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# Castro and the Churches

by Caleb Rosado

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The Seventh-day Adventist message first came to Cuba in 1903, shortly after the Spanish-American War (1898), which brought Cuba under U.S. domination. The first efforts at spreading the gospel were the results of self-supportive work of American missionaries, who accepted the challenge of W.A. Spicer for work to be started on the island.<sup>1</sup>

From 1904, when the Cuban Mission was established, to 1959, when the Cuban Revolution took place, Adventist work grew to a membership of 5,464, with a yearly increase of 347. Though the church's institutional presence was substantial, with 74 churches and a senior college, the leadership of the church was primarily in the hands of Americans and foreigners. Very little effort was made to train Cubans for leadership roles.

Thus, when the Revolution came and all the American and foreign missionaries fled the country, the Cuban church was left without properly trained Cuban leaders to assume the leadership of the church. The result was that the Adventist church in Cuba stagnated, so that the church of 1984 is basically the church of 1959—same religious

thinking, same values in behavior, same world view, same religio-centric perspective, same values in dress, same understanding of the church's mission, etc.; in other words, the church ceased to progress, due to the lack of qualified leadership, and, as a result, failed to change with the times.

After the Revolution, there were no Cuban theologians at the seminary in Cuba to re-address and redefine the mission of the church in a changing situation. Then too, many Cuban leaders left the country along with the Americans. The new leadership therefore resorted to addressing the church's mission in terms of the past, in terms of what they had known. The question of whether a changing situation might alter the mission of the church, or at least force the church to rethink its role in a revolutionary society, was never asked, nor has it been asked since.

It must be kept in mind that even though most Cubans prefer the situation of the church under Batista to being under Castro, many Adventists were opposed to Fulgencio Batista for his cruelty and political corruption. Thus, when Castro began the Revolution in the autumn of 1956, a number of Adventists, especially the laity in the province of Oriente, where Castro was located, sympathized with the revolutionaries and provided clandestine assistance. The help was such that the only religious

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group Che Guevara mentions in his *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*, are Seventh-day Adventists. Speaking of one Adventist family (which he mentions by name) Guevara declares:

They were Adventists who, even though they were against violence of any kind because of their beliefs, gave us their full support at that time and for the duration of the war. We ate heartily and rested there.

When the final battle of the Revolution was fought at Santa Clara, Castro used the Adventist Antillian College as his headquarters, where he and his soldiers were housed, fed, and entertained, due to his distrust of students at the University of Santa Clara, located across the road from Antillian College.

On May 1, 1961, shortly after the Bay of Pigs and his announcement of going socialist, Castro nationalized all the schools. The last school to be nationalized, however, was our college in Santa Clara, due to the model school that it was with its work/study program, and the high esteem in which Castro held Adventists.

### Church and State Relations

There were three factors that led to a rift in relations between the Cuban government and the Seventh-day Adventist Church:

- The acceptance by the government in April 1961 of Marxist/Leninist ideology as the official ideology of the state.
- The nationalization of all private schools in May 1961.
- The refusal to grant Adventists Sabbath privileges, whether in school, work, or the military, resulting in imprisonment for many.

The establishment, in September 1960, of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution proved to have some devastating results for Adventists. Since these committees were primarily set up for vigilance pur-

poses, anyone who espoused an ideology different from that of the state came under severe repression: no job advancement, loss of employment (especially for women), no academic scholarships, and constant surveillance.

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**The government does not mind religious practices, but actively seeking to convert others is punishable by law.**

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As part of the official policy of the state, religion was relegated to the private sphere, and though officially allowed, unofficially, religious adherence was discouraged by means of subtle repressions, constant vigilance, and loss of privileges.

The result was a difference of attitude between sectarian religious groups and mainstream Protestants about the state. (One must keep in mind that in an atheistic, Marxist/Leninist state, all religious groups take on a sectarian status, as they all find themselves in tension in an environment hostile towards religion. Still, some religions remain more accommodating to government.)

More than other groups, sectarian Christians like Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical Gideon's Band<sup>2</sup>, and Seventh-day Adventists find themselves at odds with the state in a socialist society such as Cuba. There is a reason for this: like the Communist government itself, these three sectarian groups share one common element—they are all *total systems*. They are systems that attempt to control both the behavior and beliefs of their constituents. Because the basic ideologies of these groups are different, they end up competing. This is not to imply that the systems have equal power. Adventists relate to the Cuban government like David related to Goliath.

Because of the totality of control necessary to Adventism or Communism, it is virtually impossible for one system to be sympathetic and accommodating to the other. Mainstream Protestant groups like Presbyterians,

Methodists, and Baptists do not adhere to a similarly regimented system of belief which governs all the actions of the group. These other groups, for example, have no restrictions on the Sabbath as an exclusive day of worship, on diet, on dress, on entertainment. Since they are not competing total systems, mainstream Protestant denominations are not regarded as threatening to the Communist system, a system which demands complete loyalty and integration into the system.

