) Waiting," p. 152; Jorge I. Domínguez argues that there was not a Cuban Church, "International and National Aspects of the Catholic Church in Cuba," *Cuban Studies*, 19 (1989), 44-47.

⁵Michel Malherbe, *Les religions de l'humanité* (Paris, 1990), p. 596.

⁶As examples see Luis A. Pérez, *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1995), and Jaime Suchlicki, *Cuba. From Columbus to Castro*, 2nd ed. (Washington, 1986).

⁷Gómez Treto, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-15.

⁸Kirk, *Between God and Party*, pp. 45-46.

was 6.3, about the number of inhabitants per priest in Panama.⁹ Certainly the Church in some Central American and Caribbean countries, with only one bishop and a few priests in each diocese, was weaker than the Church in Cuba.¹⁰

It is more difficult to prove or disprove that the Cuban Church was socially and politically more conservative than in the rest of Latin America. Daniel H. Levine, a widely respected scholar of religion, summarizes in this way: "Despite scattered reforms and sporadic innovations, it is fair to say that until the late 1950s, the Latin American churches had a well-deserved reputation for stodgy conservatism."¹¹ Such generalizations are deeply ingrained in the literature and influence explanations of political and social history in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. How well they capture the contentious reality of the relationship between church and state is another matter, especially in the context of the influence of powerful encyclicals such as Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891). It would be hard to summarize the impact of *Rerum Novarum* in Mexico as "stodgy conservatism."¹²

The number and range of Catholic social activities in Cuba counter the image of a church aimed at serving only the needs of the elite. *Acción Católica* (Catholic Action) and its *Juventudes Católicas* (Catholic Youth Movement) had many programs of social and economic development in the 1950's.¹³ The *Agrupación Católica Universitaria* (Catholic University Association) initiated many projects, including the surveys of 1954 and 1957 that are ironically cited by many to demonstrate the weakness of the Church. In addition, Catholics taught in hundreds of Catholic schools, two universities, and worked in Catholic orphanages, clinics, and hospitals. They also organized themselves in scores of sodalities, clubs, and service organizations, many of them attentive to the social needs of the nation.¹⁴ Despite the scope of these activities, scholars such as Margaret Crahan conclude that the "efforts had limited im-

⁹James W. Wilkie (ed.), *Statistical Abstract of Latin America*, vol. 30 (Los Angeles, 1993), p. 344.

¹⁰Eduardo Cárdenas, *La Iglesia Hispanoamericana en el siglo xx (1890-1990)* (Madrid, 1992), p. 158.

¹¹Daniel H. Levine, *Popular Voices in Latin American Catholicism* (Princeton, 1992), p. 33.

¹²For a summary see John C. Super, "Rerum Novarum in Mexico and Quebec," *Revista de Historia de América*, 126 (January-June, 2000), 63-84.

¹³Letter from Juan M. Clark, national president of the Juventudes from 1956 to 1958, to the author (September, 2002).

¹⁴Marcos Antonio Ramas, "Religión en Cuba, 1959-1979," *Diario las Americas*, 16, January 1979), p. 5; Kirk, *Between God and Party*, pp. 47-48.

fact. . . . Catholic activists were preoccupied primarily with reforming existing political, economic, and social structures, rather than radically changing them.”¹⁵ The phrasing is interesting, almost as if there were the expectation that the Church should have been involved in revolutionary activity in the 1950’s. Less subtle are the remarks of Sergio Arce Martínez, who wrote that “it was a church of the wealthy, the powerful, and the exploiters; and it never ceased to be such.”¹⁶

Manuel Fernández and Pablo M. Alonso give a more balanced appraisal by discussing the emergence of Catholic social doctrine in the 1950’s, and its influence on social policies and programs.¹⁷ It is even possible to interpret the first half of the twentieth century as a period of growth and positive change, “a renaissance of the Cuban church.”¹⁸ Kirk, in his foreword to the work of Gómez Treto, disparages this writing, harshly criticizing the authors as “sadly behind the times, dreaming of a triumphalist, hierarchical church of appearance rather than substance, sadly co-opted by the government of the day. They will never understand the reforms of John XXIII.”¹⁹

Other evidence comes from the reaction of the Church to Batista and Castro. Kirk recognizes the divisions within the Church and discusses the “surprisingly larger percentage of Catholics—although still a most definite minority in the church” who fought against Batista.²⁰ He then mentions by name many priests who were members of the “progressive minority” who joined with Castro and other revolutionary battalions to overthrow Batista.²¹ In contrast, Hugh Thomas states that “most of the Catholic laity backed Castro” in late 1958.²² Mateo Jover Marimón agrees, and argues that “. . . objective study of the situation makes clear that the general attitude of organized Catholics” was opposed to Cas-

¹⁵Margaret Crahan, “Fidel Castro, the Catholic Church and Revolution in Cuba,” in Dermot Keogh (ed.), *Church and Politics in Latin America* (London, 1990), p. 256.

