

DIGITAL ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD
DASH.HARVARD.EDU

HARVARD LIBRARY


Sanctioning Faith: Religion, Politics, and U.S.-Cuban Relations

Citation

Goldenziel, Jill I. "Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and US-Cuban Relations." Journal of Law and Politics 25 (2009): 179-210.

Published version

https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/jlp25&i=183

Link

https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37364804

Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Open Access Policy Articles (OAP), as set forth at

https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFlOWI2M2EwYTg

Accessibility

https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. Submit a story

Sanctioning Faith: Religion, State, and U.S.-Cuban Relations

Jill I. Goldenziel[1]

Forthcoming, 25 J. LAW AND POLITICS 2 (2009)

Abstract

Fidel Castro's government actively suppressed religious life in Cuba for decades. Yet in recent years Cuba has experienced a dramatic flourishing of religious life. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Cuban government has increased religious liberty by opening political space for religious belief and practice. In 1991, the Cuban Communist Party removed atheism as a prerequisite for party membership. One year later, Cuba amended its constitution to deem itself a secular state rather than an atheist state. Since that time, religious life in Cuba has grown exponentially. All religious denominations, from the Catholic Church to Afro-Cuban religious societies and the Jewish and Muslim communities, report increased participation in religious rites. Religious social service organizations like Caritas have opened in Cuba, providing vital social services to Cubans of all religious faiths. These religious institutions are assisted by groups from the United States traveling legally to Cuba on religious visas and carrying vital medicine, aid, and religious paraphernalia.

What explains the Cuban government's sudden accommodation of religion? Drawing on original field research in Havana, I argue that the Cuban government has strategically increased religious liberty for political gain. Loopholes in U.S. sanctions policies have allowed aid to flow into Cuba from the United States via religious groups, allowing the Cuban government to open a controlled religious marketplace. The Cuban government has learned from the experience of similar religious awakenings in post-Communist states in Eastern Europe and has shrewdly managed the workings of religious organizations while permitting individual spiritual revival. By softening its anti-religious stance, the Cuban government has opened the door to religious pluralism on the island while closely monitoring religious groups to prevent political opposition. As the Obama Administration has already begun to ease U.S. Sanctions on Cuba, the U.S. Government must gain a broader understanding the relationship between Cuban religion, civil society, and democratic freedoms.

---

[1] Climenko Fellow and Lecturer on Law, Harvard Law School, 2009-2011. Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Government, Harvard University. J.D., N.Y.U. Law, 2004. A.B., Princeton University, 2000. Thanks to Jorge Dominguez, Gregorz Ekiert, Noah Feldman, Steven Levitsky, Michael Pine, Cindy Skach, Matthew Stephenson, Brandon Van Dyck, and participants in the Latin American Politics Workshop at Harvard University. I am grateful to the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University for research support and an academic license to travel to Cuba.

Electronic copy available at: http://ssrn.com/abstract=1373826

I. INTRODUCTION 3
II. RELIGIOUS LIBERTY FOR ECONOMIC GAIN 4
B. ANTI-CATHOLICISM, RELIGION AND THE EARLY REVOLUTIONARY YEARS 7
III. "THE OPENING" OF 1991: RELIGIOUS FREDOM MEETS ECONOMIC NEED 14
IV. THE PUZZLE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN CUBA 19
A. IMPACT OF THE OPENING ON CATHOLICISM 21
B. IMPACT OF THE OPENING ON PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS 25
C. IMPACT OF THE OPENING ON AFRO-CUBAN RELIGIONS 27
D. IMPACT OF THE OPENING ON OTHER RELIGIONS 29
V. THE COSTS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY 30
VI. CONCLUSION: DEMOCRACY AT THE RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE? 33

Electronic copy available at: http://ssrn.com/abstract=1373826

I. INTRODUCTION

The Cuban Revolution drastically impacted the relationship between Cubans and organized religion. Fidel Castro's government actively suppressed religious life for decades and silenced the oppositional voices of religious groups, particularly the Catholic Church. Yet in recent years Cuba has experienced a dramatic flourishing of religious life. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Cuban government has increasingly opened space for religious belief and practice. In 1991, the Cuban Communist Party removed atheism as a prerequisite for party membership. One year later, Cuba amended its constitution to deem itself a secular state rather than an atheist state. Since that time, religious life in Cuba has grown exponentially. Religious groups provide spiritual and material sustenance to Cubans, often assisted by groups from the United States traveling legally to Cuba on religious visas.

What suddenly motivates an atheist state to tolerate religion? In this paper, I argue that Cuba has exploited loopholes in U.S. law to allow economic aid to flow into the island via religious groups. The Cuban government has used religion to bolster its own political power while shrewdly managing the workings of religious organizations. By softening its anti-religious stance, the Cuban government has opened a tightly controlled spiritual and economic marketplace in the wake of the economic crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Cuban state has bolstered its own power by stifling political opposition by religious groups. While post-Communist states in Eastern Europe experienced religious revival accompanied by religiously inspired pro-democratic activism, Cuba has strategically controlled the impact of its religious opening on the political sphere.

Due to political tensions between Cuba and the United States, recent academic

scholarship on religion and politics in Cuba is scarce. The difficulty of obtaining research permits and the scarcity of academic libraries, Internet, and other basic elements of research infrastructure on the island makes social science research in Cuba prohibitive for many. A grant and license from the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard enabled me to conduct original field research in Havana in 2007 and 2008 for this project, including interviews with religious, political, and academic figures in Cuba.

II. RELIGIOUS LIBERTY FOR ECONOMIC GAIN

Why would a socialist government suddenly open itself to a greater degree of religious freedom? In his recent book, *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty*, Anthony Gill presents a formal framework for understanding the relationship between religion and state.[2] Using the terminology of contemporary literature on the political economy of religion Gill describes religious organizations as "firms" that produce and distribute religious "goods." These firms compete for members and resources in a religious marketplace, each seeking to spread their religious message to as many followers as possible.[3] Religious liberty, or religious freedom, represents the degree to which the government regulates this marketplace.[4] Gill posits that in an environment where no single religion commands a majority market share, all denominations will prefer religious liberty. The presence of competing denominations where none of them has hegemonic dominance will reduce the bargaining leverage of any one particular group. Gill posits that the behavior of politicians who manage religious liberty is governed by five primary

---

[2] ANTHONY GILL, THE POLITICAL ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, 2008.
[3] JOSE CASANOVA, PUBLIC RELIGIONS IN THE MODERN WORLD, U. of Chicago Press, 1994.
[4] ANTHONY GILL, RENDERING UNTO CAESAR: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE STATE IN LATIN AMERICA. U Of Chicago Press, 1998.

incentives.[5] Politicians are interested in 1) maintaining power, 2) maximizing government revenue, 3) promoting economic growth, 4) minimizing civil unrest, and 5) minimizing the cost of ruling. If these goals are hindered by restricting religious liberty, religious regulation will be liberalized.

