Whose Civil Society?: The Politicization of Religion in Transitional Cuba

Abstract: For decades, the United States has supported the development of civil society in various places around the world. Promoted as integral to democracy, civil society projects have come to include religion and religious freedom as significant components. U.S. experts point to tolerance of all faiths and the presence of voluntary religious association as essential checks to state power and necessary to a free society. Because of its unique relationship with Cuba, the United States support of civil society there has addressed religion in a way unlike that in other countries. This article examines very recent developments there, placing them in larger social and historical context of politics and church/state relations.

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The Bush administration's hopes of seeing an end to Fidel Castro's Cuba have intensified with the creation of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba (CAFC), which strengthens a U.S.-directed approach to building civil society there. Ambassador Roger F. Noriega, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, summarized the CAFC's mandate as having two primary areas of focus: first "to provide recommendations on ways the United Sates can help the Cuban people bring about an expeditious end to the dictatorship; and, secondly on how the United States could assist a free Cuban government meet its humanitarian and reconstruction challenges, if requested." In his June 11 statement, Noriega failed to mention whose request might warrant U.S. action. He did remind observers

KEY WORDS:

United States, Cuba, politics, civil society, Catholic, religion, Church, Fidel Castro, George Bush

that the commission identified six inter-related tasks: empowering Cuban civil society; reducing financial flows to the regime; undermining the regime's "succession strategy" (i.e., from Fidel to Raul Castro); breaking the regime's blockade of information to the Cuban people; increasing public diplomacy efforts abroad to counter Cuban propaganda; and encouraging multilateral efforts to challenge the Cuban regime.1 In influencing this change, the U.S. government is giving religion a primary role.

The placing of civil society efforts at the top of the list should come as no surprise, as the United States has been engaged in such attempts in various parts of the globe for decades. Since the Reagan administration, the U.S. has expanded its efforts to include the support of civil society as important components of its foreign policy. Such a move was promoted as instrumental in inspiring the spread of democratic values around the globe. Empowering people of various regions to voice their opinions and take action through nongovernmental organizations and citizens' associations was seen as necessary in strengthening democracy and weakening non-democratic, authoritarian regimes. The movement continued through the Clinton administration. Though Reagan, Bush, Clinton and Bush have differed in their application methods, the evangelization of democracy through the building of civil society has remained constant and strong.2 However, the specificity with which the Bush administration has outlined the inclusion of civil society in a plan to "assist" in "hastening Cuba's transition," warrants special attention.

In places where U.S. evangelization of anything is considered evidence of its imperialist tendencies, foreign backing of civil society has met with suspicion, criticism and resistance. Cuba is one of those places. Longstanding political and philosophical differences between the two nations have made it very difficult to build the common ground necessary for initiating fruitful dialog addressing an authentic role for civil society in Cuba's future that is initiated by Cubans themselves. The term "economics" has been politicized. The term "democracy" has been politicized. The term "civil society" has been politicized. And in moves toward finding a place for religion in civil society, discussions of faith, God and religious expression have become politicized.

To some observers, it may seem that religion must remain absent from any discussions of civil society. Equating what is civil with what is secular suggests that religion would naturally be excluded from this process. But centuries-long threads of political philosophy—from Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau to Hegel and Marx—have devoted much examination to religion's rich and complex relationship with civil society. These are the same threads that have profoundly influenced Cuban politics for the last four decades.3 However, the strained association with Cuba has prevented the depth of these political analyses to enter into a U.S. understanding of religion in contemporary or a post-Castro

Cuba that is complex but genuine, rather than oversimplified.