¹⁶Arce Martínez, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁷Manuel Fernández, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–24.

¹⁸Salvador Larrúa Guedes, *Grandes Figuras y Sucesos de la Iglesia Cubana* (Santo Domingo, 1996), p. 183. Kirk recognizes this line of reasoning but concludes that most clergy wanted to “maintain the status quo.” Kirk, “Frente,” p. 350.

¹⁹Kirk, “Foreword,” in Gómez Treto, *op. cit.*, p. xii.

²⁰Kirk, *Between God and Party*, p. 48. Ruiz agrees that “only a minority of lay Catholics opposed Batista” (*op. cit.*, p. 162).

²¹Though a minority, Kirk does recognize that a “large number of Catholic militants” were among the 20,000 who died (*Between God and Party*, p. 48–49). For other references to specific priests (including pictures) consult Antonio de la Cova’s web site on Cuba: <http://www.rose-hulman.edu/~delacova/rebel-priests.htm>

²²Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 1129.

tro.²³ Castro himself said, "The Catholics of Cuba have lent their most dedicated co-operation to the cause of liberty."²⁴

Without more precise data it is difficult to answer definitively whether a majority or minority of Catholics participated in the struggle against Batista. Opinions on the question are important since they help to illustrate a relevant historiographic issue. If a majority did support the struggle, it would be more difficult to argue that the Church was conservative and committed to the status quo. Even if it were only a substantial minority, a plausible argument can be made for the interpretation of a church engaged with the political issues of the day and sensitive to the needs of Cuban society. It does seem fair to say that whether a majority or a minority, many Cuban Catholics risked much in the hopes of political change and improved social conditions for the poor. To dismiss this reality of Cuban history with statements that the Church "was once again limiting itself to an elite, albeit economically powerful, minority" seems misleading.²⁵ Classifying the many charitable activities of the Church as just another example of the traditional paternalism of the elite is a moral and political judgment that oversimplifies Catholic social doctrine and misrepresents Cuban reality in the 1950's.

What would be a fair assessment of the Church? Without doubt the hyperbole about it being the weakest church in Latin America is inaccurate. The Church did have strength, and had the potential to serve as a rallying point for change or resistance to change, demonstrated in the opposition to Batista. It also created and maintained hundreds of social and educational programs that sought to improve life in Cuba. The theology and social philosophy behind these programs was neither more nor less conservative (or progressive) than in the rest of Latin America in the 1950's. Given the evidence available, it is difficult to go beyond this very general assessment. Whatever the proper balance in interpretation, the tendency in the Cuban literature is to minimize the progressive role of the Church and to stress its marginal, disengaged, and elitist outlook, a point to keep in mind when trying to explain the interpretations of the Church from 1959 to 1961.

²³Mateo Jover Marimón, "The Church," in Carmelo Mesa-Lago (ed.), *Revolutionary Change in Cuba* (Pittsburgh, 1971), p. 403.

²⁴Quoted in Jover Marimón, *op. cit.*, p. 402. For another comment on Catholic opposition to Batista, "despite his donations and other concessions granted by his government," see Marcos Antonio Ramos, *Protestantism and Revolution in Cuba* (Coral Gables, 1989), p. 46.

²⁵Kirk, *Between God and Party*, p. 43.

Interpretations of the Church should also be placed in the broader context of the historiography of the early years of the revolution. Two overriding points of view help to define the literature. The first stresses that the revolution quickly assumed a progressive posture that led to beneficial reforms in many areas of life, a point of view widely endorsed among academics in the United States and Europe. Among the early reforms was the heavily praised First Agrarian Reform Law (May 17, 1959), which limited the size of land holdings. It was the first of several attempts that ultimately broke the back of the latifundia system that had long served as the economic and social basis of the island's elite. Legislation soon followed that nationalized everything from transportation and power to food and health, and in the process lowered prices for the poor. Rent control and access to new housing—some of it taken from those who left—received particularly enthusiastic applause from the lower classes. So too did the efforts to expand educational opportunities for those who lacked the skills and resources to take advantage of the limited educational system under Batista. The literacy program that brought basic and functional reading and writing skills to the rural poor was a reform that gained popular international attention.