The Cuban case appears to fit Gill's framework. The Cuban government chose to deregulate religious liberty at a time when doing so would help it maintain its power and maximize revenue. Unlike earlier periods when the Government needed to suppress religion to maintain its political power, the Cuban Government seized the opportunity to use religion as a spiritual and economic outlet.

A. RELIGION BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

In the early years of the Revolution, the Church sought to regulate religion to maintain its hegemony. The Catholic Church, with its transnational network, vast resources, and opposition to Communism, posed an ideological to the new regime. However, the Cuban Church at the time of the Revolution was institutionally the weakest Church in all of Latin America.[6] While the Church elsewhere in Latin America enjoyed broad support from various classes of society, the Cuban Church was highly reliant on an elite core within Cuba as well as support from abroad.[7]

The Cuban Church's following was also weaker than elsewhere in Latin America at the

---

[5] Gill, 2008

[6] I use the term "Revolution" according to its common meaning in Cuba and in political science literature about Cuba. The Revolution refers to both the events which brought Fidel Castro and his socialist government to power in 1959, and also to the ongoing programs of that Revolutionary government, now led by Raul Castro.

[7] Margaret Crahan, *Salvation through Christ or Marx: Religion in Revolutionary Cuba,* J. INTERAMERICAN STUDIES AND WORLD AFFAIRS 21(1):156, 184 (1979).

time of the Revolution. Estimates vary as to the proportion of the Cuban population that professed Catholicism in the 1950s. Official Church statistics state that the nominal Catholic population was 70-75% of the total population before the Revolution and experienced a significant decline thereafter.[8] In 1955, Cuba had 680 priests, 125 of whom were Cuban, and 1872 nuns, 556 of whom were Cuban.[9] These clergy members were spread unevenly throughout the island and clustered in urban areas.[10] In a 1954 survey conducted by the Catholic Association of the University, 24% of those sampled declared that they attended religious services regularly, a claim contradicted by lower attendance records in rural areas.[11] Adherence in rural areas was much lower. In 1957, the Church's own survey reported that only 52.1% of the rural population identified as Catholic.[12] 41.4% of rural Cubans reported that they had no definite religion, and 88.8% of declared Catholics never attended mass. In 1960, 20% of the Cuban population claimed to have no religion at all.[13]

Yet support for the Catholic Church in Cuba may be understated due to the Church's complex relationship with Afro-Cuban religions. These religions, such as Santeria and Regla de Ocha, originated in the religious practices of Nigeria, Angola, and the Congo and arrived in Cuba along with slavery. As slave religions, they were excluded from societal discourse, and practicing them remained illegal even after slavery was abolished. Because these religions developed in secret, they did not build houses of worship but instead operated through temples in

---

[8] Crahan, *Salvation through Christ or Marx: Religion in Revolutionary Cuba*." J. INTERAMERICAN STUDIES AND WORLD AFFAIRS 21(1):156–184, 156.
[9] AURELIO ALONSO TEJADA, IGLESIA Y POLITICA EN CUBA (2002).
[10] Margaret Crahan, *Cuba: Religion and Revolutionary Institutionalization*, J. LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES 17:2:319–340, 321, 1985.
[11] Alonso, Aurelio. 2003. *Relations Between the Catholic Church and the Cuban Government as of 2003. In Religion, Culture, and Society: The Case of Cuba*, WOODROW WILSON CENTER PAPERS ON THE AMERICAS 9.
[12] Alonso, 2002.
[13] Crahan, 1985.

individual homes and through secret societies like Abakua. Over time, Afro-Cuban religions syncretized African gods with Catholic saints and adopted the rituals of marriage and baptism within the Catholic Church. The lack of institutionalization, the secretive nature of these groups, and their syncretic nature make accurate data on these religions impossible to obtain. However, Afro-Cuban religious practices were part of the fabric of Cuban society long before the Revolution, and their individualist spiritual nature likely provided competition for other, more institutionalized religious systems such as the Catholic Church.

Catholicism and Afro-Cuban religions together form a core part of Cuban national identity. Although the Cuban Church is historically weaker than others in Latin America, Catholicism was and remains the default religion for "secular" Cubans and practitioners of Afro-Cuban faiths. Protestants comprised a small but growing proportion of the Cuban population prior to the Revolution. In 1958, Protestants claimed 150,000 to 250,000 adherents, or about 6% of the population.[14] This represented substantial growth from a 1940 estimate of 40,000 to 50,000.[15] Viewing trends of Protestant growth elsewhere in Latin America, the Revolutionary Government thus viewed Protestantism as a potential source of opposition to be destroyed or co-opted.

B. ANTI-CATHOLICISM, RELIGION AND THE EARLY REVOLUTIONARY YEARS

Fidel Castro's 1959 declaration that the Cuban Revolution would be socialist posed an ideological and material challenge to religious groups. The lack of strength of institutionalized religion described above may partially explain why religious ideology was unable to compete

[14] Crahan, 1979, Calzadilla et. al., *Religion, Cultura, y Sociedad in Cuba*, CIPS, 2006.
[15] Crahan, 1979,

with Marxist ideology when the Revolution began, particularly in rural areas. Religious groups also suffered from emigration of their elites and clergy members. Catholic elites and clergy fled primarily to Spain, causing a leadership crisis on the island.[16] Protestant elites and clergy left the country, contributing to a plummet in participation and even a closing of the Lutheran Church in Cuba. 95% of the Jewish community left the island, radically diminishing that community.[17]

Religious believers of all faiths were barred from Communist party membership and from participation in certain professions. Of all religious faiths, the Revolution had the most profound impact on the Catholic Church. The Revolution separated the Catholic Church completely from the state, distinguishing Cuba from many other Latin American countries, where the church maintained links to the state apparatus. The Church and the Revolutionary Government held a lengthy public feud in the early years of the Revolution.[18] The Church espoused anti-Marxist ideology, and the Cuban government took action to marginalize the Church. Through the Agrarian Reform Law of 1962, the government nationalized Church property and stripped it of its schools, thus depriving it of its most influential means to gain adherents.[19] In the same year, the government distributed anti-Catholic propaganda and imprisoned many Catholics for counterrevolutionary activity, which served to silence many other Cuban Catholics.[20]

Catholicism thus developed a negative patina in Cuba. Isolated from the rest of the world by Cuban policies and the U.S. embargo, the Cuban Church was not impacted by Vatican II and remained very conservative, losing touch with the Cuban population.[21] By 1963 relations

---

[16] Crahan, 1979,
[17] RUTH BEHAR, AN ISLAND CALLED HOME: RETURNING TO JEWISH CUBA, 2007.
[18] Crahan, 1985; Super, J.C, *Interpretations of Church and State in Cuba, 1959-1961*, CATHOLIC HISTORICAL REVIEW 89(3):511–529 (2003).
[19] Calzadilla et. al.,
Crahan, 1985,
[21] Crahan, 1985,

between the Church and the government had thawed enough for some clergy and missionaries to return. The Church subsequently became a place of refuge for those opposed to the Revolution, which was frowned upon by the Cuban government.[22]