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**The church in Cuba needs to define its mission in terms of faithfulness to the Gospel and its demands—not in terms of the church's institutions.**

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For these reasons, at the First National Congress on Education and Culture, held in April 1971, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Evangelical Gideon's Band were singled out "because of their activities in opposition to the Revolution."<sup>3</sup> The "most outstanding peculiarity" the declaration brought out against Seventh-day Adventists was that, "they do not engage in any activities on Saturday (do not work or send their children to school, etc.)."<sup>4</sup>

The Cuban government has made it quite clear that:

The Revolution respects religious beliefs and cults as an individual right. The Revolution does not impose nor persecute nor repress anyone for religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

This statement, written in 1971, was made into Article 54 of the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba, adopted in 1975 at the First Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba, and reads:

The socialist state, which bases its activity and educates the people in the scientific materialist concept of the

universe, recognizes and guarantees freedom of conscience and the right of everyone to profess any religion and to practice, within the framework of respect for the law, the belief of his preference.

The law regulates the activities of religious institutions. It is illegal and punished by law to oppose one's faith or religious belief to the Revolution, to education, or to the fulfillment of one's duty to work, defend the country with arms, show reverence for its symbols and fulfill other duties established by the Constitution.<sup>6</sup>

The key phrase in the above law is, "within the framework of respect for the law." Within this "framework" there is freedom of religion, outside this framework there is none. This "framework" defines religion as a "private" matter, meaning that one is free to worship in the church or faith of one's choosing. Evangelistic campaigns are even allowed with the proper permit, to be held inside church buildings. One is free to carry a Bible in public, even read it in public, as long as it is done for one's personal and private devotions. Literature can be published by the conference, as long as its use is strictly for members and not for evangelizing members. However, speaking in public, going house-to-house to distribute literature or to gain interests for Bible studies, is regarded as proselyting. That activity is considered counter-revolutionary and punishable by imprisonment.

The government claims that it does not persecute for religious practice. If a person, like Humberto Noble Alexander, finds himself giving Bible studies from home to home, then the government will arrest him or her, as Alexander was arrested. But it will not be for religious infraction, but for failure to practice religion "within the framework of respect for the law." In other words, the government says, "We don't mind you practicing your faith, but you cannot go around actively seeking to make others adherents

of your faith. That is proselytism, and is punishable by law." Since this often can be misunderstood as religious persecution, what usually happens is that other charges are trumped up, such as, in the case of Alexander, of transporting counter-revolutionaries or of being part of a plot to assassinate Fidel Castro.

Though the government claims not to persecute religion, even this declaration from the First National Congress on Education and Culture is contradicted by a statement that the declaration makes after stating that no one is repressed for religious beliefs. The declaration says: "The obscurantist and counter-revolutionary sects must be unmasked and fought."<sup>6</sup> If such a statement does not mean persecution, then I don't know what does.

### *The Mission of the Church in a Socialist Society*

The biggest challenge facing the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Cuba is how to redefine the church's mission in terms of the society wherein it finds itself. The alternative of escape as seen in the mass boat exodus from Mariol, including some 1,500 Adventists (and 50 pastors), is actually a negation of mission. Not that the individual Adventists who left for personal reasons should be judged, but that the church as a whole should be judged if the entire Adventist community fled, as was once contemplated.

The church must redefine the Gospel in terms of the needs of humanity. The government has now taken over the tasks that the church once considered to be part of its mission: education, medical and social service ministry. Since the church is no longer needed in these areas (except for the Christian education of its children), many feel that the church no longer has a mission in Cuba. That thinking defines mission entirely in terms of institutions. The church in Cuba needs to redefine its mission in terms of faithfulness to the Gospel and its demands.

Even though the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the largest Protestant denomination in Cuba, with 9,358 members as of December 1983, numbers alone do not spell success in mission. Success in proclaiming the Gospel in a socialist land is determined not by the numbers that are added to the church, nor by its institutional presence but by its faithfulness to Christ.

Perhaps the experience of Humberto Noble Alexander in prison best exemplifies what the mission of the church ought to be. The common experience of being imprisoned for proclaiming the Gospel led Christians of various faiths to band together as one body in Christ, irrespective of their differences. One of the prisoners composed a short chorus which became the theme song of the clandestine prison church, the lyrics embodying the mission of the church:

*It makes no difference to what church you  
belong,  
If behind Calvary you stand.  
If your heart is like mine,  
Then you are my brother, so give me your  
hand.*

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. "Cuba," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, Don F. Neufeld, ed., Commentary Reference Series, Vol. 10, Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1966, p. 314.

2. This Gideon's Band must not be confused with the Gideons in the United States who are best known for placing Gideon Bibles in motels and hotels.

3. "Declaration by the First National Congress on Education and Culture," *Granma*, May 9, 1971, p. 4.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Constitution of the Republic of Cuba*, Havana: Official Publication of the Ministry of Justice, 1977, p. 19.