These and other reforms took place in an increasingly violent and doctrinaire environment that led to the second noteworthy characteristic of the revolution and its historiography. When Castro declared himself a Marxist-Leninist, many who had joined him to fight Batista saw this as a betrayal of the revolution, and as a threat to their freedom and safety. As Castro started to consolidate power, he appointed presidents and bureaucrats who proceeded to dismantle the legislative and judicial structure of the Batista regime. The media and education, two institutions with the best opportunities for dissent, came under the control of the state, as did other social and economic institutions. To cement his power and quell opposition, Castro assumed dictatorial powers, and resorted to show trials, imprisonments, and executions. The toll for the popular reforms mentioned above was the forced imposition of a totalitarian state, and the crushing of dissent by firing squads and work camps. The revolution had taken a nasty turn, and the Church could not escape the consequences.

II

The Church had the potential to slow Castro's drive for absolute power. Already in the spring of 1959, some decisions suggest that the government sought to reduce the influence of the Church. In April,

1959, it canceled efforts of Catholic university students to teach literacy classes to soldiers, thereby eliminating a program that had the potential to serve as a model for a new revolutionary pedagogy. Then in the fall of 1959 Raúl Castro disbanded the *Comandos Rurales* (Rural Comandos), a group formed in February, 1959, to promote community development in the Sierra Maestra.²⁶ By the end of the year, the regime also made efforts to control the *Central de Trabajadores de Cuba* (Cuban Labor Confederation), purging from its ranks members of *Acción Católica*.²⁷

At the same time, the revolutionary government accelerated the campaign against its enemies with more imprisonments and executions.²⁸ The Church was out front in its "moderate criticism" of the increasing intolerance of the regime, but did not abandon its support of such fundamental revolutionary programs as the First Agrarian Reform Law.²⁹ It is surprising how few scholars of church-state relations analyze the significance of this for Cuban society. Crahan mentions that "three Cuban bishops did second a U.S. complaint concerning the summary executions of individuals charged with crimes on behalf of the Batista dictatorship," but with no commentary or analysis.³⁰ For her source she cites Claude Julien, who actually stated that "the 700 executions of Batista's police and hired assassins was not a high number in relation to the crimes that had to be punished."³¹ Without wondering how many executions would have been a "high number," the failure to discuss the executions and imprisonments minimizes the efforts of the Church to stop the growing abuses of the regime.

Another example of the problems of emphasis comes from descriptions of the *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción* (Military Units to Aid Production), work camps to which the government confined many lay persons and priests, including the highest ranking prelate in Cuba today, Jaime Lucas Cardinal Ortega y Alamino. Kirk mentions them in passing, and does not describe their harsh conditions, instead preferring to say that Castro recognized that they were a mistake

²⁶Clark, *Cuba*, pp. 320-321.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 323.

²⁸For a day-by-day accounting of the early months of the revolution see Esteban M. Beruvides, *Cuba: Anuario Histórico 1959. Abril-julio* (Miami, 1997).

²⁹Clark, *Cuba*, pp. 320-322.

³⁰Margaret E. Crahan, "The Church and State in Cuba," *Cuban Studies*, 19 (1989), 7. Cuban priests were often at the executions, providing the last rites to prisoners (<http://www.rose-hulman.edu/~delacova/rebel-priests-1.htm>).

³¹Claude Julien, "Cuba: Revolution against Economic Imperialism," *Cross Currents*, 11 (Spring, 1961), 18.

and closed them.³² In contrast Clark emphasizes the cruel punishment in the camps, in some cases almost forms of torture that led to the suicide of inmates. Clark also notes that Castro closed the camps (though some remained open through 1967), and replaced them with other forms of forced labor.³³ The failure of scholars to talk about the horrors of the Cuban penal system has enraged many Cubans. Carlos Alberto Montaner's anger is typical. After describing the prisons as "an unending inferno," he wrote that "to censure Pinochet's crimes but to forget Castro's is proof of the worst political opportunism. . . . Let the little Cubans rot and die in their prison cells! They are apparently not worth the movement of a fraternal hand."³⁴ For some scholars, they are also apparently not worth mentioning in trying to understand the opposition of the Church to the revolution.

The Church took the offensive when it organized the *Primer Congreso Católico Nacional* (First National Catholic Congress) in Havana on November 29, 1959. Some one million Cubans crowded the Plaza of the Revolution to attend Mass and to hear denunciations of communism. This was not a marginalized, unimportant church, but one capable of organizing an event that was "a reaffirmation of the religious faith on the part of the people."³⁵ It was a show of strength that made Castro realize that the Church did have the power to stand up against the revolution.