Besides offering refuge to such political dissenters, the Church remained largely uninvolved in political affairs between 1969 and 1978.[23] The state slowly began to make overtures toward the Catholic Church to test its oppositional strength. Fidel Castro began to speak positively of the role of Catholics in revolutions elsewhere in Latin America, including Nicaragua, Chile, and Columbia.[24] The government appeared to recognize that cultivating a progressive Catholicism at home could increase Cuban influence abroad.[25] The Church, in turn, responded positively to progressive social initiatives by the government throughout the 1970s.[26]

Even while making these overtures toward the Church, the government formalized its separation from the church by legally proscribing the Church from political opposition.[27] Article 54 of the 1975 Cuban Constitution made it illegal to oppose one's faith or religious belief to the Revolution.[28] Subsequent party Congresses affirmed these principles, as well as the need to separate the Church from education.[29]

According to religious historian Margaret Crahan, Catholics reacted positively to the amendment, glad for clarification of the relationship between Church and state and for guidance

---

[22] Crahan, 1985; Pastor Adolfo Ham, Protestant Minister & Past President of the Council of Churches, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 27, 2008).
[23] Alonso, 2003
[24] *Id*.
[25] *Id*.
[26] *Id*.
[27] Crahan 1985,
[28] CUBAN CONSTITUTION OF 1975 ARTICLE 4
[29] Crahan, 1985, 333.

on how that relationship could be improved.[30] Seizing this opportunity to gain support from Catholic Cubans, in 1980 the Communist Party Congress appealed to a joint action between its membership and the revolutionary and progressive wings of the Catholic Church toward common goals.[31]

Due to continued discrimination against religious believers, religion remained a secret, private matter in Cuban society. People rarely spoke or wrote publicly about religion, and when they did so, religion was presented in negative terms.[32] In 1985, Fidel Castro granted a series of interviews with Frei Betto, a Brazilian Dominican priest turned journalist. In those interviews, Fidel spoke positively of Catholicism in public for the first time. To have a Cuban socialist leader speak about religion at all – and in positive terms – was a watershed for many Catholics. The book sold more than a million copies in Cuba, which then had a population of about 12 million.[33] It was also translated into at least 23 languages in 32 countries. The book inspired many attempts at rapprochement between religion and state in the Communist world. In Cuba, the interview signaled to the population that the climate for religion had improved, and to the government that Cubans wanted greater religious liberties.[34] In 1986 the state permitted ENEC, a conference of bishops, to convene in Cuba. The conference reported increased Church presence and overall religious activity on the Island.[35]

B. COOPTING RELIGION: RELIGIOUS CORPORATISM

---

[30] Crahan, 1985
[31] Crahan, 1985
[32] Father Carlos Manuel Cespedes, Priest & Public Intellectual, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 22, 2008).
[33] CASTRO, FIDEL & FREI BETTO, FIDEL AND RELIGION, *20 Years Later: Introduction to the New Edition* (2006), 1-8.
[34] Monsignor Carlos Manuel Cespedes, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 2008).
[35] Alonso, 2003

AND NON-CATHOLIC FAITHS

While the Cuban government sought to distance itself from the Catholic Church, it developed a close relationship with Protestant groups. Cuba's relationship with Protestantism may be defined as corporatist. In his seminal work, Phillippe Schmitter defines corporatism as a "distinctive, modern system of interest representation" in which government grants representative corporations the exclusive privilege of representing the interests of entire sectors of society.[36] In a corporatist model, the government also maintains some control over the selection of corporate leaders and the articulation of their demands. Schmitter describes "state corporatism," the type of corporatism most common in authoritarian societies, as an arrangement in which governments create representative corporations and enter into relations with them, but do not depend on them for legitimacy and their ability to function.[37] Corporatism benefits the state by ensuring consensus over state action and bolstering state legitimacy.[38] Corporatism also increases the state ability to manage the economy by serving as a coordination mechanism to fulfill state goals and increase state control over certain economic sectors.[39] Although corporatism limits the autonomy of those sectors enter into such an arrangement, those sectors benefit from the arrangement through an increased opportunity to modify market outcomes that is less risky than bargaining from outside the political system.[40]

While corporatism is usually used to describe relations between the government and labor or industrial interests, corporatism aptly describes the relationship that the Revolutionary government developed with the Protestant Council of Churches. The Consejo de Iglesias, or

---

[36] Philippe Schmitter, *Still the Century of Corporatism?* REVIEW OF POLITICS 36(1):85–131, 1974.
[37] *Id*.
[38] MARIO REGINI. ORDER AND CONFLICT IN CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM, 1984.
[39] Schmitter,
[40] Regini,

Council of Churches, was started by Protestant leaders before the Revolution as a Protestant bulwark against the power of the Catholic Church[41] The Council of Churches is the most well known Protestant organization in Cuba. The Council is comprised of 25 officially recognized denominations including Pentacostalists, ecumenical movements, and two non-Christian groups. The council provides social service functions, like Alcoholics Anonymous groups, and receives visits and aid from Protestant groups abroad.[42] The Council also airs a radio program once per month, unlike the Catholic Church, which is denied access to media.[43]

The Council represents only about half of Cuba's Protestants.[44] Many other Protestant congregations are new and are not officially registered with the Cuban government, a process that can take more than ten years.[45] Other congregations do not agree with the council's positions, and may be effectively excluded from membership for doing so.[46] Thus, the Council represents an older guard of well-established Protestant communities. Although the Council represents only about half of Cuba's Protestants, the government treats it as the primary voice of Protestants in Cuba. The Council of Churches has consistently supported government stances throughout the Revolution. Protestant leaders have been consistently more pro-Revolution than Catholics.[47]

Thus, while the Catholic Church inched toward reconciliation with the government to work for common goals, Cuban Protestants aligned themselves directly with the interests of the

---

[41] Ham, Personal Interview.
[42] Calzadilla et. al.,
[43] Ham, Personal Interview.
[44] Puig, Pastor David, Pastor of W. Carey Baptist Church, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba, (January 18, 2007).
[45] Aurelio Alonso Tejada, Historian, Casa de Las Americas, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba, (January 26, 2007).
[46] Puig, Personal Interview.
[47] Crahan, 1985,

Communist Party. Protestants, through the Council of Churches, have never been seen as oppositional to the Revolution. Protestants also have had an internal focus rather than an external one, relying on local clergy and not relying on the foreign community[48] Protestant interests have always been publicly presented as being aligned with the interests of the Cuban people and not with external actors.