In the United States, Fidel Castro is portrayed as an evil dictator who took power by force and who abolished virtually all individual rights, among those the right to worship freely.4 Fundamental to perpetuating this image is the suggestion that all Cubans were pious and devout Catholics before January 1, 1959 when Castro rose to power, and that they will be once again when Castro can no longer rule through threats and intimidation. But overall, actual church attendance has historically been comparatively low. Even the U.S. Department of State recognizes: "Although much of the population is nominally Roman Catholic, historically the country has been a largely secular society without an especially strong religious character."5 In reality, questions of piety versus politics pervaded Cuban and U.S./Cuban observations for at least a century before the rise of Castro, with proponents of separation of church and state portraying clerical hierarchy as conveniently and tightly tied to Cuba's elite, and the Catholic Church in general as ignoring the reality of the poor and marginalized. Castro, a Catholic himself, was one of the greatest critics of what he saw as failures of the Church to implement true Christian principles and advance social justice.6

An overly simplistic view assumes no role for religion in Cuba since its emergence as a Marxist/Leninist (and therefore atheist) system in 1961. But Castro condemned only the counter-revolutionary activities of some members of the clergy and the traditional political role of the Church. In 1959, he said of religion and civil society:

> "I do not believe there can be a single just measure in human society, not a single good work in the civil society of man, which is not based on a healthy and just religious conscience . . . It is only those who play the farce, only the hypocrites, only those whom Christ called the Scribes and the Pharisees who attempt to turn religion into a tool serving egotistical, petty, and inhuman interests."7

The development of Cuba into a Marxist state can not be blamed for an absence of religion—first and foremost because religion has not been absent. It is true that Castro's government placed restrictions on the Catholic Church and its followers regarding mass communication and political participation. But to a significant degree, Cuban Marxist thought embraced the principles of justice, equality and social liberation found in fundamental Catholic/Christian teachings.8 It was the political reality of clerical support for the anti-Castro hierarchy that brought revolutionary attacks on the Church. In the early 1990s the revolutionary government lifted restrictions on political participation of *creyentes*, or professed believers, suggesting there was growing room for diversity of faith in a pluralistic Cuban society.9 Still, many North Americans presume the Catholic Church holds no status whatsoever in Cuba.

Very importantly, there is hope in the United States that once Castro is no longer in power, Cubans will be free to choose from any number of denominations. Historically, the United States has considered religion to be a significant contributor to a more civil society, and religious association as integral to U.S. democracy, with no single sect becoming dominant. In pressing for changes in Cuba, U.S. policymakers promote the idea of religion as playing a similar role there. But there is already denominational pluralism in Cuba. Approximately 40 to 45 per cent identify themselves as Catholic, while as many as 70 per cent practice Santeria or *la regal lucumi*, which are rooted in West African traditional religion. Four different conventions of Baptists make up the largest Protestant denomination, followed closely by the Pentecostal churches, in particular the Assemblies of God. Twenty-five denominations are recognized by the State, including Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Methodists, and are members of the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC). Another 24 officially recognized denominations, including Jehovah's Witnesses and the small Jewish community, do not belong to the CCC. In the late 1990s, church attendance was increasing, with Catholic participation growing significantly with the Pope's visit in 1998.10

The U.S. Department of State's Cuba Report on Human Rights Practices released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor released in February of 2004 says this of religious association:

"The Government requires churches and other religious groups to register with the provincial registry of associations within the Ministry of the Interior to obtain official recognition. In practice, the Government refused to recognize new denominations; however, the Government tolerated some religions, such as the Baha'i Faith and a small congregation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Unregistered religious groups were subject to official interference, harassment, and repression. The Government, with occasional exceptions, prohibited the construction of new churches, forcing many growing congregations to violate the law and meet in private homes.

Government harassment of private houses of worship continued, with evangelical denominations reporting evictions from houses used for these purposes. According to the CCC [Cuban Council of Churches] most of the private houses of worship that the Government closed were unregistered, making them technically illegal. In addition, CCC Pentecostal members complained about the preaching activities of foreign missionaries that led some of their members to establish new denominations without obtaining the required permits. Because of these complaints by the Pentecostals, the CCC formally requested overseas member church or-

ganizations to assist them in dissuading foreign missionaries from establishing Pentecostal churches."11