The most significant challenge to Castro came in August of 1960 when the Cuban bishops issued the "*Circular Colectiva del Episcopado Cubano*" (Circular Letter of Cuban Bishops). In it they said that "a more just distribution of wealth has always been and will continue being (as His Holiness Pius XII has said) an essential point of Catholic social doctrine."³⁶ They went on to applaud agrarian reform, the building of dwellings and hospitals, and other social projects. At the same time, they condemned "materialistic and atheistic communism," saying that it was incompatible with Cuban society.³⁷ In December, 1960, they wrote a letter to Castro, the last official and public statement until 1969, decriing the "antireligious campaign of national dimensions," and criticiz-

³²Kirk, *Between God and Party*, p. 112.

³³Clark, *Cuba*, pp. 337-339.

³⁴Carlos Alberto Montaner, *Secret Report on the Cuban Revolution*, trans. Eduardo Zayas-Bazán (New Brunswick and London, 1981), p. 209.

³⁵Clark, *Cuba*, p. 323.

³⁶"Circular Colectiva del Episcopado Cubano," August 7, 1960, printed in Manuel Fernández, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

³⁷"Circular," pp. 212-215. Cárdenas, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

ing the propaganda that equated anticommunist and counterrevolutionary beliefs.³⁸ Fidel himself on December 26, 1960, stated that to “be anticommunist is to be antirevolutionary.”³⁹

The Marxist spin on the “Circular” argues the opposite, and denies the commitment of the Church to social change. Instead, the Church tried to turn the people against “their own interests” by undermining the revolution.⁴⁰ Gómez Treto talks almost in scorn of “the small, privileged sectors affected by the revolutionary measure,” who turned increasingly against the regime and thus became more marginalized.⁴¹ Through their actions, according to this reasoning, the Church lost credibility and forfeited the chance of participating in the building of a new Cuba.

The threat of communism soon dominated political discourse inside and outside of Cuba.⁴² Many religious journals emphasized the growing threat of communism, usually recognizing it as a problem at least as severe as social and economic injustices. In a well-reasoned but hard-hitting article published in *Le Christ au Monde*, Leo-Paul Bourassa stressed that communism was the major threat to the Church in Latin America.⁴³ There were forty-six subscriptions to *Le Christ au Monde* in Cuba in 1960, placing it close to the top in the number of subscriptions in Latin America.⁴⁴ The number of subscriptions provides additional evidence against generalizing about the small size of the Church, and gives added insight into the mentality of at least some members of the Church.

Relations, a religious journal published in Montreal, offers further information on the direction of the revolution. In a series of short essays from June, 1959, to August, 1961, Luigi d'Apollonia, S.J., chronicled the

³⁸“Open Letter from the Cuban Bishops to the Prime Minister,” December 4, 1960, published in Alice L. Hageman and Philip E. Wheaton (eds.), *Religion in Cuba Today: A New Church in a New Society* (New York, 1971), pp. 274–275.

³⁹Quoted in Clark, *Cuba*, p. 329.

⁴⁰Aurelio Alonso Tejada, *Iglesia y política en Cuba revolucionaria* (Havana, 1992), pp. 14–17.

⁴¹Gómez Treto, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁴²Not all would agree. Jorge I. Domínguez in a study of the international dimensions of the Church mentions communism only in passing (*op. cit.*, p. 47).

⁴³Leo-Paul Bourassa, “La pénétration communiste en Amérique Latine,” *Le Christ au Monde*, 5 (1960), 363–370.

⁴⁴Here is the ranking by number of subscriptions: 3—Costa Rica, 6—Nicaragua, 7—Panama, 9—El Salvador, 9—Uruguay, 10—Dominican Republic, 13—Honduras, 15—Guatemala, 24—Bolivia, 30—Venezuela, 39—Argentina, 42—Chile, 46—Cuba, 61—Peru, 82—Haiti, 114—Brazil, 153—Mexico. “Nombre et répartition des abonnements au ‘Christ au Monde,’” *Le Christ au Monde*, 5 (1960), 218–220.

rising tide of communism in Cuba. The executions, imprisonments, displacements of workers, and appointments of communists to key positions quickly gave the lie to Castro's promises of democracy. In July, 1960, d'Apollonia noted that "the moment of truth approaches" when there will be irreconcilable conflict.⁴⁵

D'Apollonia was one of the few to write about a co-ordinated plan to destroy the Church in Cuba. He quotes documents published by *L'Osservatore Romano* that describe a program coming out of China to destroy the Church in Latin America. D'Apollonia believed that Raúl Castro was following a six-part plan that included creating a government office to demonstrate that the Church was controlled by foreign imperialists; expelling recalcitrant clergy; replacing the Church of Rome with a church of state (Castro made an unsuccessful effort to create a Cuban National Church starting in 1959); developing a patriotic clergy chosen by the people; abolishing the counterrevolutionary liturgy; and forbidding all Catholic activities except those controlled by the state.⁴⁶ Whether the regime was following such a systematic plan is debatable, but much of what D'Apollonia portended had already come to pass by the time he wrote. What is not debatable is that influential members of the Church in and out of Cuba believed that communism threatened the survival of the Church.