Because of the decentralized nature of Afro-Cuban religions, the Cuban government has largely left its religious infrastructure undisturbed since the Revolution. Throughout the Revolution, Afro-Cuban religions have remained the most widely practiced religions in Cuba. Rafael Rubiano, director of the Cuban Center for Anthropology in Old Havana, estimates that adherents of Afro-Cuban religions comprise 20-30% of the population.[49] Natalia Bolivar, a renowned anthropologist and authority on Afro-Cuban religions, estimates that the number is even higher, with most Cubans practicing both Catholicism and Afro-Cuban religions.[50] Afro-Cuban religious practitioners remain the most difficult to quantify because they lack centralized structures and because of past prohibitions against their religious practices. Bolivar's 1990 book on the Orishas, Afro-Cuban deities, broke the silence about Afro- Cuban religions and made some of their more mysterious aspects accessible to the general public.[51]

Because they lacked a formal institutional structure, these religions had no elites and clergy to leave. The Revolutionary government recognized the importance of Afro-Cuban religions to Cuban national identity, and realized that they were not institutionally organized enough to pose any serious political threat. Thus, the government actually lifted the criminal

---

[48] Alonso, 2003 49
[49] Rafael Rubiano, Professor of Anthropology Cuban Institute of Anthropology, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 27, 2008).
[50] Natalia Bolivar Arostegui, Professor of Anthropology, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 27, 2008).
[51] Bolivar, Personal Interview.

proscription on practicing Afro-Cuban religions, even as it discouraged religious belief in general.[52] Fearing repercussions for beliefs in the divine, followers of Afro-Cuban religions continued to worship privately, as they had since the nineteenth century.[53] While it is difficult to gain data on Afro-Cuban religion since 1959 due to their secret, informal nature, data on the number of pilgrims attending the festival of San Lazaro each year provides some evidence that Afro-Cuban religious participation was growing during the 1980s. Participation grew throughout the 1980s until 70,000 people attended the pilgrimage in 1989.[54] If participation in the pilgrimage is any guide, Afro-Cuban religious practice was steadily building in the years preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union.

III. "THE OPENING" OF 1991: RELIGIOUS FREDOM MEETS ECONOMIC NEED

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as world Communism was collapsing, the Cuban government also held a series of public conversations about the future of Cuban society. The Cuban public demanded greater avenues for free expression. The government tentative dealings with the Catholic Church in the 1970s and 1980s and its close ties to the Protestant Council of Churches provided valuable indicators to the government of growing religious trends. In light of the religiosity of the Cuban public, the government likely became concerned that affirmations of secularism or atheism would make it lose credibility, and thus needed to open itself to greater religious expression.

The Cuban government also recognized the need to provide a spiritual outlet to its people

---

[52] Calzadilla et. al.,
[53] Ivor Miller, *A Secret Society Goes Public: The Relationship between Abakua and Cuban Popular Culture*. AFRICAN STUDIES REVIEW 43(1) (2001); Conference of Catholic Bishops of Cuba, *El Amor Todo Lo Espera*, 1993.
[54] Calzadilla et. al.; Alonso 2003, 24.

during the economic crisis precipitated by the collapse of the Soviet Union. After the collapse of world socialism in the early 1990s, Cuba lost its main oil supplier and primary economic trading partner practically overnight. The Cuban government mandated a "Special Period" of severe economic austerity.According to historian Aurelio Alonso, the crises of material needs caused a crisis of values that could lead to existential crises and a reactivated belief in the supernatural. The Cuban government recognized the resurgence of religiosity in the population and responded by relaxing restrictions on religion.[55]

The Cuban government needed to harness the material and spiritual needs of its population to maintain its own legitimacy. In response to the demands of its citizens, the government acted carefully to ensure that its actions would quell potential civil unrest rather than fomenting rebellion. Having observed Soviet perestroika reforms with religion, and keeping a watchful eye on the ties of religious groups to democratic movements in post-Communist Russia,[56] Belarus,[57] and the Ukraine,[58] the Cuban government knew that controlled religious deregulation was necessary to maintain the support of its major denominations.

In the early 1990s, the Cuban government took a serious of steps that paved the way for greater religious freedom in Cuba. The Communist Party permitted religious believers to join the Communist Party for the first time. In 1992, Articles 41, 42, and 54 of the Cuban Constitution were modified to eliminate discrimination against religion.[59] The new Constitution redefined Cuba as an "estado laico," or a secular state, rather than an atheist state. These events became known as the "Apertura," or Opening, of the Cuban state toward religion.

---

[55] Alonso, 2003
[56] Titarenko
[57] Titarenko
[58] Titarenko; Wanner
[59] 1992 CUBAN CONSTITUTION, ARTICLES 41, 42, AND 54.

Several other conciliatory steps toward increased religious liberty followed the initial Opening. The government slowly eliminated social discriminations such as the prohibition of religious believers to enter certain careers and courses of study.[60] The state gradually substituted more flexible concepts for its prior official atheist ideology. Atheism courses in Universities and Schools were eliminated. In 1990, Fidel Castro met with the Ecumenical Council of Cuba, and began to pave the way for the Papal visit of 1998. These steps resulted in the popular acceptance and open recognition of religious believers, and caused a greater interest in religion in public consciousness. Religion became a central theme in music, dance, and the arts.[61] More frequent references to religion were made in radio, television, and the critical press.

Before 1991, members of official government organizations were forbidden from expressing religious beliefs, making accurate surveys of religious belief among government employees impossible. A recent poll of mass organizations reveals that religion had been suppressed in official government organizations before the collapse of the Soviet Union. 93% of members of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution report having a religious belief, as well as 57% of the Civil Defense.[62] As the stigma of religious participation was eliminated, religious organizations began to grow in human and material resources and gained a more prominent role in Cuban society.

Because the Cuban religious landscape is heterogeneous and no one denomination has a dominant market share, the Cuban government knew that it could safely deregulate without concern that any one religious group would maintain enough market share to gain critical political bargaining power. Unlike in Poland, where Catholicism had a dominant market share,

---

[60] Calzadilla et. al.,
[61] Calzadilla et. al.,
[62] Alonso, 2003

the Cuban government was reasonably assured that an increase in religious liberty would not lead to government collapse. The Cuban government could also be reasonably certain that no church would gain enough power to become a de facto state church, as in Russia.[63] With such a strong nationalist propaganda machine already in place, and with the Catholic Church's long history of opposition to its socialist program, the Cuban government also did not fear that its nationalist message would be co-opted by any church, as occurred in Russia and the Ukraine, where a national church existed.[64] Cuba also did not face the same threat from the Catholic Church as its Latin American neighbors. While the Church elsewhere in Latin America embraced the cause of the poor in opposition to rich, corrupt authoritarian regimes, the Cuban government has already politically positioned itself to represent the interests of the poor through its socialist program.[65] From its strategic interactions with the Church in the 1970s and 1980s, the Cuban government also knew that the Church was willing to behave in a conciliatory political fashion. Thus, the Cuban government could be reasonably assured that religious deregulation would not threaten its authority.