Much of Cuba's resistance to civil society efforts originating in the United States is based on the simple fact that they originate in the United States. There is a broad consensus among the world's elites, including major international donors, government leaders and think tanks, about how to develop societies across the world, and influence changes in places such as Cuba. Their model consists of three primary components: democracy, civil society and private enterprise/free market economics.12 The fact that all these aspects of international social development are U.S.-driven, creates clear and unwavering resistance in Cuba. To Cuban authorities, democracy driven by the U.S. is not democratic, a free market economy driven by the U.S. is not free, and civil society driven by the U.S. empowers the U.S. rather than Cubans.13 Cuban officials are willing to debate which system is more democratic and what methods might be used to broaden elements of civil society in ways that benefit Cuba. But insistence on the part of the Bush administration, or others with similar intentions, that civil society cannot succeed without free market capitalism creates a barrier to further discussion. With this in mind, it is easy to understand the level of suspicion present in Cuba when discussions of civil society as it relates to a variety of topics arise. Here, the issue of religion is a prominent one.

To some Cubans and many Latin American Catholics, the evangelization of democracy and capitalism along with civil society and religion are reminiscent of trends rooted in the 19th century. At that point in U.S.-Cuban relations, Manifest Destiny was beginning to transform into something more conventionally imperialistic. Calls for annexation in the 1850s did not succeed in adding Cuba to the list of U.S. possessions, but military intervention and occupation in 1898 paved the road toward "protectorate" status. Throughout these decades, adherence to social Darwinism helped to influence U.S. behavior toward Cuba and the rest of Latin America, and made working partners of classical liberal "democracy", laissez-faire capitalism, and North American Protestantism. Evangelization of political economy was *ipso facto* religious. In the eyes of some Latin Americans, the culture of North America and the Protestant religion were barbaric and alien intrusions. To anticlerical (meaning anti-Catholic) liberals, North American culture was progressive, inherently Protestant, and worthy of emulation. Political commentary from the U.S. depicted Cubans who did not regularly attend Mass (the majority) as lacking faith and conviction, and those who did attend as corrupted by a corrupted religion run by corrupted clergy. Protestants saw Cuba as ripe for settlement and conversion. Some Catholics see this as a pattern today, with Protestantism continuing to grow.14

The United States has a long history of anti-Catholicism, from the rise of the anti-Catholic/immigrant Know-nothing Party in the 1850s, to the attacks on

Catholic presidential candidates Al Smith (1928) and John F. Kennedy (1960). As a Protestant Evangelical, Bush might be considered a likely enemy of the Catholic Church as Evangelicals and Catholics have had a long relationship of antagonism. In addition, he has been criticized for bringing Evangelical intentions into the domestic and international political spheres—in issues ranging from gay marriage to Middle East apocalypse. But he has been making appeals to Pope John Paul II and anti-Castro Catholics. In his recent visit to the Vatican, Bush presented the Pope with a presidential Medal of Freedom—the highest U.S. award for a civilian— praising him for his faith and moral conviction which has "given courage to others to overcome repression and topple Communism and tyranny."15 But the Pope has been a harsh critic of U.S. policies in the Middle East. In his 1998 visit to Cuba, many North Americans expected him to condemn Communism and support the ideals of the freedoms espoused by the geopolitics of the United States. Instead, he criticized unbridled capitalism which deepened poverty in places like Latin America.

When speaking to religious freedom in his meeting with the Cuban bishops, the Pope made the following statement:

> "Respect for religious freedom must ensure the opportunities, programmes and means by which these three dimensions of the Church's mission can be carried out so that, in addition to worship, the Church can devote herself to the proclamation of the truth of the Gospel, the defence of justice and peace, and the integral development of the human person. None of these dimensions should be restricted; one does not exclude the others, nor should one be emphasized at the cost of the others.
>
> When the Church demands religious freedom she is not asking for a gift, a privilege or a permission dependent on contingent situations, political strategies or the will of the authorities. Rather she demands the effective recognition of an inalienable human right. This right cannot be conditioned by the behavior of the Pastors and the faithful, nor by the surrender of the exercise of any aspect of her mission, much less by ideological or economic considerations. It is not simply a matter of a right belonging to the Church as an institution; it is also a matter of a right belonging to every person and every people."