The point is important. The hostility of the Church—and of much of western society—toward communism is one of the keys to explaining the history of church-state relations. The Chinese background is as significant as the Soviet one. Events in China after the communist takeover in 1949 threatened Christianity, and Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Official government policies followed twists and turns in the 1950's, but did lead to the expropriation of church property, the closing of schools, and a general campaign of intimidation. Christianity espoused views inconsistent with the goals of the state, and symbolized an imperialist threat to Chinese nationalism. Despite the hardships suffered by Catholics, a full break with Rome did not come until 1958, as a partial reaction to the Chinese Catholic Church's consecration of twenty bishops without Rome's approval.⁴⁷ On the eve of Castro's success, Catholics saw direct evidence of communism's threat to religious freedom.

⁴⁵Luigi d'Apollonia, S.J., "Castro," *Relations*, 20 (July, 1960), 175-178.

⁴⁶Luigi d'Apollonia, S.J., "Plus catholique que l'Église," *Relations*, 21 (August, 1961), 212.

⁴⁷Raymond Pong and Carlo Caldarola, "China: Religion in a Revolutionary Society," in Carlo Caldarola (ed.), *Religions and Societies: Asia and the Middle East* (New York, 1982), pp. 562-564.

Kirk recognizes the overriding fear of communism that pervaded the Church, but nevertheless concludes that “the church’s denunciations of the Soviet Union in 1960, then, proved self-destructive not only because they angered the revolutionary government but also because they reconfirmed the church’s traditional disregard for socioeconomic conditions.”⁴⁸ A different slant might argue that expecting the Church to endorse communism would be tantamount to expecting members of the communist party to embrace the Church and all of its beliefs.

As resistance to the revolution became more difficult within Cuba, forces organized outside of it, culminating in the Bay of Pigs invasion of April 17, 1961. Much attention has been given to the three Catholic chaplains who accompanied the expeditionary force, which lent it the air of a crusade. Castro’s reaction could be interpreted as a counter crusade. Widespread arrests, imprisonments, and expulsions followed on the heels of the invasion. The government arrested bishops, shut down *La Quincena*, the last Catholic publication, closed the offices of *Acción Católica*, and created a general climate of intolerance. More Catholics now believed that the struggle went beyond politics and involved the very survival of their faith.⁴⁹

Increasing confrontations hardened the relationship between the church and state, and contributed to discrimination, intimidation, insults, sabotage, and much more.⁵⁰ Even Cubans returning to Cuba from the United States in 1961 were filled with propaganda against the Church. In the summer of 1961, the widely read Spanish author José María Gironella sat on the deck of the *Guadalupe* as it steamed toward Havana and watched Cubans reading in *Cuba Nueva* stories about “nuns who killed children, about cardinals given over to orgies, and every time it referred to Spanish priests in Cuba, it called them ‘Falangist clergy.’”⁵¹ Stories such as these fit very well with the government’s emphasis on popular education to mold attitudes and beliefs. This was the education of home and office, of ballfield and beach, and it was an education that criticized religion and the Church.

⁴⁸Kirk, *Between God and Party*, p. 79.

⁴⁹Clark, *Cuba*, pp. 107-108, 329-331. Kirk uses the term “religious crusade” in his description. He also makes the point that the chaplains were Spanish priests (*Between God and Party*, pp. 95-96).

⁵⁰Clark, *Cuba*, pp. 326-429, *passim*. For a brief summary see Eduardo Boza Masvidal, *Revolución cristiana en Latinoamérica* (Santiago de Chile, 1963), pp. 71-74.

⁵¹José María Gironella, *On China and Cuba*, trans. John F. Byrne (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1963), p. 122.