The government-sponsored think tank Centro de Investigacion Psycologia y Sociologia (CIPS) provides an explanation for why the state chose to open itself to religion that supports the idea that the government is using religion to pursue the strategic incentives outlined above.[66] CIPS posits that the state needed to substitute another non-materialist ideology for the discredited Marxist ideology to bolster its legitimacy. In a statement that appears to have clear Marxist roots, CIPS also notes religion's power to regulate the conduct of groups and believers

---

[63] A.D. Krindatch, *Religion in Postsoviet Ukraine as a Factor in Regional, Ethno-Cultural and Political Diversity*, RELIGION, STATE AND SOCIETY 31(1):37–73, 2003.
[64] Krindatch, ; Wanner,
[65] Gill, 1998; Sergio Arce,
[66] Calzadilla et. al.,

and its "high influence on emotional processes."[67] By carefully controlling religious groups, the Cuban government could continue to manipulate its populace. As Juan Linz has noted politicians in totalitarian regimes often use ideological rhetoric to pursue strategic incentives.[68]

The Cuban government may also have wagered that allowing religious belief would promote economic growth. Robert Barro and Rachel McCleary have shown empirically that increases in some religious beliefs, such as beliefs in hell, heaven, and an after-life, tend to increase economic growth.[69] They posit that higher religious beliefs may stimulate growth by promoting aspects of individual behavior that enhance productivity. While Barro and McCleary's study was published too late for the Cuban government to have learned from it, Fidel Castro need have looked no further than Max Weber to reach similar conclusions.

The Cuban government also likely viewed increased religious liberty as a pragmatic means toward economic growth. Religious groups in former Soviet states, such as the Ukraine, have long enjoyed financial support from the West.[70] The United States has sought to exploit the Cuban government's opening toward civil society and religion. In the mid-1990s, the United States adopted a policy of supporting dissident groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, to foster a civil society independent from the Cuban Government[71] These policies were condemned in official government actions in 1996, as mentioned above.

However, the Cuban government has permitted U.S. efforts to support religious groups in Cuba. The U.S. government has allowed a large loophole in the embargo to allow religious groups to visit Cuba. These groups travel to Cuba legally on religious humanitarian missions

---

[67] Calzadilla et. al.,
[68] JUAN J. LINZ, TOTALITARIAN AND AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES, 2000.
[69] Rachel M. McCleary and Robert J. Barro, *Religion and Economy*, JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES 20(2):49–72 (2006).
[70] Wanner,
[71] Jorge Dominguez,

laden with medicine, clothing, and other forms of material aid, as well as ritual objects and supplies for their religious denominations. The Cuban Jewish community, for example, has received resources from abroad consistently since before the Revolution. Since the Opening it has received at least two groups per week in the winter season from Jewish communities in the United States.[72] This aid from abroad has increased the capacity of religious organizations to perform social welfare functions, and has thus enhanced the social standing of religious organizations in Cuban society. The U.S. government has also permitted American religious organizations to raise funds in the U.S. for Cuban religious groups.

Religious tourism from the U.S. and elsewhere injects goods into the Cuban economy while providing much-needed humanitarian assistance to the population. Since the Cuban government would not need to provide the social services that would be provided by religious organizations, increased religious liberty would reduce the government's cost of ruling. An improved economy and social service provision would also minimize chances for civil unrest, thus meeting another of the Cuban government's goals.

CIPS also notes that the development of Cuban religion has not been divorced completely from the international context.[73] Religion in the United States and Latin America had been experiencing religious revivals in the early 1990s. The Cuban government's ability to control religion thus appears to be constrained by international religious trends and foreign influence. As I will discuss below, the influence of international religious groups may be the major flaw in Cuba's plan to tightly control religious resurgence in Cuba.

IV. THE PUZZLE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN CUBA

[72] Dworin, Personal Interview
[73] Calzadilla et. al.,

What incentives did the Cuban population have to embrace increased religious liberty? While Gill assumes that religious preferences in any society in which two or more religions compete for share in the religious marketplace are always pluralistic, this is not a given.[74] In a post-Communist society, religious believers may remain reluctant to express religious beliefs even after the legalization of religious expression, because they fear social if not official stigmatization. Religious believers may also rationally choose to affiliate with the largest, most established religious organization if they are to affiliate with any religion at all. In the Cuban case, as in much of the world, the Catholic Church has the oldest, largest, wealthiest, and most organized presence of any religion in the country. Moreover, most of Latin America is Catholic. As Cuba continues to form more political alliances with its Latin American neighbors, Cubans may have increasing contact with Catholics and social incentives to join the religion of their neighbors. As long as the Cuban government believes that it can control Catholic opposition, the Cuban government may even have some political incentive to have Cubans choose Catholicism to help it "normalize" with the rest of Latin America.

So why are all Cubans not Catholics? While some have argued that Cubans have turned to religion out of material or spiritual necessity, the growth of minority religions indicates that something else is at play. Cubans seem to be using religion as an opportunity for freedom of expression, to seek out new religious beliefs. In a sense, religion can be seen as a vehicle for bringing democratic expressive freedoms to Cuba. While the Cuban government restricts religious practice, the marketplace of religious ideas is relatively free in Cuba, and Cubans are reveling in the chance for free choice within it. Religion may be one of the few areas of Cuban society where Cubans have genuine choice as to modes of free expression. In Latin America and

[74] Gill, 2008

elsewhere, religious groups and other mechanisms of civil society have spurred a transition to more democratic forms of government.[75] Religious sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark also note that where religious pluralism exists, a high degree of religious commitment is likely to occur.[76] Indeed, Cuban religious pluralism has translated into a vibrant religious landscape.

The Cuban government has every incentive to support religious pluralism to ensure that no one religion gains dominant market share that would threaten this authority, and to diversify its revenue streams. The Cuban Government has carefully permitted religious growth across the religious spectrum, including Catholicism, Protestantism, and smaller faiths. In all cases, the Cuban government has sought to maximize the economic impact of religious growth while carefully monitoring the workings of religious groups.

A. IMPACT OF THE OPENING ON CATHOLICISM

The Cuban government may have had something to fear from the Catholic Church after the Opening. As Samuel Huntington has observed, the Third Wave of democratization was "overwhelmingly a Catholic wave," as the Catholic Church and its activists promoted greater democratization throughout the world.[77] The Polish experience, in particular, revealed that the Church could be a powerful force for democratization.[78] The Catholic Church throughout Latin America had also expressed strong opposition to authoritarian governments ever since the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, which gave rise to the "liberation theology"

---

[75] Tulchin,
[76] Finke and Stark,
[77] SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON,THE THIRD WAVE, 1991
[78] Huntington, ; Daniel Philpott, *Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion*, AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE REVIEW 101(03):505–525 (2007).

movement.[79]