He added:

> "Religious freedom is a very important means of strengthening a people's moral integrity. Civil society can count on believers who, because of their deep convictions, will not only succumb readily to dominating ideologies or trends, but will endeavour to act in accordance

with their aspirations to all that is true and right."16

The Pope would not take the side of those who sought to politicize "religious freedom" in order to gain support of U.S. policies, or to guarantee the demise of Castro. Castro himself invited the Pope to visit, as early as 1985, and remained with him throughout much of his stay.

But the Bush administration has continued attempts to politicize the Catholic Church in it efforts to destabilize Castro. The initial CAFC report of May 6, 2004 makes this clear. First, it praises the "forthright role of the Polish Catholic Church [in creating] authentically independent civil societies, building islands of independent thought, movement, interaction, and self-reliance among the repressed peoples of Eastern Europe." It goes on to say that this development of a "self-contained civil society within the gates of repression helped create a parallel culture that offered the people of the former Soviet Bloc alternatives to the corruption, exploitation, fear, and powerlessness that characterize life under communism. It offered them hope."17 But the administration also sees a future for Cuba in the growth of Protestantism, as it recommends the support of religious organizations and faith-based initiatives. According to the report:

> "Religious organizations, including both Catholic and certain authentically independent Protestant denominations, represent the fastest growing and potentially strongest alternatives to the Cuban state in providing basic services and information to the Cuban people. . . . The regime has failed to live up to its commitment to loosen restrictions on the Church in the wake of the 1998 visit by Pope John Paul II . . . Many Catholic leaders are engaged in a daily struggle with the regime to provide help, both spiritual and material, to the Cuban people. . . . [Protestant denominations] have been able to grow and develop limited humanitarian and social services. In addition, several U.S. NGOs are working to develop conferences of ministries, churches, and lay persons with a common interest in providing humanitarian aid in Cuba as a vehicle to strengthen civil society."18

The CAFC recommends encouraging a wider array of religious organizations to provide humanitarian assistance and training to Cuban churches through streamlining licensing procedures and expanding outreach to those organizations.

The Bush administration has also attempted to politicize religion in the arrest of 75 Cuban dissidents in March of 2003. The arrests nearly simultaneously coincided with the U.S. attack on Iraq, calling into question both timing and motivation. According to U.S. State Department officials, Castro orchestrated his move slyly as all eyes were on the Middle East. Cuban officials contend that the dissidents had been receiving support

from the United States, behavior which signified growing U.S. intentions to infiltrate Cuba, and perhaps even invade and occupy as was to be carried out in Iraq. The Cuban government's detention of the 75, and subsequent swift sentencing to an average of 20 years in prison, served to justify the expansion of U.S. intervention in Cuba—if not militarily, then by empowering a civil society that might take out Castro. The State Department continually referred to them as prisoners of conscience—including religious conscience—while the Cuban government contended it was simply protecting the nation against U.S. covert action, in a very tense geo-political atmosphere.

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Cuba had remained on the State Department's list of states sponsoring international terrorism. Immediately, Castro made public statements urging the United States to remain calm, and claiming that the attacks were in part a consequence of the United States having applied "terrorist methods" for years. In a report two months later, the State Department claimed that Castro's subsequent statements had become increasingly hostile. According to newspaper reports, a Cuban spokesman described the U.S. response to the events of September 11 "fascist and terrorist" and that the United States was using the attack as an excuse to establish "unrestricted tyranny over all people on Earth."19 Castro himself reportedly claimed that the U.S. government was run by "extremists" and "hawks" whose response to the attack could result in an "infinite killing of innocent people."20

The State Department continued to link Cuba with terrorism in following months, and reiterated this connection in the CACF promotion of U.S.-sponsored civil society efforts. Secretary of State Colin Powell opens his foreword to the "Report to the President: Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba" this way:

> "Over the past two decades, the Western Hemisphere has seen dramatic advances in the institutionalization of democracy and the spread of free market economies. Today, the nations of the Americas are working in close partnership to build a hemisphere based on political and economic freedom where dictators, traffickers and terrorists cannot thrive. As fate would have it, I was in Lima, Peru joining our hemispheric neighbors in the adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter when the terrorists struck the United States on September 11, 2001. By adopting the Democratic Charter, the countries of our hemisphere made a powerful statement in support of freedom, humanity and peace. Conspicuous for its absence on that historic occasion was Cuba."21

The CACF report goes on to condemn the Castro regime for prohibiting access to computer and media equipment to journalists and religious organizations. However, it explains the U.S.'s own unwillingness to

supply such things in recent years by referring to Cuba as "a state sponsor of terrorism."22 The global tension that swept the world in March of 2003 generated a fear strong enough to spur the arrests. Cuban officials accused the dissidents of conspiring with U.S. diplomats on the island to undermine the Cuban government. According to Cuban diplomat Dagoberto Rodriguez, "We have moved against people who were acting in favor of an international entity, an entity that has declared Cuba an enemy nation. We hope that the majority of the American people will understand our reasons for defending our sovereignty, defending our independence, defending and maintaining our identity."23

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have both condemned the imprisonment of the dissidents, claiming they are prisoners of conscience. The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) condemned them as well, and chastised the U.S. Agency for International Development (US AID) for seeking to fund dissident groups, and included in its recommendation the support of U.S. religious groups to develop relationships with "a broad range of Cuban individuals and groups . . . This broader and less politicized approach is more likely, in the long run, to increase tolerance and open political space in Cuba."24

Much of the concern regarding civil society in Cuba surrounds appointment of Jim Cason as head of the U.S. interests section in Cuba in September 2002. In this position, Cason helped to increase U.S. support for Castro's opponents, meeting regularly with opposition members and journalists in his Havana home, and traveling throughout the country to meet with the Cuban people. He reportedly logged more than 6,000 miles in just the first few months of his arrival on the island.25 In a presentation to the Cuban Transition Project at the University of Miami, Cason justified his activities in Cuba, referring to many of those arrested as "leading civil society figures" and "Cuban patriots". He maintained that the arrests were aimed in part at crippling Project Varela and decapitating the Assembly to Promote Civil Society.26

Ambassador Noriega and others in the Bush administration have vehemently defended Cason's activities in Cuba. According to Noriega, "Mr. Cason has done a superb job to support democratic development and civil society in Cuba. That is our policy in Cuba, and, in fact around the hemisphere. Jim was implementing bipartisan U.S. policy, and we all have every reason to be very proud of his work there." He added, "Our hemisphere will be a safer, happier place when Castro leaves the scene, whether by natural processes or, as is the goal of U.S. policy, as the result of the will of the Cuban people and the concerted action of advocates of peaceful change in Cuba."27

Perhaps the opposition groups to benefit most from Cason's support was Project Varela, named for Felix Varela y Morales, an activist Catholic priest in early 19th century Cuba. One of the greatest examples of the

politicization of religion in Cuba is illustrated in the exploitation of Varela's name. Padre Varela was an educator who embraced much of Enlightenment philosophy and revolutionized the curriculum at the Colegio Seminario in Havana. A politician and promoter of social justice, he traveled to Madrid to appeal to the Spanish Cortes for the abolition of slavery and for an autonomous Cuban government. For this he was condemned to death and fled to the United States to live in exile.28 His philosophy and action appeal very much to the Fidel Castro who calls for human rights, equality, justice, and Cuban nationalism.29 In 1961, Castro vehemently condemned the actions of those Catholic clergy who opposed his revolution and who participated in the Bay of Pigs invasion. But by 1963, he was publicly supporting the ideals of Varela.30