Authors such as Kirk prefer to emphasize the activities of the Church rather than the intolerance of the state. According to his reading of events, “unfortunately, the first two formative years of the church’s role in revolutionary Cuba were marred by a forceful opposition to the government’s reforms, culminating in the involvement of three Spanish priests in the April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion.”⁵² The “forceful” here is misleading, since there is little evidence of the Church using violence or coercion in their resistance, and the participation of three Spanish priests does not equate with the Church. “Unfortunately” is a judgmental term that connotes a mistake and helps to understand the attitude of the author as much as it does the events that took place.

There is another element to the story. My own discussions with Cubans who were unsympathetic to religion describe a campaign by the Church in 1960 and 1961 to discredit the regime. Students, even first and second graders, received “propaganda” at school and were encouraged to take it home to their parents. This behavior on the part of the Church, whether isolated or part of a co-ordinated effort, created an anger toward the Church that supporters of the revolution did not forget after forty years. In their minds it provided irrefutable evidence that the Church was an enemy of the revolution.

The charges and countercharges created a climate of anger, fear, and betrayal that gripped the Church and the state. The state acted again, crippling the Church’s influence in education. D’Apollonia anticipated this when he worried in *Relations* (July, 1960) that “communists” were taking control over private education.⁵³ The final blow came in May, 1961, when the government took over all remaining private schools, both parochial and non-parochial, and then closed them, displacing some 100,000 students.⁵⁴ The actions effectively ended the Church’s ambitions of expanding its influence in education. It had hoped, naively it must be admitted in hindsight, to expand its influence and introduce religious education at all levels of Cuban education, arguing that since most Cubans were Catholic they would support religious education in private as well as public schools. Kirk interprets this objective as “unprecedented and a risky gamble of their prestige, a gamble that they would lose.”⁵⁵ Fernández presents the counter view, arguing that religious education was “an old aspiration of Cuban Catholic educators,”

⁵²Kirk, “(Still) Waiting,” p. 152.

⁵³Luigi d’Apollonia, S.J., “Castro,” *Relations*, 20 (July, 1960), 177.

⁵⁴Clark, *Cuba*, p. 331.

⁵⁵Kirk, *Between God and Party*, p. 71.

and their goals in no way challenged the traditional separation of church and state.⁵⁶

Perceived from the perspective of the spring of 1961, the educational legislation must have seemed like the final blow to the Church. Those with an understanding of history might have looked back to the nineteenth century when liberal governments in Latin America sought to control or eliminate the authority of the Church in education. The same struggle ensued in Cuba, although this time the result came quickly and without compromise.

Events surrounding the feast day of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre in 1961 also help to explain the historiography of the revolution. The Virgin of Charity of Copper, a figure as celebrated in Cuban history as the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexican history, continues to influence Cuban identity, despite the efforts of the revolution to minimize her importance. Castro refused to allow the Church to celebrate the feast day on September 8, but did grant permission for September 10. When the procession left the church, the police and their supporters attacked it, wounding ten and killing Arnaldo Socorro, a young student. The following day the government claimed that Socorro had been killed by "falangist priests" bent on destroying the revolution. The government buried him as a hero, claiming that "reactionary priests" continued to serve the interests of "Yankee imperialists."⁵⁷ The war of violence and propaganda would continue.

III

Castro's perceptions of religion (and perceptions of his perceptions) help to understand what took place in the first years of the revolution. His widely cited *Fidel y la Religión* is a key work for interpreting the revolution, and also a barometer for measuring historiographic tendencies.⁵⁸ Kirk calls the work a "tour de force, treating a plethora of church-related topics."⁵⁹ Clark sees it as "disinformation . . . a magisterial manipulation of sophistry and the half truth."⁶⁰ Miguel Angel Loredó, O.E.M., who suffered in Fidel's prisons for more than a decade, is less kind, and wonders why the interviewer "Frei Betto is on his knees with a microphone so

⁵⁶Manuel Fernández, *op. cit.*, 49-51.

⁵⁷Leovigildo Ruiz, *Diario de una Traición. Cuba 1961* (Miami, 1962), pp. 160-162.

⁵⁸Fidel Castro Ruz, *Fidel y la Religión. Conversaciones con Frei Betto* (Havana, 1985).

⁵⁹Kirk, "Still Waiting," p. 148.

⁶⁰Clark, *Cuba*, pp. 416-417; Damián J. Fernández agrees that it "was above all a tool for domestic and foreign propaganda" (*op. cit.*, p. 67).

that Fidel can give his version of history. I do not understand, even worse, why he enters into a mystical trance at the end of his book over the immense grace of having talked 'with this man so honest, so humble, so coherent.'⁶¹

One additional quote underscores the significance of the work. In an interview in *Granma*, the official communist party publication, the controversial Monsignor Carlos Manuel de Céspedes found much that was admirable about the book, especially because "it unlocked the subject of religion in the eyes of our people. Because of many historical circumstances we all know about, there is no need to get into this subject now, [religion] had become virtually a taboo which was not talked about and people were even fearful of speaking openly."⁶² This was a very effective back-handed compliment that could lead to the conclusion that there was everything from discrimination to severe persecution in Cuba.