The conciliatory motions by the Catholic Church in the 1980s may have spurred the Opening of the Cuban state toward religion. Cubans watched with great interest to see how the Church would respond when given more space for freedom of expression.[80] In 1993 the Cuban bishops released a pastoral message entitled, "El Amor Todo Lo Espera," or "Everything Waits for Love." In it, the Church discussed the goals of the Cuban Church after the collapse of world socialism, which included primarily humanitarian aims and did not oppose the Revolutionary government. The message was viewed as the broadest political statement by the Cuban Church since 1959.[81] Its lack of opposition to the government appeared carefully calculated to allow the Catholic Church some degree of autonomy within Cuba. As often occurs when the Catholic Church chooses to support or main neutral on questions of politics, the message was probably carefully calculated to allow Catholicism to maintain or improve its market share among the Cuban population in light of an expanding religious marketplace.[82]

In 1998 Pope John Paul II visited Cuba. His sermon on the Plaza de la Revolucion before the entire Politboro, members of the public, and state-sponsored television cameras was seen as the final reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the Cuban state. The impact on Cuban society was huge as Catholics began to publicly profess their faith in large numbers. Attendance at mass swelled.[83] The Catholic Church solidified its relationship with the state and asserted its

---

[79] *Id*.,
[80] Alonso, 2003
[81] Alonso, 2003
[82] J. Anderson, *The Catholic Contribution to Democratization's "Third Wave": Altruism, Hegemony or Self-interest?*" CAMBRIDGE REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS 20(3):383–399, 2007.
[83] Cespedes, Personal Interview.

place as a force in Cuban civil and political society.[84]

Catholic institutions have multiplied in the wake of the Opening. The number of dioceses and archdioceses has grown, as has clerical and lay participation in Catholic activities. The Church adopted a Global Pastoral Plan for 1997-2000 to promote evangelization and the Church's duty to preserve achievements of Revolution in creating more just society.[85] Thus the Catholic Church, in its official stance, has taken a conciliatory rather than an oppositional tone toward the Cuban state since 1991.

The reach of the Catholic Church in Cuba extends beyond these metrics of formal participation. Margaret Crahan eloquently argues that "Christianity exerts a predominant influence which in moments of crisis can result in a reassertion of loyalty to the churches," which has resulted in enduring, if seemingly sporadic, allegiance to the Church in Cuba.[86]

The influence of the Catholic Church in Cuba is also increased by its civil society and social service organizations. A new Catholic civil society has also developed since the Opening. Most elements of Catholic civil society were disbanded early in the Revolution, but new forms began to appear shortly after 1991. Catholic lay groups such as the Catholic University Student Movement and the Catholic Center of Civic- Religious Formation have begun. The Fray Bartolome de las Casas Center provides panels and dialogue with the academic and political world. The Church has created new lay commissions and has begun to sponsor Social Weeks for the general public.

Some elements of Catholic civil society have been more critical of the Revolution than the official stance of the Church itself. The Church has also developed several publications, such

---

[84] Alonso, 2003
[85] Alonso, 2003
[86] Crahan, 1979

as *Vitral* and *Palabra Nueva*, which have become fora for both religious thought and controversial political criticism. These publications are able to avoid rigorous government censorship because they are distributed in the Church. *Palabra Nueva*, for example, has an estimated circulation of 8,000-10,000.[87] The Cuban government has been highly critical of these publications, especially of *Vitral*, published out of the traditionally oppositional Bishop's office in Pinar del Rio. Following this harsh criticism, *Vitral* revamped its editorial structure and content in May 2007.

In the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, Catholic service organizations began to play a significant role in social welfare provision in Cuba. During the Special Period, Catholic Relief Services donated 3 million dollars worth of medicines to Cuba.[88] In 1991, after the Opening, a branch of Caritas was established in Cuba. Caritas, which operates worldwide, was permitted to open in Cuba in 1991 in response to the economic crisis of the Special Period. Caritas is run through the Cuban Conference of Bishops and is considered an arm of the Church, not a separate organization. Caritas represents the Church's first broad attempts at social service provisions since its previous social service agencies were nationalized following the Revolution. Caritas grew rapidly, establishing 11 offices throughout Cuba in the next several years. The organization works with vulnerable groups to include them in society, including elderly, children, and humanitarian emergency situations. The professionals working at Caritas are all Catholics, but its volunteers and target populations are drawn from throughout Cuban society. Like all religious social service organizations in Cuba, Caritas maintains strong ties to local neighborhoods and communities through its religious denomination. Thus, it has often been more adept at

---

[87] Orlando Marquez, Editor in Chief, *Palabra Nueva*, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 2007).
[88] Calzadilla et. al,

identifying area of need than the Cuban government. During the Special Period, as municipalities and neighborhoods could no longer rely on the state for material support, locally-based religious organizations like Caritas became more crucial in supplying Cubans with humanitarian needs.[89] Although the national agenda of Caritas focuses primarily on programs for children and the elderly, local branches of Caritas have freedom to develop programs based on the needs in their communities. For example, Caritas Havana has developed a special program to meet the needs of autistic children, unique in the country.[90]

Unlike other Cuban social service organizations, Caritas does not need special permits to operate its programs because it is a wing of the Church. However, Caritas's operations are limited by the regulations on religious denominations in Cuba, as discussed below.

B. IMPACT OF THE OPENING ON PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS

Protestantism has strengthened in comparison to Catholicism since the early 1990s.[91] After a low point in the 1960s during which the Lutheran church closed, the number of Cuban Protestants began growing in the 1970s and 1980s, much like Protestant growth in the rest of Latin America. After the Opening, Protestant growth began to skyrocket in terms of membership, places of worship, and numbers of worshippers[92] Protestants currently comprise about 3% of the Cuban population, although exact numbers are hard to obtain.[93] The number of Protestant

---

[89] J.S. Tulchin et. al.. *Changes in Cuban Society Since the Nineties*. Woodrow Wilson Center, 2003.
[90] Ofelia Riveron, Director, Caritas Havana, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 23, 2008).
[91] Alonso, 2003
[92] Calzadilla et. al.,
[93] Calzadilla et. al.,

institutions would support a much higher number of adherents. Protestants currently boast more than 900 churches and other places of worship such as seminaries. Protestants also have publications and religious schools similar to Catholic schools. A new Superior Institute of Biblical and Theological Studies in Havana aims to make Protestantism more accessible for the laity.

The Council of Churches has continued to take primarily pro-government positions. Since the Opening, one of its prominent members, the Baptist Minister Raul Suarez, has become a member of the Cuban Government. Suarez has been criticized by Protestants who are not members of the Council for not doing more to voice dissent against the government[94] Suarez directs the Martin Luther King Center, which is the only place in Cuba where religious books are published and sold.[95] The government thus maintains control and watch over the dissemination of religious ideas.

As discussed above, the Cuban government regulates participation in the Council of Churches. Certain members of the Council of Churches have been selected to serve in the Government. Council members have limited autonomy to speak out against the government, but benefit from their increased political power. The Cuban government maintains close ties with the group but does not depend on the Council of Churches for its ability to function. By keeping Protestant elites within the fold of the government through corporatist mechanisms, the Cuban government marginalizes a religious group whose power is spreading rapidly throughout the rest of Latin America.