Varela also appeals to Castro's opponents, both inside and outside Cuba, particularly because of his life of exile for speaking out against the government.31 This is clearest in the work of the Varela Project, the creation of the Christian Liberation Movement inside Cuba. Founded in 1988 by a group of secular Catholics, the movement has grown in size and momentum, and in the last three years has secured more than 11,000 petition signatures to bring changes in the Cuban political system. According to one supportive Miami group, the Varela Project is a Christian-inspired political-civil movement that is open to non-believers. Its purposes include the following:

"* To get a Cuban's [sic] participation in the process of the changes needed in our society. Cubans are the doers, not only spectators of such reality. The solution to the problems of Cuba is a responsibility of all Cubans.
* To start a civic road that would lead us in the accomplishment of changes and therefore be able to demand a respect of the Civil and Human Rights.
* To promote the exercise of constitutional legal rights on behalf of citizens and a highly [sic] regard for the same on behalf of the Government and all official institutions.
*A qualitative change of law within the law, FROM THE LAW TO THE LAW. That is through the demand from all citizens, amend the law and the constitution and be able to go forward peacefully, toward a society that supports itself within the right and solidarity, social justice and economic freedom.
*The re-encounter again of our brothers from the Diaspora, an undividable part of our people.
*The Christian Liberation Movement develops a private freedom project that consists of: the practice of freedom of speech, overcome fake and a two-side morale [sic] and a recovery of self-esteem and creation of a conscience toward your own dignity and to respect that same dignity in your fellow-being."32

The historical Varela holds tremendous respect from Cuban non-Catholics, Cuban Catholics, non-Cuban Catholics, and the Catholic hierarchy both in and out of Cuba. Pope John Paul II made a point to visit to his grave at the University of Havana on his visit to the country.33 But there is religious and political division on the Varela Project, particularly within the Cuban Catholic Church. Two figures instrumental in developing Catholic civil society have gained differing levels of support from different factions. Oswaldo Paya has directly confronted the Cuban government through his leadership of Project Varela. As a result, Paya has earned only limited support from the Catholic hierarchy,34 and has earned overwhelming support from the U.S. State Department. As recently as May 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell referred to Paya as courageous (equating his work with that of Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma and Morgan Tsvangirai in Zimbabwe. According to Powell, "On every continent, we are making important, long-term investments in democracy. . . . We are working with nongovernmental organizations, faith-based groups, opposition parties, minority communities, and labor movements to develop dynamic civil societies. . . We stand in solidarity with the extraordinary men and women around the world who take great personal risks to shed light on human rights abuses and press for democratic change."35

On the other hand, Dagoberto Valdes has not directly confronted the Cuban government and has in fact secured official Catholic backing. Valdes is the Director of the Center for Civic and Religious Formation, and President of the Catholic Commission for the Culture of Pinar del Rio. In addition, he is a member of the Executive Secretariat of the Union of the Catholic Press of Cuba (Catholics produce 14 publications, none of which is censored), and of the Vatican's council on Peace and Justice. His work is far more representative of the future of the Church in Latin America and in Europe.36 Furthermore, Valdes has proven his to be genuine and legitimate endeavors intended to authentically combine religion and civil society in the future of Cuba. Spokesmen for the U.S. State Department never mention him.

It appears that outsiders have decided that the only Cuban entities which deserve the name "civil society" are those they consider human rights groups under their definition. In fact, those that do gain support are clearly among the most dissident of the dissident organizations. According to Cuban intellectual and author of *Looking at Cuba: Essays on Culture and Civil Society* Rafael Hernandez Rodriguez, groups that authentically represent the traditionally marginalized—Afro-Cubans, women, etc.—and who actively call for the recognition of rights among those people, are essentially ignored, as are those who intend to work within the system. Rather, the so-called human rights groups that the U.S., in particular, chooses to support are quite vague in their mission statements, calling for such reforms as "opening the system" or "saving the country".37 And in looking more closely at the logic of recent statements,

the anti-Castro rhetoric contained within those statements, and the financial backing of that sentiment, it becomes increasingly clear that the U.S. government is determined to "save Cuba" through its own design of civil society.

Notes:

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