In the book, Castro admits to religious discrimination in Cuba, and the need to combat it. To do so requires overcoming the imperialist threat that still relies on the "old bourgeoisie, the landowners, and the privileged classes who converted religion into counterrevolutionary ideology."⁶³ This core theme of the Church aligned with the elite recurs throughout the book. At the same time he argues the similarities between Christianity and socialism, and his "concept that Christ was a great revolutionary."⁶⁴ He also plays a little bit of "good cop, bad cop," recognizing that there are many hardliners opposed to letting Christians join the communist party. If there were more priests like Betto and those committed to social change in Latin America, it would be easier to prove that the Church could be a progressive force.⁶⁵

Kirk agrees with Castro's assessment of himself, and suggests that he "sought better relations with the church and tried to divert demands from within revolutionary circles that the government take even stronger measures against the church."⁶⁶ According to this interpretation, Castro identified with a church that lived up to the demands of Christianity and struggled for social justice by reaching out to the poor. To carry the logic another step forward, the church that did not fit this image was a threat, jeopardizing its own existence. Frederick Turner,

⁶¹Quoted in Cárdenas, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

⁶²*Granma*, July 9, 1989.

⁶³Castro, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

⁶⁴Quote is from a talk given in Jamaica in 1977 (*ibid.*, p. 20).

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 249–250.

⁶⁶Kirk, *Between God and Party*, p. 121.

whose work for a long time was a standard in studies of Latin American Catholicism, stated that "in a situation where a *fidelista* regime effectively channels nationalist aspirations, tries consistently to promote social reform, and is willing to tolerate a nonreactionary Church, the long-term interests of the Church are probably best served through cooperation with the regime."⁶⁷ Eduardo Cárdenas puts this in a different perspective, when he says that "what is new, that has never occurred in the history of persecutions, is the solidarity and sympathy demonstrated by democratic movements, Christians, including clerics, with the persecutors."⁶⁸

Clark emphasizes another point. "Only the Church remained without falling completely under the totalitarian wave," forcing Castro to develop special methods to control it.⁶⁹ Castro, according to a speech supposedly given at the University of Havana, said, "We will not fall into the historic error of sowing the seeds of Christian martyrs, since we know very well that it was the martyr who gave strength to the church. We will make apostates, thousands of apostates."⁷⁰ In other words, Castro had a carefully worked-out plan of reducing the importance of the Church. Montaner describes it in another way. "The government understands that it inherited some irrational tribes—and that 'the believers' cannot be eliminated. So it restrains their proliferation and lets biology take its course"⁷¹

The proposition that the Church had some responsibility for the government's reaction was formulated early. Claude Julien, writing in late 1960 or early 1961, asks, "What would have happened if the Cuban Church had adopted a more positive attitude? We will never know."⁷² There is indirect but convincing evidence that we do know.

The fate of Protestants in Cuba gives more than a hint. Most studies agree that Protestants reacted differently to the revolution, and were more accepting of the social changes that it unleashed.⁷³ Fidel himself

⁶⁷Frederick C. Turner, *Catholicism and Political Development in Latin America* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1971), p. 123. It is interesting to note that Turner does not discuss religious persecution in Cuba.

⁶⁸Cárdenas, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

⁶⁹Clark, *Cuba*, p. 337.

⁷⁰Quoted *ibid.*, p. 358.

⁷¹Montaner, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁷²Claude Julien, "Church and State in Cuba: Development of a Conflict," *Cross Currents*, 11 (Spring, 1961), 192.