[94] Puig, Personal Interview, 2007.
[95] Ham, Personal Interview, 2008.

C. IMPACT OF THE OPENING ON AFRO-CUBAN RELIGIONS

After the Opening of 1991, the Cuban government began to bring Afro-Cuban organizations into its corporatist fold by giving official recognition to certain religious organizations. In 1991, the government recognized the Yoruba Cultural Center in Havana, which serves as an umbrella organization for Afro- Cuban religions. The Yoruba Cultural Center has approximately 40,000 members who are somehow involved in Center programming or share its resources. The Afro-Cuban religions are non-exclusive by nature, and this membership may be very loose for many people. People may come to the Yoruba Cultural Center seeking advice on what temples to attend in times of sickness or need, but will have little other contact with the Center.[96] Through official recognition and financial sponsorship of the organization, the government is able to monitor its activities.

Several other Afro-Cuban organizations have gained official recognition. The Abakua religious organization has a long-standing place in Cuban society. Abakua began as a slave society in 1836.[97] The group currently boasts 20,000 members in 158 clubs in Havana, Matanzas, and Cardenas.[98] As a slave society, Abakua organized to buy slaves their freedom and to organize the work force. Today, Abakua is a men's group that mobilizes financial resources for social service provision. As a secret society, its workings are unclear, but they involve syncretic religious beliefs from the Yoruba, Bantu, and Carabali traditions, including ritual objects, elders with knowledge, and lifelong pacts of fraternity.[99] The anthropologist Ivor Miller compares their

---

[96] Rafael Rubiano, Professor of Anthropology Cuban Institute of Anthropology, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 27, 2008).
[97] Miller,
[98] Ramon Torres Zayas, Journalist & Abakua Activist, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 22, 2008).
[99] Miller,

function to Masonic lodges in the United States. Abakua has had great influence in all types of Cuban popular music since the 1920s, and its reach as a symbol of national culture goes far beyond its male members. Since 1991, Abakua has remained a secret society, but it has become officially recognized by the government. Another 30,000 members belong to the Comision Organizadora de la Letra del Año, which was founded in 1980 and recently received government recognition.

Several official and unofficial organizations for babalawos, or Afro-Cuban spiritual leaders, also exist. Approximately 25,000-28,0000 Babalawos live in Cuba.[100] Babalawos are tremendously charismatic figures embedded in the happenings of their local neighborhoods. They provide an enormous resource for social capital and for knowledge of communal needs.[101]

Together, these organizations mobilize an enormous amount of material resources in the community and provide social services. Like other religions, Afro-Cuban religions have been growing greatly since 1991. Unlike Catholics and Protestants, the Afro-Cuban religions do not benefit from the assistance of foreign groups. Although Afro-Cuban groups do not attract the "religious tourism" of more established religious denominations, Afro-Cuban religious centers and babalawos do attract many tourists, who are drawn to their uniquely Cuban practices, and who provide income.

While the government has increased its monitoring of Afro-Cuban organizations by allowing the establishment of the Yoruba Cultural Center and granting official recognition to other groups, it is likely that the Afro-Cuban organizations are considered less of a political threat due to their lack of international ties and their decentralized structure.

---

[100] Rafael Rubaiano, Personal Interview.
[101] Calzadilla et. al.,

D. IMPACT OF THE OPENING ON OTHER RELIGIONS

Minority faiths in Cuba have also flourished since 1991. The Jewish community in Cuba, which lost 95% of its population after the Revolution, is vibrant once again. The Jewish community's three synagogues provide a full range of social services including a pharmacy, a visiting doctor, medical equipment, laundry, daily breakfasts, snacks, and Friday night dinner.[102] The Jewish community has maintained about 200 families due to a strong interest in conversion by Cubans with Jewish heritage. Although the Cuban government has no diplomatic relations with America or Israel, where most of world Jewry resides, the Cuban Jewish community retains strong ties to both countries. The community is assisted greatly in its efforts by groups of American Jews traveling to Cuba on religious visas and carrying with them clothing and medical supplies. The community also helps arrange for emigration to Israel through a program with the Canadian embassy. Since this program with the Canadian embassy developed 15 years ago, about 120 people have emigrated to Israel.[103] Many of these Jews used Israel as a way station to get to the United States.[104] Adela Dworin, president of the Jewish community in Havana, denies that the interest in conversion has been a scheme to use religion to get out of Israel.[105] Instead, she believes that the renewed interest in religion since 1991 has caused Cubans to be curious about their Jewish heritage and to rediscover their tradition. Indeed, Fidel Castro has shown support for the community's efforts to connect with Cuban Jewish heritage by attending a Hanukah party at the Jewish Community Center in 1998. Fidel's participation in the Jewish

---

[102] Adela Dworin, President Jewish Community of Havana, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 27, 2007), Yacob Berezniak, Community Leader Adath Israel Synagogue, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 25, 2008).
[103] Berezniak, Personal Interview, 2008.
[104] Maritza Corrales Capestany, Author & Communist Party Member, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 27, 2008).
[105] Dworin, Personal Interview.

religious and cultural celebration brought legitimacy to Jewish observance in Cuban society.

Other minority faiths have grown since 1991. Cuba's first mosque opened in 2007, and many Cubans have been converting to Islam.[106] Buddhists are now an officially recognized religious group in Cuba. Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches are being built on the island for the first time.[107] Religious revival in this formerly atheist state appears to be well underway.

V. THE COSTS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Although religion did not pose a credible political threat to the Revolution in 1991, the Cuban government was aware that religious revival had become a potent political force in the post-Communist world and elsewhere in Latin America.[108] The Cuban government thus sought to control the resurgence of religious belief. The Cuban government has taken precautions to ensure that religious groups do not threaten governmental authority. The Cuban government has incurred substantial monitoring costs by expanding its system of religious corporatism to include new official and semi-official organizations designed to monitor religion.

The Cuban government has significantly increased its costs related to monitoring religious groups since 1991. The Cuban government established the Office of Religious Affairs in 1962, after the U.S. invasion at the Bay of Pigs, as an intermediary between it and religious organizations, and greatly increased its capacity in the early 1990s. The Office of Religious Affairs, directed by Caridad Diego, assigns representatives to each of the communities of faith in Cuba. These representatives sporadically attend the events of their assigned communities and bring any concerns of that faith community to the government. Religious leaders must also apply

---

[106] Corrales, Personal Interview, 2008.
[107] Corrales, Personal Interview,
[108] Burdziej,

to the Office of Religious Affairs for permits to leave the country or to bring religious dignitaries from abroad into Cuba. They must also get permits to buy computers or other office equipment. The Office of Religious Affairs officially serves an administrative function. However, in its administrative dealings, the Office of Religious Affairs also collects a wealth of information about the internal workings of Cuban's communities of faith that can be used to monitor their workings.

