

Whither Cuba? The Role of Religion

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Cuba in the 1990s not only experienced a severe economic downturn, but also an upsurge in alienation and anomie within society, as well as a crisis of values related to family and community solidarity. The family, which traditionally was a key element of social cohesion and community action, was eroded. Government created mass organizations, together with the neighborhood Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, no longer had sufficient credibility and support to substitute for civil society. This has led some to turn to religion for communities in which to share problems and seek solutions. Given the restrictions on secular associations, religions are one of the few options for somewhat autonomous civic action. Hence, even with their limitations, they constitute a critical part of organized civil society.

In recent years some policymakers have asserted that the proliferation of religiously supported non-governmental organizations in general has contributed to the strengthening of civil society worldwide and consequently the undercutting of non-democratic governments. It is further argued that the promotion of associationalism by religions has led to the strengthening of horizontal links within many societies, thereby enabling citizens to generate stronger pressures on both democratic and non-democratic governments. Such efforts are thought to have been somewhat successful in promoting non-violent change when organized civil society has developed sufficient vertical links with political and economic elites to ensure governmental implementation of new policies and programs. It does not appear to guarantee the consolidation of strong democracies. It has, however, increased the attention paid to the potential role of religions in political and socioeconomic change especially in countries undergoing transitions.

Cuba has clearly entered a transitional phase the nature and outcome of which are somewhat unclear. Commentators in the press, academia, and elsewhere, have speculated about the role of religions in stimulating greater participation in politics by the ordinary Cuban. Comparisons have been made with recent transitions in Eastern European countries. These have limited explanatory value due to the substantial differences in the roles religion, culture, and society have played in Cuba and elsewhere. The role, for example, assumed by the Polish Roman Catholic Church as a legitimator of protest and dissidence, as well as a delegitimator of the communist regime, is substantially different from that currently being played by the Cuban Catholic Church.

Under communism the Polish Catholic Church enjoyed more autonomy than the Cuban church, in large measure because of its greater institutional strength and popular support. This caused the Polish government to recognize the Catholic Church as having power that had to be contended with to a greater extent than its counterpart in Cuba. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that in 1956 the Polish Communist government permitted religious education in public schools, something which the Cuban Catholic Church has no hopes of attaining. In addition, the religious press in Poland was allowed to operate relatively unfettered, whereas in Cuba it has been restricted. The role of the Catholic Church in Poland under communism was quite unique given that the state ceded ground to it even in terms of ideological hegemony. With historical-



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ly high rates of secularization in Cuba and the weaknesses of the institutional churches, together with a much more competitive religious arena, religion has not had the capacity to strongly challenge the ideological and political hegemony of the Castro regime. In addition, the Catholic and Protestant churches in Cuba never had the same identification with nationalism as has the Catholic Church in Poland. In Cuba it is the state that has had a greater identification with the assertion of nationalism. Given this, any religion that criticizes the government can be attacked as unpatriotic.

Even if religions were stronger in Cuba, it is unlikely that civil society could play a comparable role to that which it did in the transition in Poland. In the latter there were numerous horizontal relations within society, which were conducive to building consensus around political and socioeconomic agendas. Not only were students, intellectuals, and professionals, among others, highly organized and mobilized, but the independent labor union Solidarity had 10,000,000 members at its height in the 1980s. Nothing comparable to Solidarity exists in Cuba either in the labor sector or elsewhere. While some groups of Cuban workers have organized outside the confines of the state/party apparatus, they are infinitesimal with respect to Solidarity. Initiatives such as the Varela Project or the independent libraries movement have mobilized only limited numbers of Cubans. With a weak non-governmental and civic sector, that leaves religions as the strongest element within civil society, albeit with substantial limitations.

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Even the January 1998 visit of Pope John Paul II, did not result in as much change as religions in Cuba had hoped. As a consequence, on the second anniversary of the visit, the Cuban bishops' conference issued a pastoral letter entitled "A New Heaven and a New Earth" calling for Cubans to mobilize to change their society. The prelates argued that salvation required the transcending of existing boundaries and a search for new possibilities even without a plan. Cubans, they asserted, were caught between something that was losing meaning and the uncertainty of new beginnings. The Pope's call to celebrate the millennium as a new beginning had, they felt, special meaning for Cubans since it required a more critical look at Cuban realities. The bishops admitted that it was difficult to detach from the past and embrace an unknown future, as well as hard to perceive God's presence in Cuban society. They admitted there existed real obstacles to new initiatives both within and without the country, including the US embargo. Nevertheless, legal means had to be found to encourage greater popular participation in reforming society. Such a task required the involvement of all citizens in discussing economic, political, social, and cultural issues, which made dialogue and reconciliation within and without the island essential to build consensus.