⁷³Kirk is representative. "In contrast to the Catholic church, the Protestant church supported the revolutionary government's reform programs as both necessary and long overdue." Kirk, *Between God and Party*, p. 80.

noted that the revolution never had problems with Protestants.⁷⁴ This attitude did not save the Protestant schools that were shut down along with the Catholic ones. Nor did it help the Baptists in 1965, when the government came down hard, arresting Baptist preachers and laymen, sentencing them to a maximum of thirty years in prison (the longest served term was twelve years).⁷⁵ The groups who eventually suffered the most were probably the Evangelical Gideon's Band, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh Day Adventists, groups "deemed obscurantist and counterrevolutionary" by the regime.⁷⁶

With the evidence available, it is easy to prove that the Church suffered discrimination at the hands of the revolution. Whether the discrimination led to persecution is less easy to determine.⁷⁷ Kirk, so knowledgeable about church-state relations, concludes that "there is no evidence to support the argument that the revolutionary government set out to destroy organized religions, although it clearly tried to inhibit and limit religious activities."⁷⁸ Many would agree, saying that although the government never mounted a "a broad-based campaign against the churches, the Marxist-Leninist orientation of the Revolution did give it an antireligious tone."⁷⁹ These were pretty mild words and generally representative of academic and journalistic opinion. André Linard writing in *Le Monde diplomatique* said, "The Church was never 'persecuted' or 'reduced to silence,' as it was elsewhere. Instead there was an attitude of hostility, of confrontation, which undoubtedly weakened it."⁸⁰ Clark, on the other hand, leaves no doubt that Castro "used tactics of terror against the laity and clergy."⁸¹ This interpretation is supported by many

⁷⁴Castro, *op. cit.*, pp. 245–246.

⁷⁵Harold Greer, "Baptists in Western Cuba: From the Wars of Independence to Revolution," *Cuban Studies*, 19 (1989), 69–70. See also *idem.*, "Leoncio Veguila," in William H. Beezley and Judith Ewell (eds.), *The Human Tradition in Latin America* (Wilmington, North Carolina, 1987), pp. 231–244. Montaner says that "the *whole* [his italics] Baptist seminary ended up in one of those camps," referring to the camps created for political prisoners (*op. cit.*, p. 78).

⁷⁶Margaret E. Crahan, "Freedom of Worship in Revolutionary Cuba," in Philip Brenner *et al.*, *The Cuban Reader: The Making of a Revolutionary Society* (New York, 1989), p. 214.

⁷⁷Aurelio Alonso Tejada, "Catolicismo, política y cambio en la realidad cubana actual," *Temas*, 4 (October–December, 1995), 27, notes that it is difficult to make the distinction between the two, but concludes that there was not persecution.

⁷⁸Kirk, *Between God and Party*, p. 103.

⁷⁹Crahan, "Church and State in Cuba," pp. 10–11.

⁸⁰André Linard, "Guarded rapprochement between Rome and Havana," *Le Monde diplomatique* (January, 1998), www.monde-diplomatique.fr, p. 2.

⁸¹Clark, *Cuba*, p. 326.

who were there, and experienced a “state of true and violent religious persecution.”⁸²

The question of discrimination versus persecution is more than a rhetorical one. It speaks to a mindset about attitudes and perceptions of what was important and unimportant in the first years of the revolution. Those who argue for discrimination offer it as evidence of a positive revolutionary environment, almost as an exoneration of the abuses of the revolution, or as a way of completely ignoring them. Discrimination in this context becomes a positive attribute of the revolution. Castro is the real master here, and invokes support because he discriminates and does not—so he says—persecute. It is also consistent with an emphasis on the failure of the Church in the 1950's to address the social and economic problems of Cuba. Given assumptions about the traditional and conservative background of the Church, it is easier to argue that the Church failed to support the positive goals of the revolution during the critical early stages.

In contrast, opponents of the revolution emphasize its repressive nature, though they recognize that the repression differed from places such as Mexico in the 1920's and Spain in the 1930's. Without using the strong-arm tactics of other militantly antireligious regimes, Castro encouraged the oppression through a combination of laws and propaganda campaigns. Instead of shooting priests and burning churches—though many priests were imprisoned or forced into exile—the government severely limited the activities of the Church in national life and created a climate of fear and insecurity. Open profession of faith often brought harassment, expressed in physical and verbal abuse, and discrimination at work and school. By the end of 1961 the government had made it clear that full participation in Cuban life would be denied to those who continued to practice their faith.

By way of conclusion, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Church was spiritually and socially more important in Cuba than previously assumed, and that it did suffer discrimination, and in some cases persecution. Furthermore, the oppression experienced by the Church was due more to its early and uncompromising resistance to communism than to its opposition to the social programs of the revolution. Marxism-Leninism had at its core an antireligious bias that was evident before the Bay of Pigs. The Church and other dissenters who valued freedom and democracy could do little to stop the inevitable clash be-

⁸²Boza Masvidal, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

tween the church and state. Communism, not social and economic programs, became the overriding issue for the Church, an easily understandable preoccupation given the national and international political climate. From this perspective, many members of the Church who criticized the excesses of the regime during the first years of the revolution emerge as heroes, not as betrayers, of the social goals of the revolution.