The government-sponsored think tank Centro de Investigacion Psycologia y Sociologia (CIPS) also serves to investigate the working of religious organizations. CIPS was developed after the Opening of 1991. CIPS employs fifty full-time researchers, and a twelve-person division exclusively studies the workings of religious institutions in Cuba.[109] When CIPS first began, religious leaders were told that it was being organized to stop religion.[110] While this has not occurred, CIPS has gathered the most comprehensive collection of data on religious organizations within Cuba by contacting and interviewing religious leaders of all faiths throughout the country.[111]

To understand how the Cuban government uses these branches to control and gather information about religion, consider how the Office of Religious Affairs carefully monitors the workings of Caritas. Caritas would be of particular concern to the Cuban government because of its worldwide organization and frequent contact with Catholic organizations in the United States. Caritas has a direct relationship with the Office of Religious Affairs and is sporadically requested to make presentations about their work and any problems they are having in their operations. Caritas often must negotiate with the Office and with other branches of the government to get the

---

[109] Perera, Personal Interview.
[110] Ham, Personal Interview.
[111] Ana Selia Perera, Director of Research Programs Centro de Investigacion Psycologia y Sociologia, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 19, 2007).

equipment and resources that it needs to properly provide social services. They do not have direct access to import equipment, which means that obtaining vital goods such as medical supplies and wheelchairs often involves a long negotiation process with several government agencies. They also cannot campaign for funds to conduct their work. Caritas professionals are denied permits to travel abroad to obtain resources and foreign professionals are denied visas to enter Cuba and work with Caritas. All of their relations with the public are through the government, which maintains controls on to whom they can market their programs. Thus, the Cuban government carefully controls the welfare functions that it has entrusted to Caritas. The U.S. embargo compounds the difficulty by making it difficult for Caritas Cuba to work with Catholics in the United States or to obtain supplies from abroad. [112]

By giving the population limited access to religion and carefully monitoring the activities of these groups, the Cuban government has created tightly contained spaces for political dissent within the public sphere. The Cuban government regulates the contact that religious leaders can have with information and with the world at large. Religious leaders cannot travel in or out of the country without government approval, which is often dependent on the overall political climate.[113] Religious books may not be imported unless a list of names is first submitted to the government for approval.[114] Material resources arriving from abroad are subject to government investigation and approval. Churches cannot expand or build new churches without government permission. Religious groups must report regularly to the Office of Religious Affairs about their current activities and future plans, and the Office of Religious Affairs must approve any major or minor purchases, from new computers for administrative use to wheelchairs and other items for

[112]Maritza Sanchez, Director National Caritas, Personal Interview, in Havana, Cuba (January 22, 2008).
[113] Riveron, Personal Interview.
[114] Ham, Personal Interview.

humanitarian assistance. Yet in public, the Cuban government appears responsive to the demands of its people for greater freedom of expression.

Thus the Cuban government has expended a great deal of resources into monitoring religion. As religious life on the island continues to flourish, these monitoring costs will increase. The Cuban government will likely continue to allow religious liberty until the cost of monitoring religion exceeds the benefits of economic growth brought by religious tourism and social service provision. When the costs outweigh the benefits, the Cuban government will need to decide if it can incur the financial costs of shutting down religious practice in Cuba and any accompanying public dissent. The Cuban government will have excellent information to estimate these costs because of its close tabs on religious organizations through the Office of Religious Affairs and CIPS. Alternatively, the government could cease monitoring of religion, thereby further increasing religious liberty, and accepting the potential political consequences.

VI. CONCLUSION: DEMOCRACY AT THE RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE?

The Cuban experience of religion and state has not followed the post-Soviet experiences of Poland, the repressive policies of China, the Catholic models of Latin America, or the neutrality models common throughout the West. Instead, Cuba appears to have learned from post-Communist experiences elsewhere that it must promote greater religious freedom while strategically manipulating religion to serve political ends. Cuba presents its own unique and fascinating blend of religious toleration and control.

The Cuban and post-Communist experiences suggest the need for new models of the relationships between religion and politics in secular authoritarian states. These models must

include the strategic relationships between religious and political actors and domestic and international institutions. This analysis can be extended through both qualitative and formal studies of these dynamic interactions. In the Cuban case, besides the domestic political dynamics between religious and political actors, religion provides a vital link between Cuba and the outside world. By facilitating flows of information into Cuba and providing a material connection between Cubans and religious adherents elsewhere, Cuban religious organizations may facilitate pressure on the Cuban government to provide other liberties to its citizens, despite tight government controls.

U.S. Government policies toward Cuba have amounted to the sanctioning of faith on the island. Religious pluralism has flourished, Cuban believers enjoy greater freedom of religious expression than ever before, and flows of Bibles and bread from U.S. religious groups make religion increasingly attractive to Cubans. Yet the full import of "The Opening" of official Cuban policies to greater tolerance of religious organizations remains to be seen. The democratic values of free expression and choice that have been an upshot of the new policy have been counteracted by the Cuban government's tight controls on the activities of religious organizations. These controls may ensure that religion in Cuba serves merely as an instrument for social welfare provision and an outlet for spiritual expression, but not for the promotion of democratic values. The international dimension of the Opening, however, may have a broader impact on the globalization of Cuban society. This, too may be instrumental: the Cuban government may be using its modified stance toward religion to improve its standing in Latin America and throughout the world. The Catholic Church, in particular, is viewed as positive for Cuban international relations because the Church strongly opposes the U.S. embargo.[115] The

[115] Hernandez, Personal Interview.

Catholic Church also will not support foreign intervention by the U.S. or other countries into Cuba. However, the Cuban government has been less successful at controlling other international aspects of religion.

Although Cuba carefully controls the comings and goings of religious personnel, visits from foreign religious leaders to the country have increased since 1991.[116] These leaders bring informational materials and material and humanitarian aid that is then distributed by the religious organizations to the Cuban population. Cuban religious leaders have also been permitted to travel outside Cuba for educational and religious engagement and taste the religious freedoms experienced by clergy and laity elsewhere.

The flow of foreign money into Cuba through religious organizations, particularly from the U.S., also increases foreign and democratic influence within Cuba. Under the Bush Administration, the U.S. clamped down on perceived abuses of the religious visa, noting that the number of travelers to Cuba on religious visas increased when family visitation restrictions were tightened.[117] As of March 11, 2009, the Obama administration began to ease family restrictions on Cuba, and has already signaled willingness toward new diplomacy with Raul Castro's government.[118] Concurrently, the Obama Administration has also increased its support for faith-based social service provision. The U.S. may wish to harness the power of religious groups to promote democracy in Cuba, but must understand the unique model of religion and state in Cuba to succeed.

---

[116] Alonso 2003; Sanchez, Personal Interview; Ham, Personal Interview.
[117] Mark Sullivan, *Cuba: U.S. Restrictions on Travel and Remittances*, CRS Reports for Congress, (January 21, 2009).
[118] CUBAN ASSETS CONTROL REGULATIONS, TITLE 31 PART 515, March 11, 2009.