While the enormity of the task was admitted in the pastoral letter, the strategies the bishops opted for were more hortatory than pragmatic, a common tendency among all Cuban religions. The focus was on evangelization to stimulate communities of believers who would commit to the moral reform of society, as well as undertake social welfare activities. All Cuban religions have increasingly assumed responsibilities in the latter area as the government has decreased its basic needs programs. Such activities have contributed to an increase in transnational ties for all religions. Catholic Relief Services is the largest international non-governmental organization operating in Cuba today. In cooperation with the

government it distributes food and medical aid. International Protestant agencies have been active in providing basic humanitarian assistance, as well as educational and other materials. There has also been a proliferation of US-Cuban parish exchanges, as well as a flow of aid via Cuban American church people visiting the island. Hence, Cuba's needs and the increasing role of religions in meeting them have intensified transnational linkages, as well as international cooperation and dialogue between Cubans and Cuban-Americans. Spiritist communities have been particularly active in international exchanges, including the training of foreigners in their rites and rituals. Unofficial missionaries from countries such as Brazil and Mexico have also provided some resources apparently in an effort to evangelize what they regard as particularly fertile territory.

While there has been a resurgence of religion in Cuba, divisions within denominations, as well as between them, suggest that it will not be easy for them to assume a leadership role to promote a consensual agenda for societal change. The vagueness of many of their statements reflects their historical objective of appealing as widely as possible and is reinforced by the religions' ingrained caution and perception of the limits of the political space available. While this has a certain logic, it does not provide a basis for broadbased mobilization of Cubans, most of whom do not identify strongly with any particular religion. Therefore, the caution of most religions reinforces the passivity of the citizenry. The relatively low level of civic organization and lack of strong leadership of Cuban civil society, together with the paucity of horizontal and vertical alliances, limits the possibilities for that level of mobilization sufficient to effect substantial societal change. Furthermore, most religions accept the socialist option which inclines them to avoid identifying with government opponents who support a clear cut ideological alternative.

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At a Wilson Center conference on "Religion, Culture and Society in Cuba," January 21-22, 2003, Yolanda Prieto, Ramapo College, discussed transnational religions ties and their impact on Cuban and Cuban-American identity.

Instead the Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Spiritist communities have focused their efforts on the inculcation and nourishing of hope among Cubans or as one pastor has characterized it of "oxygenated space" to help revitalize people and prepare them to experience hope. Hope, Pope John Paul II stated in his 1998 visit to Cuba, is a prerequisite for Cubans to become proactive in the molding of their own history. Without hope, religious leaders in Cuba assert it is impossible to successfully devise new models to achieve justice. Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and Spiritists agree that hope can be restored only by reaffirming belief in a divine plan. Several surveys in the late 1990s indicated that at least three-quarters of Cubans believed in the supernatural, this after some forty years of officially sanctioned materialist atheism. But this has not translated into widespread religious activism for broadbased societal change.

In addition, in a country such as Cuba where the realization of national self-determination and autonomy has been difficult to achieve, any political system that appears to have contributed significantly to the securing of sovereignty tends to be legitimized as fulfilling national interests and aspirations. Hence, institutions and individuals that appear to be challenging the system can easily be characterized as unpatriotic. Struggle for change raises issues of national identity, loyalty, and what it means to be a good citizen. The building of consensus on a broadbased societal agen-



da becomes freighted with issues of national identity and pride deeply rooted in Cuban culture. In such a situation, any group that supports a substantial modification of the status quo comes under suspicion and not just by the government.

In addition, if a political regime has arisen in response to such long-term problems as intervened sovereignty, chronic socioeconomic and racial inequalities, and dependent development, it may be defended by significant portions of the citizenry when outside forces appear to threaten it. In the Cuban case, the option for socialism is closely identified with the assertion and defense of national sovereignty in the face of an extended colonial and neocolonial past. Furthermore, socioeconomic justice may be regarded as more linked to socialism than capitalism, including by religious leaders. That means that religions are unlikely to find it easy to legitimate capitalism and liberal democracy, particularly in the light of Cuba's history.

Given the extent of alienation and passivity in Cuban society today, the likelihood that religions could mobilize a substantial portion of the society is

limited in the short term. In addition, the potential for civil society to play a major role in effecting societal change is also limited. Change may come more as a result of circumstances than as a result of the direct actions of civil society led by religions. A question that remains is to what degree religions will be able to influence, as well as adapt to change. Given a frail civil society, strategic alliances would be necessary, but also possibly unstable if no strong consensus emerges. In such a situation, religions would require a great deal of skill to define and achieve a consensual agenda. Furthermore, while more and more people are joining churches and other faith based communities, there is no strong evidence that efforts at religious formation are creating a critical mass of believers that could strongly influence a new government. This suggests that religions in Cuba may facilitate change, but not channel it to the degree that some hope. Nor does it guarantee that religions will be well prepared to adapt to a more participatory and openly conflictual society in which religion, culture, and society continue to interact in an ever more complex fashion.

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